

# HELLBREAK



There are those who will never give in.  
There are those who will laugh in the  
face of death and Big Brother.  
There are those who so cherish  
their faith that they are willing  
to risk everything for its  
preservation.

The stakes are rising. The flames are  
licking higher and higher.  
As the heroes of Blood and Freedom  
continue their quest for freedom, the  
unseen powers will do anything to  
see them silenced—even pitting  
them against the horrors of  
Hell itself.



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**SEQUEL TO BLOOD AND FREEDOM**

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Cover by Kristen.

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## TRUCKING

The rhythmic jolting of the army truck continued on with maddening monotony. Cal was used to the long drives in the hardy, but not exactly plush vehicle, but his fellow front-seaters, Stuart and Alana, found the journey less than exhilarating. Alana in particular, sandwiched between two sweaty bodies and a stick shift, was coercing her mental powers to retain at least a faint aura of polite graces.

She finally broke the silence in a final desperate attempt to save herself from bursting out in a string of profanities, “So ... Cal, tell me about yourself!”

Cal laughed pleasantly. “Well, I don’t know ... what is there to say?”

“You know, the usual trivia—name, background, shoe size, underwear preference...”

Stuart turned his attention to the window, laughing under his breath at Cal’s unfortunate introduction to Alana’s winsome personality.

Cal seemed quite capable of taking it in stride. “Oh, boxers, definitely.”

“Hm, that’s nice. I wear boxers too. Well, not all the time, you know, but anytime I want to really be comfortable, that’s totally the item of choice. So how long you been in the service?”

“About three years—three years next March

actually, so more like two and a half.”

“And?”

“How do I like it, you mean?—I should say *did*, I guess. I’m not gonna be seeing the inside of a barracks for a while, I bet!” Cal grinned to himself. “Oh, it was all right at first—for an unenlightened, mindwashed, party-line-swallowing zombie, that is. Go here, fight there, bomb this, shoot that. I mean, it doesn’t take much mental slackness to start swallowing all that crap, and before long...”

“You think you’re doing God service,” Stuart interjected.

“Exactly,” Cal nodded. “It’s almost to where you can’t think for yourself anymore.” He looked down at his hand that gripped the steering wheel. “Just a little prick and that’s it—poof! You’re under control!”

“Is it really like that?” Stuart turned curiously from the view. “Can you actually tell a difference once you get the registration?”

“Nah, not really,” Cal shrugged. “Not at first anyway. But I’ll tell you something, there may be nothing more to that registration than a practically invisible microchip flushed under your skin, but if that’s a fact I’ll be put out to pasture with the sheep.”

“You think there’s more to it?” Alana grinned.

“Big way!” Cal made a sudden left turn as the winding road they were following curved sharply. “I mean, get this. I’m not talking for myself here, because I just got level one...”

“The hand job,” Alana offered helpfully.

Cal smiled and continued. “But there was this friend of mine, Greg Tipper—best friends we were for most of our lives. Our minds and basic belief system could have been cloned from two identical Dollies.”

“Dolly the sheep!” Alana laughed. “I haven’t thought of her in ages! Wasn’t she like the little beast that started all this cloning experimentation years ago?”

“The very same. But that wasn’t what I was talking about,” Cal responded.

“Greg Tipper,” Stuart offered. “Cool it, Al, let the guy get a word in.”

Alana threw up her hands in mock surrender, and Cal picked up the torch again and pushed bravely forward. “So Greg and I, we were basically like two identical twins in a movie that are played by the same actor and you’ve got to change their hairstyle and give one of them glasses so people don’t get confused. We didn’t look at all alike, mind you—just, you know, ideology and all that type of stuff. But anyway, I always had this dream of joining the army, so first chance I get, that’s what I do. Greg on the other hand, he wants to go into government—always had high political ambitions, that guy. That’s one area we differed, I guess.

“So we kept in touch. We used to go out to the bars on Saturday nights, chat about the old times and swap tales of our lives. Then one day he tells me he’s getting this big lucky break. His overseer got nabbed for some contraband anti-government operation, and the over-jobbies are so pleased with his work they want to promote him right up to supervisor of something or other. Can’t recall right now, but some big fancy title.” Cal shook his head darkly. “And that was the beginning of the end.”

“What?” Alana’s eyes widened. “What happened to him?”

“Nothing on the outward,” Cal shrugged. “That’s the weirdest thing of all. But in order to go up the ladder he had to go for the next registration level.”

“The head job.” Alana couldn’t help herself.

Cal didn’t seem to notice this time; his preoccupied thoughts were very far away, and his eyes were on the road. “I mean, maybe I’m just paranoid, but I could swear that within days of his new implant he was a different guy. We stopped going out pretty much

right away—he was just too busy and had all kinds of other stuff to do. Greg was never that type of guy. He wanted to get ahead, but not at the expense of his cushy lifestyle. And he *always* had time for a football game. Suddenly it seemed like all he wanted to do was work! And a couple times when I made some off-ball comment about the government, I caught him eyeing me with this look of utter contempt, like I had betrayed his one true love or something. It just got worse from there. He got more promotions and kept getting more and more hard-line.

“One day we met on the street. I hadn’t seen him in months, and I swear, this was a different guy. He even *looked* different, but it was more than that—his whole attitude, mentality, perspective on life, everything.”

“A new man,” Stuart said grimly.

“Yep.” Cal shook his head. “It’s like that implant fused with his conscience and transmuted him into some kind of One World Order clone. Downright freaky if you ask me. Right then and there I knew I had to find a way out. And now...” He looked up at his two new friends. “Now I have—thanks to you!”

“And thanks to the forces of Heaven,” Stuart smiled. “We’re sure glad to have you.”

“Yeah, you and your cushy transport vehicle!” Alana said sarcastically, but with a warm smile.

Just then an obnoxious buzzing sound resonated through the cabin. Stuart and Alana jumped, but Cal said quickly, “Don’t worry. It’s just the intercom link to the back area.” He poked a button and said, “Yeah, what’s up?”

A male voice came pumping out of the little speaker. “Oh Cal, pull over next chance you get, would you? We’ve got some sort of revelation going back here.”

“A what?” Cal asked.

“The girl, you know, Su? She’s getting some type

of urgent message and she says we’ve got to stop. The others seem pretty set on following along.”

“All right then.” Cal looked at the other two.

“There’s a shoulder up there,” Stuart offered. “If Su’s getting a prophecy we probably should stop and check it out.”

“Yeah, after all, she’s the whole reason we ever met up with you guys,” Cal agreed. “She got that prophecy—is that what you called it?—originally. Led us directly to you! I know a lotta guys who would pay big bucks for a gift like that! Regular gold mine, I’d say. Do you all do it?”

Stuart nodded. “Let’s just say it’s something we’ve spent a long time practicing for. The gift is there for anyone who wants it, sometimes it just takes some people longer than others to get up the guts to grab it.”

“That’s all it takes?” Cal asked curiously. “Just ‘grabbing it’?”

“You tell him, Alana.” Stuart jabbed her. “She’s our newest convert, you know.”

Alana opened her mouth to retort something to Stuart, then changed her mind abruptly. “Yeah, so I’m stuck on it too. I mean, hey, who wouldn’t be? You’ve got this hotline linkup thingle going, you know, ear to the mouth of God and all that. It’s not a little awesome. Okay, I’ll admit, when I first heard these guys do their thing, you know, once the whole mysterious slash spooky tingles had worn off, I thought, ‘Now here are some serious weirdoes.’ But it’s not really like that. Now it all seems rather...”—she waved her hand in the air, as if trying to catch ahold of the right word—“rather ... normal!” She paused triumphantly, then looked over at Cal, with a grin. “Don’t worry, you’ll catch onto it. Just keep an eye on those who know how. You’ll be spouting before you know it.”

Cal switched gears and slowed down as they pulled

onto the shoulder. He switched off the motor and reached for the door handle. “Come on,” he said, “let’s go back and find out what the scoop is.”



The seven others in the back of the truck all shuffled over to make space for the three new arrivals. Su was resting in a corner on a makeshift bed. Though still weak from the ordeal she had escaped from only a day before, she was already showing a marked improvement being reunited with her friends and Family. The first order of business had been to remove her lower body cast, which Patrick and the others had accomplished with little fanfare, using the sparse medical equipment stored in the truck. (And Su was glad for a strategically placed towel when it came to the moment of truth!) Her former injuries were all but healed, and there was nothing for her to do but to keep steadily improving by the hour. She looked much more healthy and alert than even when they had first driven into Julian’s camp, and was beginning to quite closely resemble herself again.

Patrick, who had not let Su out of his sight from the moment they had escaped the medical facility, sat loyally beside her. Marty and Angelica were half-draped across each other on the seat that ran along the left side of the truck, with Jay and the two other soldiers (make that former soldiers) on the right side.

“Sorry to halt the transport on you guys!” Su smiled, as they lowered themselves to various levels of comfort.

“Hey, no problem,” Stuart replied. “You got some sort of a word on something?”

“Nothing real concrete,” Su confessed. “I just keep getting these real bad vibes, and I thought we should stop and check in about it.”

Alana poked Cal and raised her eyebrows knowingly with a real strong ‘see, now you’ll get your chance to observe’ kind of a look. And so he did. The

four newcomers—Patrick and the soldiers—obediently followed suit as the others closed their eyes, and Jay took the lead with a prayer for leading and guidance as to where they should turn. After a few moments, all was still, and nothing could be heard but the droning sound of cicadas courting outside the vehicle.

Then Angelica spoke up, rather timidly at first, but increasing in boldness as she went along. It was a simple message—faith, trust, courage for what lay ahead, promises of protection and safekeeping—but those present latched onto it like a message in a bottle, for they knew it came straight from the throne of God.

After that no one else spoke, and after a couple minutes people started opening their eyes gingerly, looking around to see what everyone else was doing, and finding them doing the same.

Stuart fished around, “So...anyone else get anything?” Somehow they all felt there was something more—perhaps just beyond their grasp, but definitely waiting to be reeled in. “Su?” he asked, since she was the one who had started all this.

“Yeah ... uhm,” she said hesitantly, “I don’t know...”

“What is it?” Jay asked. “Go on, we’re not judging you.”

“Okay, look,” she said, propping herself up a little. “I’m like so vague on this that it’s just killing me to say anything. But what are checks for, right? So all I’m thinking is just about those marks—you know, the registration things.”

“What about them?” Patrick asked.

“Well, so Cal disabled the government tracking thing on the truck—but what about the tracking systems on the registration chips? You’re all marked. Don’t you think they’re keeping tabs on you that way?”

The air became noticeably silent (except for the cicadas, who grew noticeably louder).

Finally Cal came out with a profound, “Gee, I never

thought of that! Kinda stupid of me not to, I guess..."

"You know," Alana said, "I bet they do. Wouldn't that be so like the big Them, to have known all along and been following us all this time, maybe?"

Angelica looked back nervously towards the opening of the truck's canopy, as if half-expecting to see intruders with a submachine gun peering in. "You think they're following us?"

"Well, Su's right, we've got to do something about these implants," Patrick said. "But what can we do?"

"I know who would know—Julian," Stuart responded hesitantly. "But where he'd be by now I have no clue."

"And no way we could get in touch with him either," Cal said. "I haven't seen a phone for miles."

"I've got a cell phone," one of the soldiers offered helpfully. The nine other passengers turned on him, glowering. "What? What?" he said quickly.

"A *cell phone*?" Alana said suggestively. "As in 'send out a beacon and come quick and find me, O government creepos,' that kind of cell phone?"

"Oh," he said. "Yeah, I guess that about sums it up, doesn't it?"

Cal resumed the original train of thought. "Well, no Julian, and I suppose severing our right hands is out of the question, so ... where does that leave us?"

"I know," said Jay quietly. Something in his voice made everyone turn to look at him.

"You sound like you've got the answer for us, Jay," Stuart said. "What's on your mind?"

Jay looked up with a curious gleam in his eye. "I bet we could pray 'em out," he said, then quickly lifted his hands in self-defense. "Now just wait before pulling out your big guns, and let me explain. To the best of our guessing, these things are fitted with some sort of global positioning linkup—I mean, of course they would be ... that's one of their main purposes, right? But if these guys want to say 'finito' to their life of

servicing the Beast, it would seem that they shouldn't be subject to his tracking anymore, should they?"

"Heaven's Girl used a pin to jam the circuits," Angelica offered helpfully.

"I'm afraid technology's advanced a little since Heaven's Girl braved the lions," Jay said with a grin. "Though I wouldn't mind jabbing a pin through the skull of some of those lunatics! But what I'm thinking in this case is more a matter of 'our weapons are not carnal but mighty through God.' I say we could just ... pray they fritz out."

"You mean just *pray*—and that's it?" Cal asked incredulously. "And what good would that do?"

"That's just it—it could do everything!" Su looked up exultantly. "Jay, you're right!"

"Whoa, wait a minute here! What exactly is this that we are discussing?" Cal asked again.

"Look, Cal." Stuart put his arm across the other's shoulder. "I know this is a lot to take in all at once, but you might have to just let us lead on this one. To us, prayer is not some piddly little thing that church people do to feel pious, but it's a very real power that we can put to use in our daily lives."

"It's the Force!" Alana exclaimed.

Cal ran his hands through his hair. "So you'd just pray for these things to malfunction, and then go on believing it was done, but having no idea for sure?"

"Send up the request, and count it done," Jay nodded.

"Wait, I just thought of something else," Su said, sitting up excitedly and looking at the three soldiers. "You know we were talking earlier about how we live for Jesus and all, and that prayer of asking Him to be in our hearts and all?"

Cal and the others nodded.

"Well, I bet that in itself would zap the shells too, don't you think?" This last enjoiner she addressed to Angelica and Marty, who were the nearest Family



members to her.

Angelica's eyes glowed. "Of course!" she said, grabbing Marty's arm. "Don't you think? I mean, how can the Lord and the mark exist side-by-side? I bet it would fritz on contact."

"I can't believe that we didn't pray with them earlier," Marty said, shaking his head.

"No fear," Stuart said firmly. "The Lord must have let all this happen for a reason—and it's never too late. Are you guys game for this, then? Do you know what you're getting into?"

Cal looked searchingly from one face to another, and seemed to draw strength from the faith that exuded from each. At last he looked at Patrick and the two others. They each nodded in turn. "All right then ... I guess we're on for action!"

"All right then, so how do we do this?" Stuart looked around at the others. "Angelica, why don't you help us out. You're the master of ceremonies, after all!"

Angelica giggled and shook her head, but moved towards the middle of the floor. "All right then, guys," she said, pulling a box into the center space. "Come up closer and each put your right hand on this box, all next to each other. The rest of us are going to come up—as many as can crowd around, anyway—and completely cover your hands with our hands."

"Ah, that's it!" Alana rubbed her hands together gleefully. "Smother the darn things! Suck the life out of 'em!"

Everyone systematically scrunched themselves forward, adding their hands to the great woodpile that was accumulating in the center floor space.

At last they were ready, and several people prayed—first Stuart, then Jay, and finally Su. As Su completed her prayer, she paused, and then said, "Perhaps each of you should just give a one-liner too, you know, ask Him yourself? It will lend extra weight

to it. It's just like we talked about before—nothing fancy, just tell Him you want Him."

Cal opened his eyes and looked right at Su. "I've never prayed in my life!" he said, almost desperately.

"It's okay," she replied, and the look in her eyes was almost healing in itself. "Just say what you feel.—Not everything you feel right now, of course." She smiled teasingly. "You can save that for later. Just ask Him—it couldn't be easier."

Cal might have disputed that last statement had the circumstances been different, but things being as they were, he took a deep breath and started. "Look, God...," he began.

"Jesus!" whispered Su.

"Look ... Jesus," he began again. "I don't know You, and—well, yeah, I guess You do know me. But I've been serving the Devil too long and I've gotta make a break. If I don't cut the tie here, not only am I gonna get it but all these great guys here are too, and I don't want that to happen to them. So, God ... I mean, Jesus ... I'm asking You real politely to please just disconnect this thing for me." He paused a second, then added quickly, "Permanently. I don't want to ever go back to that old life. And please ... please come and hang out with me. I don't ever want to be without You again."

The other three followed in like manner, and by the time they were done, the entire atmosphere in the truck was different.

"Isn't it weird how prayer can do that to you?" Alana put all of their thoughts into words (though perhaps not exactly the words that they all would have used). "I mean, we're tossing back and forth, babbling about this and that, acting like a bunch of headless chickens, then all of a sudden, poof! It's like you're sitting on a cloud playing a harp or something! Isn't that just the life?"

"Come on guys," Stuart said. "We'd better get on

the road. We've still got a long trip ahead of us."

"Oh yeah, speaking of trips," Cal said, as the three of them got out of the back of the truck and headed back for the front cab, "where exactly is this place we're heading for?"

"The Refuge?" Stuart replied. "It's still a good five- or six-hour drive from here—though it's hard to say for sure, as I'm not positive where we are. We'll need to keep our eyes peeled for a signpost or something."



The team continued making their rumbling way towards their destination, while Stuart glanced out the window at the somewhat familiar landscape before him. Though he did not recognize the road they were on, the mountainous and wooded terrain brought back memories of the home he had left behind nearly two years before.

"They have a lot of people there?" Alana asked curiously, picking up the thread of conversation that had led Stuart's thoughts to where they were.

"It's been a while since I was there, and things change pretty fast at this time in world history. Last time I was there, though..." He scratched his ear as though that might help him tap into a secret memory bank. "I don't know, maybe twenty? At least half were kids, though."

Alana sat in uncharacteristic silence, digesting the latest information.

"I wish we could tell them that we're coming," Stuart mused. "I should have used Julian's secure phone line before we split up."

"Yeah, we're gonna hit 'em like a ton of bricks, no kidding!" Alana laughed. "Hi there, Honey! Me and my eight buddies—including a few army deserters with their truck—thought we'd stop by for a while, hope you don't mind!"

"Oh, they're used to that," Stuart grinned. "I wouldn't lose too much sleep over it."

"The whole living by faith deal, right?" Cal asked. "Su was telling us about that. You all tend to sort of thrive on these impossible scenarios, don't you?"

"Something like that, I guess," Stuart agreed. "If the Lord's leading us there, then I'm sure He'll have something figured out for our upkeep. Plus I'm sure they'll be so glad to see new faces they'll be laying on the room and board with a butter knife."

"I bet!" Alana grinned at Stuart. Then she suddenly froze in mid-motion, half of her mouth still curled into a teasing grin, and the other half dropping open in alarm. She grabbed Cal's arm with a grip that made him screech on the brakes. The thud of the passengers in the back hitting the sides of the truck snapped her back to reality, along with Cal and Stuart's instant volley of demands as to the nature of the disturbance.

"Are you all right? Alana! What's up?" Stuart repeated. Seeing her still mute, he grabbed her shoulders and shook her. Cal quickly pulled the truck on to the side of the road.

"Quit shaking me!" Alana barked. "I'm not incapacitated. I'm just trying to think of the right thing to say. I just had something very weird happen to me, all right? Now let me recover for a second." She took a deep breath and then looked at each of the guys in turn. "There's something really bad going on. We must not have disabled those things in time or something, but I just had the most horrible vision, and I think Someone up There is trying to give us a little 'watch out' signal or something."

"What do you mean?" Stuart asked, having a pretty good idea but wanting to hear her say it.

"I have no idea what I mean," Alana retorted, "except that whatever it is that I mean is probably going to come upon us very soon—with a whole lot of weapons and artillery. Maybe even helicopters."

Having had no success with using the intercom, Jay and Marty had jumped out of the back and had

come around to the passenger door in time to catch the drift of Alana's premonition.

"So what do we do?" Jay asked.

"We get desperate, and quick!" Stuart replied.

"First, we'd better get off the road," Cal offered.

"There's a side road off to the right there, let's take that."

Without another word the back-of-the-truck boys piled back in and Cal took off at record speed.

"Oh my God!" Stuart groaned, as they drove under the cover of the trees. "Of course! We should have been expecting this."

"Why?" Cal asked.

"They were probably just keeping tabs on you guys through your registration chip signals to find out where we were heading so they could nab as many of us as possible. Now that your signals are cut off, they've got to grab us before they lose track."

"Well aren't we a bunch of Sherlocks in hindsight," Alana said glumly. Then to Cal, "Pull over here, man, we don't want to come out the other side! We've got to get a game plan and we don't have long."

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## THE AMBUSH

"I think we should split up," Cal said to the rest as they huddled nervously in the back of the truck. "We'll have a better chance of escape if we're not bunched up together like this."

"And we definitely should dump the truck," Alana said. "They'll be onto this like larva."

"What exactly did you see, Alana?" Angelica asked quietly.

Alana cast a look at the flax-haired girl. "I don't know if all the fine details would be appreciated by everyone," she said rather doubtfully. "It wasn't a pretty picture, to say the least. But," she said, more cheerfully, "at least I'm not like Nostradamus or Jeanne Dixon or someone. You know—things I see don't necessarily come true."

Stuart raised his eyebrows. "You know about those guys?"

"Oh yeah," Alana replied. "I was always real big on mystics and weirdoes like that. So you see, this kind of life is just my destiny all-around. But please, let's not talk about me right now. Let's save that for when we have more time to elaborate."

There was a slight pause, and then Stuart took charge, as though a sudden wave of realization had come upon him. He dropped to his knees on the metal

floor. “Oh, God! Oh, Jesus!” he begged. “Here we are, stuck in the boonies with nothing but a sheet of metal between us and the enemy. We have no idea how close or how far away they are right now, but it’s very likely that they’re closer than we had imagined.—And they’d like nothing better than to end our lives, each one of us.”

Stuart’s eyes were filled with tears. “We’re not stuck on our lives, Lord, and if it were just for us it might not be such a big deal. But there’s more to this than just our lives. We’re Your servants, and if we die, we take any possibility of continuing Your work here to our graves—and all those souls that we won’t be able to reach. And that is something that we will not accept. You haven’t brought us through everything we’ve gone through this far just to have our corpses rot on some forest floor. You’ll have to come through for us, Jesus. We need some direct instruction, and we need it now! Please speak to us, Lord!”

Silence followed Stuart’s impassioned plea. No one said anything else; no one needed to. He had expressed the thoughts of each one there, and now there was nothing to do but wait.

“I have put My Words in your hearts, and revealed unto each of you the secrets whereby you shall defeat this Enemy of your soul.” The words echoed in the stillness, and no one could have said afterwards who it was that spoke them. It was to the desperate listeners as the very voice of God. “But know this for a certainty: There shall not one hair of your heads perish. Hold this thought forth before you like a beacon that shall light your way, and like a sword that shall take the life of your adversary before he comes nigh unto you. Not one hair of your heads ... and though you walk through the fire, you shall prevail.”

“I’m staying with the truck,” Alana said slowly, half-surprised at what she was saying.

“I’m going down the mountain, to the west,” Stuart said.

“So am I,” said Cal and Angelica at the same time, then looked at each other, surprised.

“I’m taking the forest trail to the north,” said Marty.

“That’s what I got too,” said Jay quickly.

“I’m staying,” Su said quietly. Patrick placed his hand quickly on Su’s arm. Wherever she went, he was obviously to follow.

All gazes turned now to the other two soldiers, who were sitting in their places looking somewhat bewildered. They obviously weren’t pumped up in the finer art of heavenly thought-guiding.

“You guys had better come with us,” Jay said.

The two nodded sheepishly, and with that final gesture of commitment, the group sprang into action. Stuart was the nearest to the door. He turned and looked back at the rest with a faraway look in his eyes. “Well...,” he said, “if we don’t ever meet all together again on earth ... it’s been great knowing you all.”

The others muttered similar utterances with all the outward enthusiasm of a group of priests giving each other last rites. Yet underneath it all there was a certain tangible excitement that can only come from living in a life-or-death situation, yet knowing that whatever the odds, you will beat them and come through victorious.

Alana, in a rare moment of acquiescence, let Stuart help her out of the back of the truck. “Are you sure we don’t have time for a quickie before you go?” she whispered in his ear under the cover of a goodbye hug.

Stuart just reached his hand inside the waist of her shorts and tweaked the elastic on her underwear. “Boxer shorts!” he laughed softly.

“Never leave home without ’em,” she grinned. Then she kissed him urgently. “Don’t you dare die, you hear?”

“Not on your life,” he returned. “After all ... I’ve got a date to keep!”

Alana opened her mouth, then closed it again. “Right you are!” she said. Stuart was running now to catch up with his teammates. “Till then!” she called after him, then sighed. She turned and kicked the wheel of the truck so hard that it made her wince.

They were alone in the clearing now, Alana, Su and Patrick, and the silence landed dead upon them like a deafening blanket to their senses.

“We’d better get out of here, I guess,” Alana muttered. “You guys want to ride up front or stay cozied up in the back?”

Su threw Alana a withering look but just said, “I think I’ll do fine moving to the front.”

Alana got in the driver’s seat, and within a few moments had revved up the engine. “All right then ... we’re off!” Then she looked down suddenly. “Oh, blast!” she muttered. “It’s a stick shift! I don’t know how to drive a stick shift.”

“I can...,” Patrick began, but then stopped in mid-phrase. “My God, Alana ... you were right!”

The three turned their gaze upwards, and their eyes riveted on the sight before them. “Heavenly Father, here we come!” Alana whispered.



There wasn’t any particular physical force that spurred the runners on, no reason to suddenly change from a medium-paced jaunt into a breakneck dash, but that was exactly the impulse that hit Stuart, Cal and Angelica at exactly the same moment. Without a word of explanation to each other, the three shot off, ever deeper into the forest.

“Do you hear anything?” Cal called nervously over to the two others.

Stuart shook his head as best he could without slowing his pace. “But I know they’re not far. I can feel it.”

All of a sudden Angelica stopped, and threw her hands over head. “This is it!” she cried, as her whole

body began to quiver like a leaf in a thunderstorm. “We’re doomed! There’s no way we can escape! This forest is surrounded. I can feel it. Why don’t we just sit here and wait for them?—We’re going to die anyway!”

Stuart seemed to clear the few steps back to where she stood in a single leap. He took her by the shoulders and shook her until her hands dropped to her side. “Stop that!” he yelled. “Stop that, it’s just not the time for it!”

“Hey!” Cal said, a little more quietly. “I think we’re all a little stressed out.”

Stuart dropped Angelica’s shoulders, and the girl whimpered a little. “I’m sorry,” she murmured.

“No, I’m sorry,” Stuart said, turning back towards her. “I shouldn’t have snapped like that. God knows we have enough troubles from the outside without losing it between ourselves too.”

“Look,” Cal said, “I’m the last one to know about these things, but didn’t your—*our*—God say everything was going to be okay? The whole ‘no hair of your head’ deal?”

“You’re right, He did!” Stuart said, hope rekindling slowly in his eyes. “He told us that we wouldn’t be harmed! And what else did He say? Do you remember? Gosh, we should have written these things down!”

Angelica looked up, brushing away the last of the tears from off of her face. “Something about holding the Word like a weapon, and it would defeat the enemy.”

“Well if we’re gonna be running, let’s make sure that that’s the main vision for us, and let’s make sure we’re running the right way too.”

The three stopped and squatted on the ground a minute. They didn’t say anything; they didn’t have to. Time was precious and they knew that their questions would have been too numerous and unintelligible even if they had had the time to voice

them.

“Stand fast and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will show unto you this day,” Stuart said quietly. “Make your calling sure and stand, rooted firmly and grounded in Me. I will not leave you nor forsake you, and the end of this day shall see you reunited with those that you love.”

“I got that we should head back up towards the road,” Angelica added.

Cal nodded. “That all sounds about right to me.”

“Did you get anything?” Angelica asked. Her highly touted woman’s intuition had suggested that his noncommittal answer may have been an indication that there was something else waiting to be drawn out.

“Oh, it’s nothing really.” Cal suddenly looked flustered. “Well, okay, here it is. My grandma used to read me Bible chapters sometimes when I’d visit her on the weekends, and it was almost like I could see a picture of her face, and she was saying one of her favorite verses—something about walking through fire.”

“When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee,” Stuart offered.

Cal nodded.

“That’s curious,” Stuart mused.

“That’s the second fire mention, isn’t it?” Angelica said.

“Yeah, that’s right, I had forgotten that!” Cal exclaimed. “That other message said fire too.”

“Well, let’s not waste any time,” Stuart jumped up. “We’ll stand our ground if they show but there’s no point waiting to be butchered if you can still squeal.” He grabbed Angelica’s arm and lifted her up, and the three began to run through the forest again.



The north trail through the forest was narrow and

winding, and the four fugitives from injustice made halting progress. It all began very suddenly, with a muffled shot and a cry of pain. Jay dropped to the ground, clutching his right calf.

The other three looked in alarm at the sticky red ooze beginning to eat its way through his jeans, staining his hands.

“Go on, you guys!” Jay shouted hoarsely. “Get out of here! Run! We don’t all have to get caught!”

The two soldiers set off in an instant dash. Marty hesitated. “Go on!” Jay rasped again. “You’ve got to help them. What are they gonna do on their own?”

Marty reached down and grabbed Jay’s hand. “The Lord be with you!”

“And you,” Jay whispered, and Marty was off.

Strangely enough, no other shots had been fired during their brief exchange. Jay wondered what exactly was going on. Left alone on the path, unable to move, he scanned the trees for signs of life. He quickly noticed a suspicious-looking rustle far to the left, and sure enough, before another full minute had passed a young soldier emerged, in full combat gear and weapon pointing directly at Jay.

“Don’t move!”

The voice made Jay look up, his eyes wide. A *female* soldier had stopped his dash to freedom? He opened his mouth, but then reverted to his inherent political correctness and decided not to say anything.

“What are you staring at?” the girl asked. “You’ve never seen a woman soldier before?”

“No—I mean, yes—I mean ... I don’t know what I mean,” Jay asked.

“Well, don’t try to pull anything strange on me, because I swear I’ll shoot you in a heartbeat.”

“I’m sure you will.” Jay surprised himself at the strange calmness that he felt. “I’ve got a blood-soaked pair of jeans to testify to your great abilities.”

“I’m sorry about that,” she said gruffly. “I’m just

following orders. You were trying to escape. No one escapes a patrol of the one-world government.” Her chest swelled with pride as she spoke.

“You really believe that crap, don’t you?” Jay said, as scornfully as he could, though the pain in his leg was beginning to wear on his nerves.

The girl narrowed her eyes. “I am the captor here and you are the captive. So *I’ll* say what is and isn’t crap.”

At that moment, with a loud tromping sound a group of four soldiers broke through the underbrush and came onto the trail.

“Tanya!” called the soldier in front. “You caught one?”

“He’s incapacitated,” she shouted back, never taking her eyes off Jay. “I got him in the leg.”

“Others?” The group came up to where she stood.

“No, he was alone.”

Jay said nothing, but his inner self shot up like a mushrooming question mark. He looked in her eyes for some explanation, but for all appearances she was convinced of her response. It instantly dawned on him that the others must have somehow been invisible to her. *It figures I’d be the only one that’s left out in the light*, he thought wryly to himself. *I guess I did so well in chains last time the Lord figures I get to go for Grade Two of that course.*

It was only a joke, and so he was surprised when he felt a sudden warmth in his heart, almost blocking out the cold, dull pain in his leg. Words formed in his mind, more clearly than any words ever had before. *Fear not, for I will go with you upon every step of your journey. Though you travel far, you shall never be far from Me, for we shall travel together, you and I. I have chosen you for a very special mission, and it is for a reward, not a punishment. This, too, shall accomplish My perfect will in your life—you, My yielded, willing and obedient vessel.*

Jay was returned to reality by a sharp kick in his ribs. He looked up at the gruff soldier who towered angrily over him. “Answer me, you scum, or I’ll shoot you again just for fun! Where did they go?”

“They?” Jay asked, knowing full well what the man meant.

“Your buddies.” The man clenched his teeth. “We’ve been tracking your truck all day, and we know you weren’t the only passenger, so where are the rest of them?”

Jay looked up at the man with a face full of calm trust. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. “We split up and ran. I was stopped in my efforts, and quite obviously was unable to get ahold of anybody else to help me. They could be anywhere.”

The soldier growled and swore under his breath, but seemed to see the logic of Jay’s response. “Get up!” he said, and then turned to the others. “Take him back to the transport.”

“I’m pretty sure I can’t walk,” Jay began.

“Get up!” Tanya shouted. “You will walk back every step that you took into this forest.”

Shaking his head, Jay slowly and painstakingly rose to his feet, keeping most of his weight on his left leg. He took a deep breath and laid down his other foot, but no sooner had he done so than his whole body crumpled under the weight and he fell to the ground, groaning and quite speechless with pain.

“He’s not gonna make it,” Tanya muttered under her breath to the other soldier.

“All right, Stark.” He signaled one of the other soldiers, a huge hunk of a man with a broad chest and arms the size of Jay’s legs. “Haul him on your back. And don’t be gentle either.”

The man leered, obviously pleased at the opportunity to allow his inherent brutality to come out. Yet for all the roughness with which he picked Jay up and threw him against his back, Jay felt no

pain whatsoever. He almost felt as though he were walking alongside the group, observing the limp sack of flesh that was his body being hauled back to the truck.

*I suppose this is what it feels like to be dead*, he mused, although he knew full well that he was not dead, for somehow at the same time he was still there, in that mortal body, and he could feel his own heart beating. It was a very strange experience, and Jay savored every moment of it until they arrived back into the clearing where the team had originally split up.

“Load him in the jeep!” the commander shouted.

Jay was propelled back into his aching flesh with a thud as he hit the flatbed in the back of the army jeep.



In that first second that Alana, Su and Patrick took in their surroundings, it seemed that all was certainly lost. As they looked around them, a near circular ring of soldiers in full camouflage dress and brandishing menacing weapons had sprung from the bushes from the other side of the clearing where they had stopped the truck. A full array of firepower was now pointing their direction.

“Turn off your motor!” came a voice from a loudspeaker. “Come out of the vehicle with your hands over your heads!”

“What happens now?” Alana looked over at Su. It was perhaps the first time in her life that she was asking for someone else’s opinion on what she should do. It seemed a good time to start. Su, however, little realizing the significant moment of Alana’s life that she was spurning, had not a word of advice to offer.

“Come out!” the speaker boomed again. “This is your last warning. If you do not comply with our instructions, we will open fire!”

“Those weapons look pretty heavy-duty,” Patrick

said hesitantly. “Maybe we should get out. Arrest is better than death, no?”

“I should say not!” Alana said indignantly. “I’d die first any day than give myself to those brutes!”

“Well that just depends on what we’re supposed to do,” Su said practically.

“Look, He sent us back to the truck, didn’t He?” Alana said suddenly, as a flash of inspiration struck her. “So in the truck we stay. It must be our getaway vehicle. Come on, let’s give it a shot!”

“But I thought you...,” Patrick began, looking hesitantly down at the stick shift. But it was much too late for any seat-shifting. Alana took a deep breath and fumbled with the gears.

The truck lurched, then jumped forward two dainty little steps. Alana groaned and fondled the gears again, as Patrick shouted an instruction to step on the clutch pedal first. This time the clearing resonated as the truck appeared to be churning across a giant cheese-grater.

“They’re trying to escape!” came a loud shout from the side.

“Open fire!” bellowed the loudspeaker belligerently.

At that same instant, either Alana stumbled onto the right gear or an invisible presence took compassion on her plight, and the truck shot forward, going from zero to thirty in the two seconds it took to cross the clearing.

“Get down!” Alana cried, as the first volley of bullets shattered the windshield. She ducked, shut her eyes, and prayed for the best, glancing back out just a split second later in time to avoid a tree, and marveling that she had felt no glass on her face whatsoever.

Turning the steering wheel frantically, Alana spun the truck around in the clearing, feeling only slightly guilty when she heard the vehicle ram and crush several machine-gun toting soldiers. *I’ll have to save the Hail Mary’s for later*, she apologized to her



conscience. *The first objective is getting out of here!*

The rest of the soldiers in their path dove out of the way, but the ones on the sides kept up a steady volley of shots. The next bullets shattered the right window, and still Alana pressed forward. They had cleared the ring of shooters now, but they braced themselves for the next round. Sure enough, no sooner had the truck begun tearing back up the path towards the main road than two or three army jeeps roared up the dirt road behind them and took up the chase.

They could hear the bullets whizzing and the brakes screeching behind them, and knew the danger was far from over.

"It's a good thing we've got that whole truck canopy behind us," Su said nervously.

Alana looked in the rearview mirror. "Three cars, huh? I wonder, what if I slammed on the brakes right now and we had a huge pile-up? They'd all get smashed to bits and then we could just pull out and take off again."

Su looked unconvinced.

"Yeah," Alana wrinkled her nose. "Doesn't seem such a good idea to me either. I mean, you know, car wrecks can be tricky things. Might get the wreckage tangled up together and not be able to make a quick getaway. Or we might all get whiplash and not be able to move. All kinds of things could happen. ... Whoa!" She slammed on the brakes, but didn't stop, hugging the wheel for dear life as the vehicle lurched and strained for control. "What was that?"

Patrick looked at the sideview mirror. "Looks like they blew the back tire!" he shouted. "We're not gonna make it much further unless they..."

"Yeah!" Su shouted. "They blew the other one too."

"That should make it a *lot* easier!" Alana screamed. "You've obviously never driven a friggin' army truck with two flat tires!"

"Well at least it's balanced!" Patrick called back. The noise around them was deafening by now, and they were finding it harder and harder to communicate.

"I just hope they don't hit the fuel tank," Su said. "Wouldn't it blow us up if that happened?"

Nobody bothered answering that question. Just then they came to the turn up to the main road.

"The good news and the bad news...", Alana said as she stepped on the accelerator, "is that we can speed up big-time, but..."

"They can too!" Patrick finished.

Their pursuers had not been able to overtake them earlier because of the narrow pathway, but now the much lighter and faster-powered, hate-driven jeeps were quickly catching up to the hobbling transport, which found itself on a downgrade and despite its flat tires was picking up considerable speed.

"We've gotta do something!" Su cried. "Oh Lord, what do You want us to do?"

"I know," Alana replied. "He wants us to do 120."

"Be careful!" Patrick shouted, although the wind coming in through the open windshield now made it difficult to even breathe, much less speak. "This road's got unexpected curves in it."

"Oh my God!" Su shouted. "Look up ahead! We're not gonna make it!"

A hairpin curve loomed before them, and they were approaching it with alarming speed. Only a thin rail separated it from the steep drop beyond. Alana slammed on the brakes, but it was too late. The unstable truck only lurched and skidded straight for the drop. A small raised ridge was all that stood between them, and a fearful drop below.

"Jump!" Patrick shouted. All in an instant he threw open the side door, grabbed Su, and barreled out of the moving vehicle. Alana had less than fifty milliseconds to decide what to do.

With her hands frozen to the steering wheel, and still startled by what was coming upon her, she was barely able to ponder any options of her own escape before it was too late. She watched with horror as the truck jumped easily over the small concrete ridge and soared out into the great blue beyond. Then she was staring out into the vast open expanse, with tiny picturesque white dots far below her which looked quite unlike the hard, jagged rocks that they were. “Oh, Jesus!” she shouted with all her might. Then all was silent, and black.



Alana opened her eyes suddenly to see two anxious faces peering over at her. “My God!” she cried. “I’m alive! What happened?” She was laying flat on her back on a soft ledge of ground just below the road. She plucked up a bunch of grass with each hand, and held it up to her face. “I *am* alive! God, I feel like eating this!” She threw the grass back on the ground and sat up, just as a loud explosion shook the ground under them.

The three turned their focus towards the edge of the cliff, which was only a couple of feet away from them, in time to see the flames bursting from their escape vehicle far below. At the same instant, a jeep came sailing out from the road above them, following the path their truck had made, and likewise plummeting to its destruction below.

Their attention was instantly riveted back to their precarious situation. They heard the remaining jeeps screech to a halt on the road above them, and held as still as they could. But they need not have worried.

“That’s the last we’ll see of them, I suppose,” they heard a voice above them saying. “Let’s get back to the others. And send down a team to inspect the wreckage.” Then the jeeps started up again, and roared back the way they had come.

After several minutes, all was silent.

“I guess that’s the last we’ll see of them for awhile,” Su said quietly.

“Let’s hope so,” Alana grunted.

“We made it!” Patrick was obviously still in shock at all that had happened. “I just can’t believe it!” “Hey, are you all right?” Alana asked him. He had obviously taken the brunt of the fall, and though the padding was soft and grassy, the concrete ledge and crags of rock between the road and this small clearing, together with the force of his momentum, had done their damage. His arms were covered in a smattering of scratches, with one large gash in his side.

“Here,” Su offered, as she ripped off the lower half of her top. “Let me bandage that up a bit.”

“It’s just a scratch,” Patrick said.

“Aw, men!” Alana grunted. “Always playing down their weakness and up their strength.” Then she grinned. “My role models always!”

“What about you, Alana?” Patrick asked. “How exactly did you get out of that truck? You didn’t have time to jump. And you don’t have a scratch on you.”

“My dear boy,” Alana lifted her eyebrows and, with a symbolic gesture towards Patrick’s many bruises, smiled knowingly, “perhaps *you* jumped too soon!” Then she looked more serious. “No, I guess God just saw there was no way out of that deathtrap for me, but reckoned I had unfinished business, and so He just ... you know—gave me a lift!”

“A lift, huh?” Patrick said. “Well, that’s a lift I’d take any day!”

Su stood up. “Come on guys, we’d better get going. Once they begin looking for bodies, it won’t take ’em long to find out we managed to escape, and they’ll begin scouring the place again.”

“She’s right,” Patrick affirmed. “Let’s get out of here.”

With that, the three turned and started climbing back up to the road.

## **ANTS' NEST**

Less than three minutes into the by-foot segment of their daring escape, Su, Patrick and Alana had begun to feel more like Thanksgiving dinner than glorious Endtime overcomers.

“Whoa, somebody turn down the oven,” Alana groaned, flapping her hands around in front of her face aimlessly—though it felt more like she was flailing through the atmosphere in a sauna than actually generating any sort of a breeze. “All praise to global warming!”

Patrick, who had been walking more and more slowly, now ground to a complete halt. The sloppily bandaged gash on his side had started to bleed again, and it was obvious that he could not travel much further.

Just at that moment, the sound of a rumbling motor warned them of someone’s imminent approach. Su opened her eyes wide, and the three stared around themselves wildly. They had not yet fully cleared the curve in the road that would take them to the forested area again—there was another good half-mile to cover before then. And the sound of that motor portended that the vehicle was just around the bend.

“He hasn’t brought us this far to fail us now,” Su cried, desperately trying to believe what she said.

Alana determined herself unable to speak positively under the present temperature, and so kept her mouth shut. She hoped against hope that Su would have faith enough for them all.

Figuring it useless to waste their energy in moving further, the three plopped to the ground on the side of the road, as a cloud of dust and liquid heat came careening zealously around the curve.

“Ha, ha!” Su shouted with joy, turning to the others with renewed energy. “It’s not them! It’s just a tourist bus!”

“For that I am glad,” Patrick said through painfully gritted teeth. “On the other hand, that means now we’ll have to get up and continue our escape. And for that I am *not* glad.”

The bus roared by, and any expectation of it bringing some sort of cool breeze along with it was dashed by the wave of Gobi Desert takeaway that it delivered instead.

“Oh, I’m dreaming of Alaska,” Alana muttered. Then to Su, “Do you think we should have stopped that bus?”

“We probably should have tried,” Su replied glumly. “Not that it would have been much help—for all we know they could be just as nasty as the other bad guys, especially when they see we’re without any form of registration. But at least we’d be imprisoned in an airconned environment.”

“I think the bus heard you,” remarked Patrick, who had continued observing the vehicle. “It’s coming back to help.”

The girls turned and stared. Sure enough, the bus had screeched to a halt and was backing furiously up the winding road towards them.

“I wonder if this is good news or bad news?” Su mused.

“Either way,” Alana grinned, “you’ll have your aircon!”

The bus pulled up in front of them and the door burst open. Out leapt Stuart. “Come on in, you guys!” he called. “Quickly!”

The three weary travelers just stared for the better part of a minute, until they were finally snapped out of their reverie by the repeated command, this time in a more hushed whisper. “Come on! The army can’t be far behind!”

Without further ado the three parceled themselves up the stairwell and the doors hissed shut behind them. On a sudden impulse, Stuart quickly turned and wrapped his coat around Patrick to hide his obvious wound from view.

“I feel like I’m walking in a dream,” Su breathed, as they moved in slow motion down the half-empty aisle. “I can breathe! I can speak!”

“And I can smell!” Alana sniffed her shirt and crossed her eyes in disgust. Then she knit her brows and stared at Stuart. “But let’s leave the really important things for later. First of all—what are *you* guys doing here?”

“Angelica!” Su cried in delight, coming across her friend. “And Cal! Are the others here as well?”

Stuart shook his head. “We’ll just have to keep ... hoping for them.” He blinked his eyes towards the other passengers on the bus, of which there were a little more than a dozen, who were eyeing the newcomers with not a little curiosity.

“I’ll fill you in on all the details later—it’s a long story. But as for now ... we saw you on the side of the road as we were driving by, and asked if they could stop and pick you up too. The driver was so kind as to let us ride with them to their next stop. It’s about twenty minutes from where the Refuge is.”

Su nodded politely at their benefactor, whom she noticed was eyeing the group curiously in his rearview mirror, and then she collapsed in a seat next to Patrick, who was already asleep from pain and

exhaustion.

“Thank God for salvation,” she whispered, and then she too, fell asleep.



“Thank you! Bye!” The six, now feeling quite refreshed, turned back to wave at the driver. He had gotten out of the bus, and was attending the other passengers, who were now stretching their legs and readying their purses to enter the roadside restaurant they had stopped at, before they would continue their voyage.

“I wish we could have witnessed to them more openly,” Su said regretfully, as they turned and headed in the opposite direction.

“Me too,” Stuart nodded, “but it’s much too close to the Home. We wouldn’t want to endanger their safety. It’s a miracle the driver even agreed to take us without any questions like that. I wouldn’t have even risked asking if we weren’t so desperate to get away. But they were right there by the side of the road when we came careening out of the bushes, and it seemed the Lord had led us right to them—or them right to us, depending on how you look at it.”

“And it’s not likely the baddies’ll pick up our trail. I mean, it’s not like this was a regular city bus. These tourist busses have their own schedule, and could be going anywhere. I’m surprised it wasn’t followed though, or stopped and searched as it passed the place we pulled off the road.”

“I guess we drew the bulk of their forces into the forest, so the main road was unwatched,” Stuart offered. “They must not have heard the bus pass by either, as it was never pursued. I guess we can only thank the Lord for providing us such a great way of escape.”

The others nodded in agreement.

“And so refreshing too,” Alana sighed in remembrance.

“Come on,” Su said, “let’s get going. I can’t wait to get home!”

“You okay, Pat?” Alana asked.

Patrick nodded. “It’s not bleeding right now, and not nearly as painful. I had some good rest.”

“Anything we can do for you?” Angelica asked.

“Not from here,” he shook his head. “The sooner I can get off my feet and get it cleaned up properly the better. Aside from that, let’s carry on!”



It took the better part of a half-hour for the well-traveled group to make their way through the village, some way into the forest beyond, and up and down a small hill.

“How much farther is this place?” Cal asked.

“Maybe another twenty minutes.” Stuart scrunch-ed up his face doubtfully. “It’s hard to tell in this forest.”

“Isn’t that the distance it was supposed to be from the village?” Alana asked. “We’ve walked at least that long already.”

“I never promised full accuracy,” Stuart shrugged. “Plus, it’s been a while.”

“Oh, let’s not get lost, please!” Alana groaned. “I couldn’t take that.”

“We’re not lost,” Su said. “It’s not much further.”

The remainder of the trek proceeded in relative silence, apart from the crunching of twigs and berries underfoot, and the labored and erratic breathing of those members in less than daily workout condition.

All of a sudden, Su looked up. “There it is!” She pointed excitedly up the trail to the left. All those not familiar with the Refuge—that is, all but Su and Stuart, for Angelica had not been to that particular place either—strained their eyes in the direction of her thrust.

Alana turned to the rest of the group. “Is it just me that’s missing something, or is this maybe an

invisible portal to another dimension?”

“Come on,” Stuart shoved her playfully. “Quit your bantering for just one minute, will you? It’s right up here.”

He led the way up a steep embankment, which seemed to just go further into the forest. Not much further in, however, an obviously well-used trail emerged, and this they followed for a couple hundred feet until they came in sight of a large stone cabin. Overjoyed at having finally reached their destination, none of them were prepared for the sudden bark that startled them back into the reality of the moment. The dog that now checked their approach did not look too ferocious, but it was obviously not familiar with any of these strangers, and determined not to let them get any further on to what it seemed to regard as its own turf.

For a moment Stuart wondered whether the house had perhaps been taken over by new residents. But almost before he had the chance to finish his thoughts, the door burst open and a whole stream of people came pouring out. There were shouts of “Stuart” and “Susanna” and “Oh, my Lord, you’re back” and “Look at all these people, Mommy! Who are they?”

“Wow, these guys are quick on the draw!” Alana whispered to Cal. “I mean, we hardly set foot in their pasture before they were all over us. I’m glad they’re on our side!”

A boy who looked about preteen age was standing nearby and looked over at her comment. He laughed—a pleasant, toothy sort of laugh. “We set up a couple mini-cameras along the path,” he offered. “Got ’em donated before things got too tight a few months back—we want to have at least a couple minutes’ advance warning if anything’s coming. Though Trigger here, since he’s showed up out of nowhere about a week ago, has done us almost the same service.” The

boy pointed to the dog, who was now making his rounds to the new arrivals, and dutifully (though, Alana couldn’t help thinking to herself, very strangely) smelling their footwear.

“That’s fair enough,” Cal said, and held out his hand to the boy. “Hi, I’m Cal.”

The boy shook his outstretched hand, then gave him a warm hug. “You’re a soldier?” He nodded towards Cal’s uniform.

“Used to be,” Cal said quickly. “Seems like a very long time ago—actually it was just yesterday.”

“Where’s Kim?” Stuart was looking around with a rather worried look.

A woman with ruffled hair and a tired but pleasant face looked around as well. “Your wife is...gosh, she was just here. She must have gone to fix herself up or something ... you know!” She smiled knowingly, and patted her own hair as though she wished she had done the same.

Just then the front door of the cabin opened, and at that moment the world went into slow motion. Perhaps it was only for the two of them, or perhaps the entire universe did happen to stray into some time warp. Either way, the effect was the same. The front door opened, and a slim girl appeared on the threshold. She had white-blond hair that hung just past her shoulders and big grey eyes. She was twisting her hands nervously in front of her, and stepped rather hesitantly out into the sunlight.

“Dang!” Alana muttered under her breath, breaking the slow-motion spell to bits. “She *would* be a knockout.”

“Kim!” Stuart called. He was obviously not in slow motion, and cleared the small front yard in two leaps, amazingly avoiding any head-on collisions with the hugging clusters.

Then they were in each other’s arms, locked in a clinging embrace that told of destiny and Heaven

hereafter.

"It's been so long!" Kim breathed, as she let out all the love and longing that she'd been holding inside for the past two years. "I can't believe you're finally home!"

"It's true," Stuart kissed her tenderly. "And I'm not going to leave you again if I can help it!"

They hugged again, not willing to dilute the moment with their feeble words, which could do so poorly at expressing their true feelings. Then the moment passed, and Stuart felt a timid tug on his pants. "So you're my daddy?" came a matter-of-fact voice.

"Dylan!" Stuart bent down and picked Dylan up. "Dylan, look at you! Look at him! He's huge!" He swung the boy up his arms and enveloped him in a huge bear hug. "How old are you, big guy?"

"I'm five," Dylan replied proudly. "Just turned last week."

"That's right, that's right," Stuart said, as though he could hardly believe how fast time had gone, and needed a little mental convincing to help it to stick. "And where's the baby?"

"The *baby* is three years old—nearly three-and-a-half, actually," Kim laughed. "She was a bit shy to come right out and see you. But ... oh, there she is."

They turned towards the doorway, where a shy, round face was peering around the side of the door.

"Maya," Kim called softly. "Come."

The face disappeared back inside the house.

"Maybe we should give her some time," Stuart suggested. "I'll have to grow on her."

"I'm sure you will," Kim laughed, still with her arm around his waist.

Just then the door flung open, and the little girl leaped onto the doorstep, planted her feet firmly and swung her arms up above her head, lifting up a well-worn doll as though it were incredibly heavy. "You

ask for a sign?" she squeaked emphatically. "Then a sign will be given you!"

Kim hurried over and swooped the little girl up, with a rather red face.

"I see she's recognized me already," Stuart laughed. "That's a pretty good rendition, I'd say."

"I was able to download a file of the broadcast from the Web," Kim explained. "The kids like to watch it for parent time. Helped to bring you near, I guess."

"You got that off the Web?" Cal asked. "How on earth did it get there? I mean, I saw the live broadcast myself, but on the Web that stuff's gotta be pretty closely monitored."

"Sure is," Kim said. "But there'll always be rebels. Stuff like this pops up every now and then. Some renegade makes a new Web site and spreads the word around through their sources. Usually only lasts a day or less before it gets taken down, but if you know where to look, you can get ahold of some pretty hot items."

"Seems pretty dangerous," Angelica shivered. "Can't they like track you down if you go on those sites?"

"Not if you know what you're doing!" Kim smiled knowingly, leaving the others with a subtle hint that she may well possess that prized knowledge. "But let's get inside the house. We don't want to be out here making so much racket out here for long. Anyone could be walking the trails and hear us."

Then she looked over at Alana, apparently recognizing her from the broadcast. "This is your friend, Stuart?"

Stuart nodded, and grabbed Alana's arm. Most of the others had gone inside already, and Alana tried to pull away, not anxious to expedite her integration into this obviously warm and fuzzy family unit. But Stuart discreetly twisted her elbow behind her back and escorted her over to Kim.

“This is Alana,” he said, giving her a little shove forward. “My very good friend.”

“Hi, Kim,” Alana said, sporting her best and most polite smile. “So nice to meet you at last. Stuart’s told me a lot about you.”

“If I know Stuart you’re probably not terribly comfortable to meet me,” Kim said in a low voice, and with a knowing wink. “But don’t worry, you don’t have to feel at all awkward, okay? We have a mutual arrangement about these sort of things.”

Despite her many well-polished exterior fronts, Alana was caught completely off-guard, and could not think of a word to say. Finally she stuttered, “What do you mean ... I mean, how did you know?”

“Oh, come on.” Kim put her arm around Alana’s shoulders and they turned towards the house. “It’s all a part of life, no? Don’t worry! Let’s go get something to eat.”

Slightly bewildered at the unexpected exchange, Stuart picked up the two kids and followed the girls into the house.



“So we started running through the forest again, right,” Stuart paused to fill his mouth with food again, and Cal took up the narrative for their breathless audience.

“We felt as if we were surrounded, but hadn’t caught sight of any bad guys yet.”

“Course we had no idea where we were headed, but we figured that we’d gotten a decent enough head start to come to some haven of safety before we’d be detected,” Stuart added.

“Though we had that ‘walking through the fire’ prophecy,” Angelica reminded them, “so we had one of those sneaking feelings that maybe we wouldn’t get off so easy.”

Cal nodded. “So as we’re tearing through the woods, all of a sudden we hear this shout. Some guy

belting out with all his might, ‘Freeze right where you are, or we’ll shoot!’”

“My heart nearly stopped working right on the spot!” Angelica said, shivering at the remembrance. “I was like, ‘Sure, anything you say!’ But these guys had some kind of unseen sense...”

“Yeah, well,” Cal cut in, “something in his voice just sounded a little too desperate. When you’ve got full backup and your target’s checkmate, your tone’s a little more self-assured. This guy sounded downright panicky.”

“Guess your soldier-experience paid off after all,” Su laughed. “It takes one to know one!”

Cal grinned. “I guess so,” he said. “I can say I’ve been in both situations, so maybe that’s where I got the tip.”

“Anyhow,” Stuart continued, “we couldn’t see the guy and didn’t really know where he was, just that his voice came from off to the left somewhere. They must have had their men crawling all through that forest, and he just happened to be the first to spot us. We stopped for a sec, to sort of decide what to do and all, and suddenly it was like we all knew what we were supposed to do...”

“Run!” Angelica burst out. “And keep running!”

“So that’s what we did,” Stuart said. “The guy started shooting right away, of course, but as we’d thought, he seemed to be the only one—at least for the time being. And the forest was so thick he was more or less shooting blind, so it would only be by chance he could have hit us.”

Cal picked up the narration. “We’d only been running for a few seconds, though, when we heard other shouts. It seems his buddies were quick to pick up on the gunshots, and before we knew it, everyone was coming after us. That was when the real fun stuff happened.

“There was this helicopter that showed up right



about then too. Not that we could see it, but as soon as I heard it, I suddenly realized it wasn't exactly gonna be easy to get out of this one."

"Thank the Lord we were far enough away that all the shooting wasn't an immediate danger, although they were all coming our way too, so in a way it was just a matter of time," Angelica said. "So then we come to this clearing, right, and just then the helicopter flies over and spots us. So we keep running for cover, but then some foot-soldier guy catches up to us and gets the bright idea to pull out his flame gun..."

"Flame-thrower," Cal corrected her.

"Oh, well, whatever," Angelica continued. "So anyway, before we know it there's this huge fireball shooting right out in front of us..."

"It lit the entire patch of undergrowth." Stuart shook his head. "Before we knew it, there was a raging bonfire in front of us. There was no going around it, as it was spreading fast, and the other soldiers were pretty much on our tails. But then we remembered..."

"Walking through the fire..." Angelica smiled, and shivered at the same time.

"You *walked through the fire*?" Kim asked incredulously.

"I must say we did," Stuart said, "though it's even hard to believe looking back at it now. I guess when you're in those desperate moments and the Lord says 'go,' you don't bother much to think of whether it can be done or not. It's a real case of 'do or die'—literally! So we took the plunge, and dashed through that blaze like it was the fires of hell."

"And like the fires of hell, they couldn't touch us!" Angelica concluded triumphantly. "Not a burn, not a singe—nothing! We came out the other side feeling like we'd been through a giant car wash, and only the better for it!"

"The guys were still shooting at us, and by then they were closer 'cause we'd hesitated getting to the

fire," Stuart said. "One of them almost got me, actually—just barely nicked my neck, but there wasn't any blood or anything."

"You got shot?" Kim looked concerned. "Let me see!"

"Oh, it's nothing," Stuart said, "I hardly felt it myself."

But Kim insisted, and so Stuart brushed back his long hair as she quickly inspected his neck. "I don't see a thing," she declared. "Must have been a mighty small nick."

Stuart shrugged. "Well, I don't know. It felt like a nick at the time, but maybe I was just paranoid."

Cal suddenly lost several shades of color in his face. Pushing Kim aside, he leaned over Stuart's neck. "Where did you say you were hit?"

Stuart flailed his hands in the general direction of his neck. "Somewhere up there, on the right side."

"What did it feel like?" Cal asked.

Stuart turned around and looked at him. "What did it *feel* like? Are you writing an essay on pain in the Tribulation or something? I don't know what it felt like—what does a bullet grazing your neck feel like?"

"No, I'm serious," Cal repeated.

"Well, I've never been shot before," Stuart said contemplatively, "but it didn't feel like what I'd have expected of a bullet. It felt almost more like ... a shot—that is, like an injection type of shot. A real quick, light sort of stab."

Cal had continued studying Stuart's neck and seemed to have found what he was looking for. "I was afraid of that," he said. "My friend, you weren't shot with a bullet at all. It was a high-speed, self-injecting tracking device. They must have been firing bullets just for the scare of it—what they were really after was following us to where we were going."

Now it was Stuart's turn to go pale. "You mean

they've had tabs on us all this time?"

"That's right. You're a little red blip on their radar, and if you'd have died the device would have registered the drop in your body temperature, so they know you're still spry and kicking. They've probably been right on our tails this whole time.—I don't doubt they were just waiting to make sure we'd arrived at our gathering point, and now that we have, they're probably rushing reinforcements here at this very minute so they can come in and finish off the job. No wonder our bus wasn't followed, when they'd been so close on our tails before—and come to think of it, that helicopter just disappeared right afterwards as well."

Cal's statement threw the room into a frenzy.

"Whoa, hold it everyone!" A graying man on the far side of the room spoke up. "Let's not leap before we look here. If this is indeed the case, then we're going to have to clear out and quickly, but let's not go without committing ourselves to the Lord and getting a confirmation from Him that this is what we really need to do. We knew this time would come upon us sooner or later. Do you all have your fleebags ready?"

Various worded murmurs of assent simmered through the room.

Stuart was still sitting in the same position as he'd been when Cal had first sprung the news. "I can't believe it!" he shook his head in dismay. "I led them right to the nest!"

"Hey Stu!" Alana came over and grabbed his shoulders, giving him a vigorous shake. "There's no time for self-analysis here. You know it wasn't your fault—how could you have known? God's got some master agenda going, we've just gotta roll with it. You wouldn't razz anyone else if they were in your place, would you?"

"You're right," Stuart sighed. "Of course you're right."



The heavenly check-in process, while desperate, may have been one of the shortest in recorded Family history. Having ascertained that they were indeed supposed to make a speedy getaway, everyone retreated to their bedrooms to gather up their fleebags. Departure was set in exactly ten minutes' time.

The gray-haired man was rubbing his hands together, as he tended to do when he was feeling nervous or awkward. Finally he motioned to Stuart. Alana, who noticed the man's gesture, decided to come along as well.

"Can I have a word with you?" the older man said when the two were near enough. "I don't know how to say this, but..."

"It's about the vehicles, isn't it?" Stuart asked. "I remember from when I was here—not one to spare, right?"

"That's right," the man nodded apologetically. "We've got exactly enough seats in our vehicles for each person here—and if we overload them we risk getting pulled over for a traffic violation, and we all know what that could lead to."

"Look, we got you into this," Alana seemed oblivious that the question was more directed at Stuart.

"Yeah," Stuart agreed. "Please don't worry about us. We're used to roughing it, I'm sure we can lose 'em in the woods or something—there aren't that many of us."

"Except..." Alana turned up her nose as if she was dismayed at the uncharacteristic expression of empathy and consideration of others' feelings that she was finding within herself, "I don't know about Patrick ... he is not be the best of shape with his wound ..."

Stuart nodded. "Su too—she's still not in peak condition after her ordeal."

Just then Kim broke into the circle. "Why don't

Patrick and Su take our place in the Rover? We can go with these guys.”

“You and the kids?” the older man asked.

“Yes,” Kim replied. “I know it sounds risky, but didn’t the Lord promise to take care of His own?” She turned her gaze to Stuart. “Look, I’ve thought about this a lot, what I would ever do if you came back and then had to leave again, and just now I brought it before the Lord again, and I’ve got the faith for it. I know that He will keep us—and even more than that, I think it’s His plan. Besides,” she turned back towards the elder man, “I could take them to our own hideout. That’s what we’ve been getting it ready for all this time, right?”

The man looked thoughtful for a moment, and seemed to be agreeing with her. But Stuart was hesitant, and looked serious. “You know I’d love to have you come,” he said slowly. “I’m just so worried about dragging the kids into something that could be...”

“I know, Stu!” Kim said. “I am just as concerned as you are. But I’ve prayed about this and I have the faith for it. And it could only be a help to have somebody along who knows the area.”

Just then Cal joined the group.

Stuart looked up quickly, his mind suddenly diverted from the question at hand. “Cal, I just thought of something—what about our little pickup machine here?” He motioned towards his neck. “Is there any use in us running away?—They’ll just keep tailing us, no?”

“That’s right. The best thing to do is sit tight and do nothing—at least till all the others have had a chance to clear out. That way they won’t suspect that we’re onto them, and it’ll hopefully buy the others a little more time to beat it the hell out of here.”

“And then what?” Kim asked, a worried look crossing her face. “They’ll still be converging around

us, right?”

“We may be able to mislead them,” Cal said. “I’m no doctor, but I have a basic idea how the device works from my field training. We could try to extract the device, though we’d have to be careful to keep it at body temperature, and then find something else to poke it into—an animal, for instance. We’ve come here too directly for them to think it’s a random resting spot, so they’ll be surrounding this place sooner or later, or at least putting it under surveillance. But if we can divert them by sending the signal elsewhere, we may be able to clear out of here unnoticed before they realize what’s going on.”

“An animal, huh?” Alana asked with a curl of her lips. Her mind instantly flickered back to the strange mutt that had greeted her shoe.

Cal nodded. “But that can wait. The first order of the day is to get everybody else out of here!”



A few short minutes later, the vehicles were all loaded up with essential items, and people prepared to take their assigned seats.

“Well, there’s still an extra seat in the car,” Kim offered. “If anyone else wants to hitch a ride with them...”

Cal and Alana looked at each other. Neither was anxious to trade an adventurous mountain trek for a ride in a comfy getaway vehicle. Then Alana’s eyes lit up. “Angelica!” she whispered, nodding her head. They all looked over to where Angelica, back turned, was deep in conversation with another girl.

“Leave it to me,” Alana said confidently. “I’ll be back in no time.” She breezed over to Angelica, scooped up a quick nod of consent, and charged back over to the others.

A few moments later, after a few scattered hugs and fond farewells, the teams loaded up. The vehicles soon disappeared down the road, making their own

way to whatever adventures would greet them in the days to come.

As soon as they had left, Cal brought them all back to the present. “I believe now is as good a time as any to perform our little operation.”

“And it looks like the Lord Himself has provided a lamb for the offering,” Stuart joked, motioning over to Trigger, who from the moment the others had left, had come and stood resolutely beside him, as if he knew where his next mission lay.



The operation took longer to plan than to execute. Under Cal’s direction, Kim prepared two small plastic sandwich bags filled with cotton swabs and warm water. Then, using a digital thermometer that was part of her personal first aid kit, she made sure both bags were precisely the same temperature. The room was also heated as much as possible by means of any heaters they could gather (as if anyone thought it could have gotten much hotter than it already was), all the while experimenting until they were assured that the bags would hold a steady temperature long enough to perform the operation.

Cal then instructed Kim to hold one bag directly over the area on Stuart’s neck where the projectile had lodged itself. To Alana was given the inglorious task of holding the second bag against Trigger’s backside.

“The probe is designed to ignore moderate temperature changes,” Cal explained, “you know, like when the subject decides to soak in a hot bath, or goes for some other body-temperature increasing activity.” He cast a sly glance in Alana’s direction, but she didn’t notice.

Cal continued, “If we hold this bag against Stuart’s neck, the probe will gradually detect what it believes to be an increase in Stuart’s body temperature. Then, as we extract it, we’ll have to keep it snugly enveloped

by the bag, so hopefully it won’t detect the change. Then it’s just a matter of getting it over to Trigger here, and re-inserting it at the spot that we’ve prepared to register the same temperature.”



I don’t imagine you could have picked a better one, huh?” Alana retorted.

Cal just grinned, and kept his full concentration on the task at hand.

Within about ten minutes, the operation was complete. With the aid of a couple of sterilized needles, a pair of ordinary tweezers, and some dental floss, the thin, needle-like projectile was finally extracted from Stuart’s neck, and rested safely in the warm, soft folds of the sandwich bag. Then it was carefully transferred and poked into the backside of the dog.

It was a primitive procedure, performed under primitive conditions, and Cal congratulated himself on the ingenuity of the whole idea, though he wasn’t entirely sure he had actually outsmarted the hi-tech piece of military-grade hardware. But he determined to keep his doubts to himself.

Trigger had remained silent and submissive throughout the entire procedure, as if he understood all that was being done, and had accepted it as his fate—and his duty. Then, within moments after the procedure had been completed, he suddenly bounded up and made for the half-open door. And so Trigger made his way back down the path they had come, apparently intent on fulfilling his own unique canine portion of the big picture.

“Do you think it worked?” Alana asked.

“Well, let’s hope so,” Cal answered, trying to sound assured. “In either case, I’d say it’s about high time to clear out, so let’s scram!”

Kim reached down and picked up an old, beat up backpack, and threw it over her shoulders. “We’re ready,” she said.

“Okay,” Stuart said, rubbing the back of his neck where the projectile had been, and which was now covered with a simple bandaid. “Let’s be off then.”

“Come this way!” Kim motioned towards the back door of the house. Grabbing the hastily prepared food bags that lay beside them, the group of young people headed towards the back door. It was lined with several pairs of large, knee-high rubber boots in different sizes. “Put these on. There should be something to fit everyone. We’ll be needing them. We can dump all our shoes in this bag.”

With that, Kim thrust her feet into a pair, and bent over to help Maya work her feet into a pair of rainbow-colored boots her own size. Maya looked as excited as a child about to go on a field trip.

“Here,” Kim tossed Stuart a makeshift strapping device. “If you put that on, Maya can ride on your back. We’ll make faster progress that way. Dylan should be able to keep up. Okay, everyone—we’re off to the great outdoors.”

Without another word the group made their way out of the house and disappeared into the bushes on the far side.

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## IN THE LAB

“I wonder how far we can get before the goons catch on to us,” Alana wondered aloud.

“I just wish there were some way we could phone Julian,” Stuart mused. “I’m sure he’d be happy to help us out.”

“You want a phone?” Kim asked. The others looked at her in surprise.

“You’ve got one out here?” replied Alana.

“Sure!” Kim grinned. “It’s right where we’re going!”

They walked for another five minutes, ducking through notably unfriendly terrain. Cal finally resorted to carrying Dylan on his shoulders, as the little boy was having a hard time with the trek, though he was being very brave about it. Soon they came to a wide, shallow stream, which Kim forged into without any hesitation.

“It’s to cover our tracks,” she explained, as she began walking along with the flow. “Don’t worry, it’s not deep. That’s what the boots are for. Did you know they’ve got thermal cameras that can pick up a footprint up to three days after it has been made? If they’ve got a couple of those on ‘em, they’ll lose us here.”

And so they headed downstream, never leaving the shallow waters. The watercourse branched out more

than once in varying directions, but Kim seemed to know her way around them easily, and the group soon found themselves in a narrow sort of fetal-stage stream that presently disappeared underneath a thick hedge.

“Here we go,” Kim said softly. She pushed through the hedge, and it gave way easily. Having passed through the obstruction, the stream tripped rapidly downwards over a slight slope that almost resembled a covered stairway, with the hedge they had pushed through growing thickly over and above it, forming a dense roof of foliage. “Make your way down the rocks. Be careful—it’s a bit slippery. At the bottom there’s an opening. Crawl through. It’s the entrance to our secret cave.”

“A cave?” Cal wondered aloud.

Kim grinned. “It’s our last bastion of resistance. We can rest there till some of the commotion dies down.” She reached into her pack and pulled out a long, thick flashlight. She laughed at Stuart’s surprise. “I know, it is a bit of a monstrous thing to be lugging around in a fleebag. But you’ll see we’ll need it.”

One by one they made their way down the slippery slope, and then found the opening Kim had described. It was just a little above the stream, and seemed to have been primitively carved out so as to make it larger and easier to get into.

“Couldn’t you have made your home away from home a little cozier?” Alana said, brushing off the remnants of twigs and weeds that had amorously bonded with her arms and legs.

“We don’t want to invite the wrong kind of guests,” Kim explained. “If it was any more inviting we’d be begging to be discovered. Don’t worry, it gets worse before it gets better.”

“Well that’s reassuring,” Alana said glumly.

But Kim was pushing forward, and clicked on her

flashlight. The others quickly followed. The opening was apparently the mouth to a network of natural tunnels of some sort, and the waning daylight from the outdoors peered faintly through the thick hedge covering that they had just left behind. Kim pointed the beam into the inky blackness, revealing a long corridor. “This way,” she said, and quite obviously too, as it was the only corridor available. Kim followed directly behind the piercing white beam, with Stuart and Maya just behind her, Alana following them, and Cal and Dylan bringing up the rear.

On and on they walked, for a good ten minutes, up and down various corridors, through slimy puddles of dripping ooze and around blind corners.

“Careful here.” Kim pointed her flashlight to the side to reveal a sharp drop off. Directly below them was a sheer drop, with awesome-looking granite formations guiding the deadly way down the bottom, sixty or seventy feet below.

“Pays to know the way,” Cal said.

“Yeah, good thing you thought to join us,” Alana agreed.

They continued along to the right, hugging the wall of the cave so as to avoid any other unexpected drops. Then Kim turned towards Stuart. “Can you pull up Maya’s hood? She doesn’t like this part.” Maya started fumbling with her hood, and realizing that Stuart could not twist his torso sufficiently to accomplish the task, Alana aided the little girl. Maya immediately burrowed her head down as far in between Stuart’s shoulders and the backpack as she could. No sooner had she done so then a faint screeching noise was heard.

“Sorry, guys,” Kim smiled. “I forgot to mention our flying guard dogs.”

“Bats!” Alana gulped. Then she grinned broadly. “Lucky for me they’re my favorite animal.”

“Just wave your hands above your head every so

often. They're harmless," Kim instructed. "It's not much further."

A minute or so later, they came to some sort of a wooden door. Kim shone her flashlight full on it, revealing an elaborately carved-out inscription reading *The Lab*.

"The lab?" Cal echoed. "What's that?"

"Welcome to our humble abode!" Kim flung open the door. "We first called it the Labyrinth, because of what it took to get here. But of course that's not nearly conversational enough, so the Lab it is."

"You got that from the movie, didn't you?" Alana said, with the triumphant tone of someone who has been searching their brain for a familiar link and has finally discovered it. "The Labyrinth'—it was a really big hit two summers ago. It's got that girl in it—Sheba, you know, the new Hollywood heartthrob."

Kim just laughed, as she reached into a corner to light a lantern of some sort. "Come on in. Just ditch your boots at the door."

Alana immediately lost her train of thought as she opened her mouth wide. "Whoa, what a pad!" she burst out.

And a pad it was! The room they entered was not a large one—no more than twelve feet each way—but gave off every impression of an average comfortable room (minus a view). The rough floor had been swept clean and covered in various places with soft rugs. There were piles of cushions in the corner, and several large posters had been pasted to the rough walls. A fair-sized trunk had a place on the far side of the room, and next to it were four large coolers stacked one on top of the other. An opening on the far left hand side of the room seemed to lead off into additional chambers.

"Pull up a cushion, all." Kim threw her bag down on the rug and followed it with herself. "Here we abide until the calamity is overpast."

"That's a Bible verse," Dylan said importantly to Cal, with all the air of a self-appointed spiritual overseer.

The others lowered themselves into varying degrees of comfort.

Dylan, having temporarily exhausted his need for spiritual output, grabbed Maya's hand and together they dashed off into the adjoining room, where squeals of delight and scuffles of tumbling objects inferred that they had tapped into a trove of long-lost amusements of some sort.

"This is quite a place you have here," Stuart said. "I'm impressed."

Kim grinned. "We started on it not long after you all left. It's taken a while, but we figured it would come in handy someday—you know, one of those 'better to have it and not need it' cases. Occasionally it's been used by some of the more adventurous folk who wanted to take some time away, you know, freedays and all, but this was its real purpose—a hideaway."

"But what about laser sensors and all that?" Cal asked. "I mean, the technology they've got these days can pick out a fly from a cockroach if that's what they're looking for."

"Ah yes," Kim replied. "But that's the beauty of the Lab. It's right smack in the heart of a mountain range—we've got a good couple hundred feet going above us, and at least a half-mile on any given side. As far as we know, there's no type of sensors that could detect even a herd of mating elephants inside that much solid rock. And with the imprint of our tracks being washed out by the flowing water, there's no way they'd even know where to begin to look. No siree, we're packed in here as solid as they come, and with the Lord's protection, there's no finding us till we choose to poke our heads out."

"How long can we hole up here?" Stuart asked.

“Probably not more than a week, with the amount of us there are. Food will hold out longer, but there’s not that much water. Not that we’d want to stay here that long anyway—I figure give it forty-eight hours or so, let all the hoopla die down, then perhaps your friend Julian could give us a quick lift out.”

“How exactly are we supposed to get in touch with Julian?” Alana asked.

Kim opened the lid of the large trunk and whipped out a slim black object. “The *pièce de resistance*,” she smiled. “*El telefono!*”

“It is secure?” Cal asked in surprise.

“You bet!” Kim said. “You’ll notice it’s a good bit bigger than any cellphones that are circulating nowadays, mostly because of its huge, long endurance rechargeable battery, which hooks directly up to our own highland generator in the back. But it’s totally top ace.—It’s a contraband special, that’s why.” She flipped open the device and displayed the keypad. “See all these extra buttons? You can pick different frequencies, you’ve got a secure transmission feature, encryption feature—and it just taps right in to whatever local cellular network you’re near.

“It can even dial itself onto the Net by any number of simulated Web accounts—a virtual Internet self-service provider, if you know what I mean. It plugs into your computer, letting you anonymously surf the Web, send e-mail, voice-mail, whatever you want.

“Course to use it inside this much rock, it’s gotta have this great ol’ wire spewing out its rear. That runs it to a remote antenna, which is equipped with its own special signal cloaking device. We try not to use it too often, but it works, and is one of the most secure devices on the black market today.” Kim suddenly opened her eyes wide to realize that she had been quite monopolizing the conversation with her technical jargon. The others ranged in expressions from amused to mildly impressed.

“Well,” she grinned. “You know, that’s the basics of it.”

“I see you’ve got everything covered,” Stuart smiled, quite at a loss for words. “Gosh Kim, I don’t know what we’ve done without you all this time!”

“Hey, don’t,” she replied. “It’s taken us all this time to get it all together, and even longer for *me* to begin to understand any of this gear. You guys have been doing the real work—the hand-to-hand combat, so to speak. We’re just the stay-by-the-stuffers, and we’ve tried to make the best of the time we’ve had, just hoping it would come in handy someday.”

“And now it has!” Stuart replied, leaning over to kiss her lips.

“And what a pretty picture that makes,” Alana said, forming her fingers into a square shape and making a clicking noise. “My camera-away-from-home. I’ll send you an autographed print sooner or later.”

Kim giggled and jumped up. “Come on, let’s get something to eat. I’m starved!”

“Maybe we can call Julian in the morning,” Stuart said. “If he’s not too far off I bet he’d have a way of finding out when the forces around us are thinning out.”

“That’s just what we’ll need,” Cal nodded. “We don’t want to have to go through that trek on an hourly basis to find out if the coast is clear!”

“And that’s a fact,” Alana said. “But as for me, I’m game for that food you offered, Kim.”



The sparse meal of canned food and other non-perishable preserves was no sooner out of the way than the younger members of the party started displaying obvious signs of requiring some time in shuteye. Dylan had taken up a sport of poking his little sister with a popsicle stick that he had apparently been reserving for just such an occasion. Maya, in turn, responded to this treatment with a



mournful wail, and started running away from him. As Dylan jumped up to pursue the chase, Stuart looked on in amazement.

“They’re a couple of little monsters!” he whispered to Kim.

Kim laughed. She had obviously seen much worse times. “Come on,” she said, under her breath so that the little miscreants would not pick up on it, “give them a little credit. They’ve had a pretty eventful evening, a long walk, and it’s almost ten o’clock now. They’re just overtired.” Then she rather reluctantly put on her Firm Mother Tone, and called out, “Dylan, that’s enough. Bring me that stick.”

Dylan immediately dashed for the other room. “Uncle Bob’s not here!” he shouted gleefully at the top of his voice.

The others turned questioningly to Kim, who grinned. “Our local strongman. I send Dylan to him when he needs a stronger talking-to than I could give him. It adds a bit of fatherly deterrent—since I’ve had to make do without the real thing for a while.” Then loudly, to Dylan, “Do I have to come and get you?”

Maya was perched in the doorway between the two rooms, and put her hands on her chubby waist. “Mommy said you’d better come, Dylan!” she chirped gleefully. “Or you’re gonna *get it!*”

Stuart suddenly stood up. “Maybe I should give it a shot.” Swooping Maya up and setting her down next to Kim, he disappeared into the other room.

Kim and the other two made small talk about nothing for about fifteen minutes, until finally the two emerged, Stuart holding Dylan, who had his arms around his neck. As they came closer, Dylan held out his grubby hand. “Here, Mommy! Here’s the stick.”

“Thank you Dylan,” she smiled. “So what have you guys been up to all this time?”

“Big guy stuff,” Dylan replied proudly. “Daddy said he’d put me to bed and tell me some of his adventures.

Can he, Mommy?”

For a moment Kim looked perplexed at the thought of not having to put the kids to bed for a night, but Stuart swooped Maya up in the other arm before she could protest. “Come on,” he said. “I’ve got two years to catch up on. Just name the spot and I’m on it.”

“Well ... all right then,” Kim relented. “Their backpack-fleebags are right here, PJs are inside. There’s a tiny little room in the back where I usually put them down when we come here. There’s bedding in there.”

“Right then, troopers! Off we go!”



Stuart emerged forty-five minutes later, to find the other three engrossed in conversation.

“Hey, Daddy man,” Alana laughed. “Who was putting who to sleep?”

Stuart laughed. “I must say I’m out of practice,” he admitted with a yawn. “They pumped me for every age-appropriate story I could think of. Finally I just had to lay down the law and say bedtime was bedtime.”

“And?” Kim asked.

“That was twenty minutes ago. I told them some more stories and they finally fell asleep. I probably bored them into it.”

“I see we’re going to have to brush up on the finer points of discipline enforcement,” Kim said.

“For sure,” said Stuart, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her front. “But not in the near future. I’m going to be much too busy over the next, say, seventy-two hours or so, to think of very much...”

“Oh my God!” Alana shrieked. “Mush alert! Get me out of here! Cal, quick! Save me! Take me someplace where I’ll be unaffected by the fallout!”

“Well,” Stuart said, in mock offense, “if you don’t appreciate a good show then we’ll just take our act

elsewhere and perform it for the privacy of our own enjoyment.”

“Stuart!” Kim’s eyebrows shot up.

“Don’t mind Alana, Kim,” Stuart said with a laugh. “She’s still getting her bearings in this strange new lifestyle she just got introduced to like three weeks ago.—Don’t mind me either, for that matter. I think we’ve just all had a bit of a long week. But come on, there must be some empty room there in the back that we can warm up, no?”

“I know just the one,” Kim said, standing up with a coy smile. She turned briefly back to the others. “We’ll see you guys later then. Make yourselves comfortable—there’s bedding and stuff in the big trunk there.”

“Good night,” Cal said.

“Don’t wear yourselves out too much,” Alana called after them. “You’ve only got a couple days to recover!”



A long silence followed the couple’s departure. Finally, out of desperation, Alana broke it. “Cal, man, say something! Anything! I’m getting eaten up by these quietness molecules!”

“So what is it with you and Stuart?” Cal asked.

“That’s what’s eating you? Why, do you like me or something?”

Cal threw her a scornful glare. “Don’t flatter yourself. I’m just making conversation, like you asked. You’re much too loud to be my type. Plus, I like short girls.”

“You like *what*?”

“You’re too tall for me,” he said with a perfectly straight face. “I can’t bring myself to get involved with anyone whose head is higher than the top of my ear. So you missed it by a good couple inches.”

Alana was quiet for a moment, trying to digest this new information. Finally she said, “I can’t figure out if you’re pulling my leg to see how desperate I am, or

if you’re actually serious in your own twisted sort of a way. I mean, that registration mark has been known to do weird things to people. But I can’t really make up my mind, so why don’t we just have sex and not worry about it?”

He shook his head. “Nothing personal, but as I said, that height thing just really would not work.”

“Well, what are we going to do then?” Alana asked, exasperated. “We’re just supposed to sit out here and *talk* while they’re in there, flipping like burgers?”

Cal stuffed another pillow under his head and tucked his arms back comfortably, stretching out his long legs across the rug. “You like him, don’t you?”

“*Like*? What is like, anyway? The guy’s married, it’s not like I’m building churches in the air. But he sure is hot in bed ... and other places too.”

Cal groaned, “Please, spare me the details.”

“Look, soldier guy, you asked for it. Don’t go poking your nose in places if you don’t like the smell.”

Cal tossed her a scornful look, but didn’t say anything.

“So, what do you figure they’re doing in there?” Alana broke the silence again.

“By this time?” Cal looked at his watch. “They’re probably starting on Round Three.”

Alana snickered. Then, heaving a long sigh which was her way of resigning herself at last to a sexless night and a purely platonic conversation with a man whom she found vaguely attractive—an experience which she could not remember having had before—she curled up in a ball on the carpet and dropped off to sleep.



Meanwhile, in the adjoining room, Stuart and Kim were still warming up to Round One.

“Isn’t this weird?” Kim laughed softly, as she traced her finger around Stuart’s lips.

“What?” he moved his lips around her fingers, and

she closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the warm, sensual feeling that it sent tingling through her whole body.

“Well, I’ve been dreaming of this night for the last two years—and now here we are and we’ve done nothing but talk for the last forty minutes!” She moved her fingers around the contour of his chin, then down to his neck. She slid her fingers down softly, then moved them up again, the back of her nails pressing his skin lightly.

“Come on,” he said, “it’s time we revived those memories we’ve been dreaming of.” He picked her up in his arms and laid her down on the makeshift bed that had been set up on the rough-hewn floor.

She reached down to pull off her shirt, but he quickly covered her hands with his, and then gently pulled them away, laying them flat alongside her body. “No,” he whispered. “Not like that. I want to re-discover you myself, bit by bit. Just like in my dreams.”

He moved over and sat astride her, resting his weight on her upper legs. Slowly, ever so slowly, he worked off the buttons on her short, silky gray shirt. One by one he undid them, baring her light tan skin as he went. Then more buttons—this time the flimsy skirt that had so inadequately tried to cover her shapely legs. That too was swept aside by the sheer passion that consumed his touch. Only a few minutes had passed—though to Kim it could have been an eternity’s lifetime—and there she lay, completely bare, waiting.

Stuart remained still in his position, not saying a word, just breathing her scent and devouring her with his eyes. “God, I love you!” he breathed at last, as though words themselves were not sufficient.

“Then come here and show me.” She sat up now, and pulled his T-shirt over his head. She ran her hands along the length of his arms, rediscovering every hollow of his back with her fingers, burying her

face and her silky hair in his chest. Her tongue drew little playful circles as she descended the ribbed staircase toward his belt buckle. There she stopped.

“Interference!” she whispered teasingly. “We’ll have to be rid of it!” She deftly unstrapped his belt and Stuart, as though he could not wait for her to complete it, quickly finished the job for her, lending his last garments to cover the remaining bare parts of floor in the room.

“At last!” she murmured. He let his body gently fall and envelop hers, engulfing it until it seemed there was nothing left that was alone or individual. They were entwined together in a searing, all-encompassing passion that prodded and ground and beat them into a frenzy of ecstasy, and then finally shot them back down to earth. They emerged slowly from their dream world, breathing heavily and glowing with exertion. Stuart rolled over and lay next to Kim, still not taking his eyes off her for a moment.

“I can’t believe I’m really here, next to you ... part of you again,” he whispered.

Kim smiled, still not fully in control of all her senses. “What I would give to have this moment last forever!”

“Maybe we could try and give it a twin,” Stuart turned and brushed his lips along her collarbone, over her shoulder and sought out the little round scar on her upper arm.

“I’m game for that,” Kim replied.

It was time for Round Two.



There was no natural light to announce the morning’s arrival in this inner-mountain dwelling place, but it is surprising how punctual small human beings are, even with no outward assistance. True to their nature, Dylan and Maya went off like oversized alarm clocks somewhere around the seven o’clock mark, and started careening around the small enclave

of rooms in the hopes of infusing everyone with their same joy and zest of early-morning living.

Before long everyone had dragged themselves from their beds and quasi-beds, and had gathered in the front room eating corned beef sandwiches. “That was good thinking to bring some stuff from the house,” Cal commented.

“Yeah,” said Kim. “I’ve been stuck here one too many times with a canned food solo—it’s not that great. I mean, there’s dried stuff too, but there’s nothing like a good loaf of bread for a quick fix.”

Alana and Cal had been introduced to the others’ first-thing-in-the-AM staple—the ‘D’ word—and were glad to find themselves absorbing more and more of the local culture by the day. The children were notably quiet as the others took turns reading, praying and eating.

“So what happens today?” Alana asked, when the reading was over. She still felt rather irritable after Cal’s rejection of the night before, and stooping to idle chit-chat somehow just made it worse. What she needed was some solid action, and quick.

“I guess we should call Julian and feel out the situation,” Stuart said. “We should probably do that right away.”

“I’ll call him,” Alana offered quickly.

“Um,” Cal looked up quickly.

“Um what? Do you have a problem with that?”

“No, no,” he said, quickly backing down on whatever reservations he may have had.

“How about I call him, Al,” Stuart said.

“Whatever,” Alana shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter to me. I’m going to go powder my nose. You do have an outhouse in this place?”

“Just outside the door here, follow the corridor to the right—you can’t miss it.” Kim tossed her a flashlight.

Alana made her grand exit while the other three

returned their attention to the task at hand.

“I’ll take the kids in the other room. We’ve got to have our own pint-sized devotions now. If you guys want to read some more after your call, you’ll find all the basics in that trunk.” With that, Kim turned and ushered the kids out into the adjoining room.

After a short prayer, securing a heavy dose of divine guidance and anointing for their call, Stuart dialed the number. The steady hum on the other line rang a couple times before Julian’s voice came sounding through.

“Yeah, who’s there?”

“Julian! This is Stuart.”

“Stuart, man! How’s it going?”

“Good, Julian! Well ... I don’t know if good is the word for it. We’ve had some ups and downs since we left you. That’s why I’m calling.”

“Needing my help already, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m afraid so. See, we hooked up with our guys in the Refuge, and wouldn’t you know it but we were tailed and I got tagged with one of those transmitters. Led ’em right into the cauldron. Thank God Cal caught on in time for us all to beat a quick getaway.”

“Another hideaway trashed, huh?” Julian laughed. “You guys do make a sport of that!”

Stuart groaned. “Don’t remind me. I’m still getting over it! Anyway, we all split up, but we’re a team of six here now, and we don’t have any type of transport. We’re in some sort of a cave hideaway. We can hang here for about a week at most, but not much longer and not even that long if we can help it. We don’t really have the means to travel any sort of distance. We’ve got two kids so we can’t really go on foot.”

“So you thought, if I wasn’t too far away, maybe I could swing by and spritz you out of there?”

“Yeah, that’s about right. Along with checking out the landscape so we’d know if the coast is even clear.”

“Where are you exactly?”

Stuart told him the general area.

Julian pondered a minute in silence. “We’re nowhere near there, actually. We’ve been heading steadily in just about the opposite direction.”

“Oh,” Stuart said, not sure quite where that left them.

“I told you we should have stuck together,” Julian said finally. “Look man, I’ll bail you out this once. You guys sure put in the overtime for me and x-hundred of my friends. I owe it to you.”

“Hey Jules, you’re great. Thanks! I can’t tell you how grateful we are.” Stuart sounded just as relieved as he felt.

“Forget about it. Okay well, it’ll take me at least a day to get to your area. I’ll call you when I’m there and you can give me the specs. I’ll tread lightly till I’m sure the coast is clear.”

“You want our number?”

“No problem, I’ll have it on my caller-ID. See you then.”

Stuart looked up at Cal exultantly, as he clicked the phone off. “We’re on!” he said.

Cal nodded. “So they’ll be a while?”

“A day or more. So we’ve got time to kill.”

“Well, that’s just as well. I could use some rest.”

“Yeah,” Stuart stretched himself out on the rug. “No kidding, I’ll take a day of rest any time it’s handed to me. I’ve had my share of hectic ones for awhile.” Stuart suddenly stopped and frowned. “Speaking of hectic ... what’s up with Al? Did she seem to be acting strange to you?”

“Was Alana acting strange? Isn’t that a moot question?” Cal asked, with a shrug.

“Cal.” Stuart frowned. “You know what I mean.”

Cal shrugged again. “Yeah well, she was trying to hit on me last night and I gave her the run around. Didn’t seem to bother her then, but maybe the

accumulated horniness finally got to her with morning light.”

Stuart shook his head and laughed a little. “She is a bit of a strange bird. Give her a chance though, man, she’s not as bad as she makes herself out to be.”

“Of that I’m sure,” Cal replied. “Hey, toss me a book, would you?”

Stuart flipped open the trunk and pulled out two little books, and sent one flying Cal’s way. Cal caught it and started flipping the pages with interest. Finally he said, “What is this stuff?”

Stuart looked up, surprised. Suddenly remembering where Cal was coming from, he felt his life flash before his eyes and looked quickly to see what book he’d tossed. He looked over to see the dark blue *Daily Bread* flipped open to page 26, and the conspicuous title, “Sex Works.”

Stuart laughed a little and quickly swiped the book up, replacing it with a *Treasures* that he’d quickly pulled out of the trunk. “Here,” he said. “You’ll find this a bit easier to understand.”

“Hey, what is this?” Cal asked, annoyed. “I want to read that one. It looked interesting.”

“Look, I think you should start out with this. It’s ... you know ... more introductory.”

“I don’t need introductions, Stu. Pass me the blue one. What’s it to you, anyway?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Stuart shrugged. He pulled DB6 back out of the trunk and passed it to Cal.

Cal curiously opened the front cover of the book and finally came across the table of contents. Immediately grabbing ahold of the eye-catching Letter that had sparked his interest, he flipped to the appropriate page and was soon engrossed in reading. Stuart sighed. *I guess the Lord knows what he needs*, he thought.

All was silent for more than half an hour. Suddenly

Cal looked up and caught Stuart's eye with a sheepish grin. "Cool stuff, this!" he remarked.

"I'll say," Stuart laughed. "Truth of God too, every last word of it."

"You've got more of these?"

"More than you could read in a year probably," Stuart laughed. "Unless you're a very fast reader."

"Well, I guess I'll just keep myself busy as long as I can then," he replied, and turned his attention back to the book.

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## A DARING PLAN

"Where's Alana?" Kim broke the contemplative silence as she entered the room.

Stuart jumped. "Alana! Gosh, I forgot all about her! She's been gone over forty minutes!" He was on his feet in an instant. "I'll go see where she is. Got another flashlight, Kim?"

"Right over there," she nodded towards it.

Stuart stepped out into the dark corridor. "Alana?" he called. "You anywhere?" He moved down the winding corridor. After a few minutes he came to a fork in the path. Unsure of which way to go, he took a deep breath, then bellowed with all his might, "ALANA! WHERE ARE YOU?"

A voice right beside him nearly made him leap out of his skin. "Yeah, Stu, what's up?"

He turned quickly. Alana was leaning against the rough wall, her hands in her pockets.

Stuart scowled at her. "Next time can you please alert me to your presence before I make a total moron of myself?"

Alana just laughed. "It was quite the show. I couldn't help giving it the full spectator treatment."

Stuart grinned. "So what's with you? Out here sulking or something?"

"Please!" Alana said, with a snort. "A little fresh

air, that's all. I needed some time to think."

Just then Stuart sniffed the air suspiciously. "You've been smoking, haven't you?"

Alana rolled her eyes. "Yes, and...?"

"Nothing, I just didn't know you smoked."

"Yeah, that and the rest of my life. Well, I finished every one I had and I doubt I'll be getting many more hanging out with your crowd. Not that I want to anyway—it was just a way to pass time."

Stuart sighed and then threw his back up against the wall next to her. "All right, Alana," he said. "Spit it out—all of it. What's eating you?"

"What's eating me? What's eating *you*? Can't a girl even come out and have a smoke without alerting the National Guard?"

"Out with it," he persisted. "I know you're a tough nut, but you're never this cranky unless there's something wrong. So are you going to tell me or do I have to guess?"

"Oh, come on," she shrugged, but her voice softened a little. "My bum-outs don't come with nametags. I just feel a bit screwed up, okay? Is that allowed in your group?"

"Sure it's allowed," Stuart laughed. "I just thought maybe there was something I could do to help."

"Well there isn't."

"Look here, you know this prophecy stuff, hearing from God and all?"

"Yeah, what of it?"

"Well, it's not just for preaching to the masses and doing signs and wonders. It's tops for personal fix-its too."

"What are you trying to tell me, Stu?"

"You want me to ask the Lord what your problem is?"

"Big no way! I don't want Him to tell you anything about my problem, least of all what it is!"

"Well whatever, but let me at least pray for you

and see if He's got anything He wants to say. Come on, Al," Stuart poked her playfully. "It couldn't be any worse than anything we've already done, could it?"

"All right," she said irritably. "Whatever. Just do it quick and get it over with."

Stuart reached his hand out and grabbed hers. "Jesus, You know what's up with Al, much better than I do. And You know how to speak to her in a way that she'll relate to and appreciate. So please speak now with something to encourage her and get her back into the fight. In Jesus' name."

For a few moments nothing could be heard except for the hollow echo of distant drips escaping from a cavern stalactite. Then Stuart slowly turned and looked sideways at Alana. She looked back at him, her eyes wide and dark and wondering.

"What did He say?" she whispered. "What are you supposed to tell me?"

Stuart didn't answer. He slowly turned until he was facing her. He brought his hands around the side of her face, and brushed her short black hair back out of her eyes. Her eyes seemed to melt into the dim surroundings, leaving her striking white skin alone to meet his touch.

"What are you doing?" she asked again.

He brought his lips to her neck, covering every unclothed inch of her. His hands reached under her shirt and pulled aside her bra till they could feel her in completeness.

"Stuart," she said again. "You can't..."

"That's enough," he said, and she instantly looked up, eyes wide with surprise.

He started to kiss her, and slowly she began to relinquish her own control and give in to the passion that threatened to overwhelm her. Her fingers found his top button and pushed it impatiently aside. He lifted her up and held her to him, all the while never

letting his lips lose contact with her skin—her arms, her neck, her ears, her eyes. She felt like she was diving into a pool of touch, and she never wanted to come out of it.

At last they were spent, and Stuart’s head dropped onto her shoulder. They stayed there for a minute or two, too awkward or too satisfied to move, and then gradually they returned to their own bodies and to their own clothes.

“Whoa, Stu,” Alana shook her head. “You were like ... whoa! I mean, what can I say but that?” Then she narrowed her eyes. “But you know, it’s pretty slack of you to be out here humping me while your wife is just around the corner.”

Stuart shook his head. “It’s not like that,” he said. “Kim and I talked about this last night. She wanted me to.”

“She *what?*” Alana burst out. “Oh, that is too much! I mean, you screwing around is one thing, but if it’s a big charity thing, that’s another story altogether.”

“Alana, cut it!” Stuart said fiercely. “It wasn’t a charity thing—you know that as well as I do. Okay? That’s what the Lord told me to do.”

Alana laughed out loud. “Now you’ve really gone off the edge and come up the other side. So you mean to tell me you’re sitting here and the voice of God comes to you and says, ‘Lean over and stick the girl next to you?’”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Stuart replied. “In those very words. I didn’t know you had such a good channel.”

Alana rolled her eyes to acknowledge the joke. “Well, just don’t do it again, okay? I’m not some basket case that needs sex so bad I’ve got to get it from a married man.”

“What’s wrong with that?” he asked.

“Oh, please!”

“No, I’m serious. There’s nothing wrong with sex

and there’s nothing wrong with me giving it to you—or you giving it to me. As long as what we do is above board with Kim, it’s not a problem. Now get up off your lower lip and give me a grin, would you?”

Suddenly Alana went quiet. “Stu, I don’t know how to say this; it sounds too weird even for me. For a minute there when you were going at me ... I could have sworn you were somebody else.” She lifted her hands quickly. “No, wait, I don’t mean that the way it sounds. It’s just ... I’ve had this fantasy all my life and ... well, it was basically identical to what happened just now. And the weirdest thing of all is...” She stopped.

“What is it?”

“No, I can’t say it, it’s too weird.”

“Come on, you said yourself I’m about the weirdest you’ve come across. Of all people I should understand, no?”

“All right, but you’d better not laugh.” She shrugged. “Not that I’d care if you did, but it’s a matter of principle. So yeah, the whole time you were doing me ... it was like you were *Jesus* or something. I looked at you and I didn’t see you. You talked and it wasn’t your voice. Your touch—I mean your touch is great any day of the week, but this time it was like more than sex, it was like ... like ... like raw energy or something. It was just tearing me open and filling me with ... you know, passionate stuff, stuff that doesn’t really have a name.” She laughed, and quickly carried on in a lighter tone. “So, doctor? What’s the prognosis? Totally wacko or just demented?”

Stuart didn’t say anything for a moment. “That’s quite something, Al,” he finally said. “And on my side ... downright flattering!” He grinned teasingly.

“Oh, you bum!” She jumped up. “Come on, we’d better be getting back to the others. They’ll think we’ve eloped.”





The rest of the morning passed by with the usual predictable activities that happen when a group of people are cloistered in a small underground cave. After a certain amount of talking, reading and game playing, everyone started to go a little stir-crazy.

“I can’t believe we’ve got a whole ’nother afternoon of this!” Alana groaned, punching the wall for emphasis.

“That’s at the very best, remember,” Cal added. “I wouldn’t bet on getting out of here for at least a whole other day—if not more.”

The kids were purposefully jumping up and down in one corner of the room. Alana turned and studied them curiously for a moment. “What is this whole jumping monkey routine?” she finally asked.

Kim laughed. “That’s their jumping corner. They go absolutely bonkers when they’re cooped up in this place for too long. Usually we go outside for a good part of the day, but if it’s raining or I’m too tired to take them all the way out—they go to their jumping corner and get their ya-ya’s out. They can’t come out of there until every last jump is out of their system.”

“Impressive,” Stuart smiled. “That sounds like a very productive activity.”

The children, immediately noticing that they were being discussed, stopped their jumping and came charging over. Dylan leaped on Stuart with all his might, catching him off guard and sending him sprawling backwards. Seeing him temporarily incapacitated, Maya seized her chance and came to sit squarely on his forehead.

“Nice cozy seat!” she chirped gleefully. “Bring me some tea, Mommy!”

“They’ll have you housebroken in no time, Stu,” Alana laughed.

“Diversions, quick!” Stuart groaned, as he wrestled with Dylan while trying to keep from upsetting Maya’s comfortable seating arrangement. “There must be

some stop-gap measure we could pull out right about now.”

“How about lunch?” Kim offered. “It’s about that time.”

“Lunch would be good,” Cal agreed.

The two little tormentors immediately leaped up at hearing the L-word, and left their captive in search of a new diversion. Soon they were scrambling around their mother, as if hoping that flat toes and frayed nerves would help her bring food to their bellies more quickly.



A warm, comforting wave of silence followed in the wake of the hastily made sandwiches, and everyone over three feet tall enjoyed it immensely. In the midst of this, Stuart suddenly knit his brow.

The others turned and looked at him. “What is it, Stu?” Kim asked.

Stuart shook his head in a puzzled way. “I don’t know ... I just got this sudden picture of Kate—like we should ... call her?” The words came out slowly, indefinitely, but as soon as they were out of his mouth he nodded resolutely. They sounded right. “That’s what we’re supposed to do,” he said with dead certainty. “We’re supposed to call Kate—and quick. There’s not a second to lose.”

Kim scrambled for the phone, and carefully handed it to him. “You have the number?”

“I know it.” Stuart dialed the numbers, his fingers tripping over themselves in his haste.

All of a sudden a hand clapped down over the receiver, clicking the button off. “Hey, Spiritual Teacher-man,” Alana said with a smirk. “Aren’t you forgetting Cardinal Rule number one?”

“You forgot to pray, Daddy! You forgot to pray!” Dylan started jumping up and down.

Maya immediately burst into tears. “No!” she sobbed at the top of her voice. “No, he didn’t forget!

Daddy doesn't forget!"

Cal leaned a little further back against the wall, as if trying to distance himself from the chaotic scene.

Kim quickly scooped up one of the children in each arm and trucked them out of the room, all the while comforting Maya that all was not lost, and that her daddy would survive.

Meanwhile, Stuart paused for a short prayer, then with spirit calm and fingers firm, he dialed the number once again.

The receiver was picked up after the first ring.

"Yeah, who's there?" Kate's voice was high and jittery.

"It's Stu, how's you?"

"Stuart?" The words exploded from her lips like a gunshot. "How ... why... what are you calling for?"

"No reason," Stuart said, adding quickly, "I don't have any suicide-missions for you this time. I just got inspired to call you, that's all."

"Well, fate's got us switching places then. He's on my trail ... that's for sure!"

"Who's on your trail?"

"God is ... I mean, it's just downright unbelievable that you'd call right now. I'm this minute on my way out the door.—Actually I'd already gone, but I forgot my car keys. Just walked right back through the door this second. A minute earlier or a minute later and you'd have missed me."

Stuart looked incredulously up at Alana, who gave him a how-am-I-supposed-to-get-the-joke-when-I-can't-hear-what's-going-on look. "Whoa, Kate," he finally said. "That's pretty weighty. So ... where are you going exactly?"

"Yeah well, funny you should talk about suicide missions." Kate's voice quivered, and she stopped.

"Kate? What is it? Where are you going?"

"It's Jay, Stu," Kate sobbed. "They've got him again!"

"Jay's been captured?"

"Yeah, don't you see the news? They said there was this big sting operation on some renegades heading through the forest. All the rest were reportedly killed, but they captured Jay alive." She took a deep breath. "I thought you guys were gone."

"Kate, Kate," Stuart said quickly. "First of all, as far as I know no one was killed. Turns out they had been tracking us through Cal and his friends' registration implants. They cornered us in the forest but we got the early warning and had split up. Most of us beat it out safely. The only ones we don't know about are Jay, Marty and the other two ex-soldiers."

"Oh!" Kate said suddenly. "I saw Marty! Well ... I didn't see him exactly, but he left a note in my mailbox. Said if I saw you to let you know that he and the two guys were safe. They're making for the border—trying to put in some distance, I guess. The note said they'd got orders that way. I guess we know what that means."

"Look, Kate," Stuart said, "why don't we get together and talk sometime. Wherever you're heading in such a hurry, it can wait a day or two."

"No, Stuart, that's where you're wrong." Kate's voice turned hard and determined. "I've got to go after Jay. I did it for Su twice, and it worked both times. I can't just leave him ... it's the least I can do..." Her voice trailed off again. Kate apparently had a bad case of it.

"Whoa, Kate! Hold it!" Cal and Alana had gathered near the phone now, wondering what on earth Kate was up to. Stuart sounded desperate. "Have you checked in about this? Are you all set up top?"

"I don't know, Stu," Kate was openly crying now. "I don't know anything except I've gotta do this. I can't think straight. I've gotta go now. Bye."

Stuart looked up at the others, stunned. "She hung up," he said slowly.

The others looked at him with great question marks in their eyes.

Stuart scratched his head, unsure of where to start. "I think we've got some big praying to do," he said at last. "Kate's kicking into some pretty murky waters—she's going to need some serious backup, and I have a feeling that we are it."



Kate stepped uncertainly out of the building and walked briskly towards the lot where Emsie was parked. *Dear Emsie!* She smiled at her shiny red car. Then seeing her reflection in the glass, Kate stopped and stared. It took the better part of fifteen seconds before she felt comfortable enough to move on. Somehow the short, bleached hairdo that she had just adopted—an attempted diversion from her more well-known profile—didn't sit as well as her usual one. Kate sighed, and stepped into the car.

She drove slowly through the streets, her eyes half-blinded by the tears that would not stop flowing no matter how she tried to rationalize them away. "What is the matter with me?" she finally said out loud. "It's not like I've never done this type of a crazy stunt before."

*It was different before, Kate's mind took up the opposing side. Before you were going with God's blessing. This time you're on your own.*

Kate slammed on the brakes, narrowly missing a pedestrian. The man turned and gave her the finger. Kate kept driving. "That's not true," she argued. "There's nothing different this time than the others—except that it was my own idea."

*Did you check in about it? Did you pray?*

"I already answered that question to Stuart," Kate was growing irritated at this internal struggle that would not let go of her. "I'm too messed up to pray right now. I'm not some sold-out Christian like he is. For God's sake, I've got the mark! What do they

expect?"

For a moment Kate faltered, but just then she looked up and saw the imposing-looking government building. The sight of her desired goal—and knowing that Jay might be just within those walls—sparked her will back to life again. She pulled into a free parking space, shut and locked her doors, and passed her hand over the parking meter, which acknowledged her registration code with a short beep.

She moved through the small park in just a few minutes, arriving at the foot of the great staircase a little out of breath. Not wanting to stop and think lest her thoughts get the better of her, Kate marched up the stairs as quickly as she could. She passed the guards without so much as a second glance, but suddenly, halfway through the rotating doors, the conviction of God descended upon her in full force. She could almost feel her own mind screaming at her: *How do you expect to do the will of God without the power of God?*

How indeed? This was a question that had not occurred to Kate. And now it might be a little too late to start thinking about it. The force of impetus had landed Kate squarely in front of the reception desk, around which several other people were gathered.

"Can I help you?" the young secretary looked suspiciously in Kate's direction.

*Come on!* Kate urged herself. *Pull your life together, girl! You're gonna get yourself arrested if you don't watch out!*

"Uh ... yes, good afternoon," she said, as briskly as she could. "I'm M-M..." The words stuck in her mouth like thick porridge, and she felt her head mechanically turning to the side, where a tall, stern-looking woman was speaking with another secretary. Kate's eyes stared at her nametag, transfixed: *M. Henche.*

Kate's face turned an unbecoming pastel shade.

The secretary lifted her eyebrows in concern. It would be just her luck to have some stranger come in and have a seizure right in front of her.

“Are you all right?” the secretary said quickly.

Kate shook her head, trying to grab ahold of her senses, and failing miserably. “I’m fine...” she stammered. “Th-thank you.” She grasped the counter with both of her hands until her fingers felt numb and senseless. The pain brought some life back into her. “Perhaps I’ll just go back outside and get some fresh air ... for a minute,” she said hesitantly.

“Sure,” the secretary said.

Kate turned and walked quickly back towards the rotating door. She couldn’t help noticing, out of the corner of her eye, that Monica Henche was staring at her like a prospector searching for gold. As the rotating doors swirled behind her, Kate saw Monica reach over and start talking to the secretary, all the while gesticulating in Kate’s direction.

Kate’s heart started pounding. She kept a steady pace going down the steps, desperate to not attract any more suspicion than she already had. But it was too late. No sooner had she reached the bottom of the staircase than a half-dozen armed guards burst out through the door and began charging after her.

“Ma’am, may I have a moment of your time?” came an authoritative voice.

Kate weighed up her options quickly. Obviously they were onto her. But they were only a few feet behind her—if she ran now, they would most likely shoot her in the back. And no matter how good God was at taking care of Stuart and Alana, Kate doubted that the great protection Jay had told her about would apply in her case. Wasn’t there a whole lot of embedded code along the lines of doing your part, checking in and all that sort of thing? Yes, running was definitely not likely to be Kate’s lucky option.

That left her then with the distasteful task of

turning around and giving her wit her best shot at getting her out of there.

Taking a deep breath, she pasted on her most charming smile and turned to face her pursuers. “Of course! What can I do for you?”

The front guard stepped up, speaking almost apologetically. Obviously he wasn’t too sure what exactly he was after. He pulled out his portable scanner. “May I see your hand, please.”

“Of course.” Kate held up her right hand, and the guard flashed his device across it, then punched in the keys that would relay that information on—Kate had no idea to whom.

“If you could just wait a few minutes longer,” the guard was practically bowing and scraping. “Just until I get further details. I’m so sorry to detain you.”

Kate wasn’t sure who he thought he was detaining, but apparently he was under the impression that she was somebody rather important. She decided to try to press her luck a little and see if it held up. “I really am in quite a bit of a hurry,” she said, with an impatient sigh. “I’ve got an important conference in less than ten minutes, and I’m hopelessly late.” She waited to see a sympathetic look cross his face, and then pushed on. “I wonder if I could just catch you later? You’ve got my name and number right there, and I’ll be home by six at the latest.” She looked at her watch again, and fidgeted with her briefcase in a business-like manner.

The guard contemplated the matter seriously. He pulled out his walkie-talkie and barked a few queries in it, but there was no answer. Finally he sighed. “I suppose that would be all right. I’ll pass your information on, and we’ll get back to you this evening.”

Kate’s heart felt like it would burst, but she forced herself to thank the man calmly, then slowly, ever so slowly, she turned and started walking away.

She hadn’t walked more than fifty yards, however,

when a loud screech tore through the air. At first Kate thought that some small animal had been hit by a car, but she soon realized that it was a woman's voice. "Stop her!"

Kate looked quickly over her shoulder and saw Monica Henche poised on the top of the tall marble staircase, pointing a long crooked finger in Kate's direction. "Felon at large! Stop her, I say!"

Kate broke into a run. There was enough distance between her and the befuddled guards that she could still try for an escape. She ran for more than a minute when suddenly she felt a pair of strong arms grab her. Her arms were pinned behind her back.

She strained to see her assailant. He was a tall, wide, burly man with an unshaven face and foul-smelling breath. He had his glassy eyes fixed on the cragged figure of Monica Henche, and had apparently seen a perfect opportunity to score himself some points along the path to the top.

*If only he'd thought to shave and wash beforehand, he might actually have had a shot,* Kate thought wryly to herself.

Such trivial thoughts quickly dissipated, however, as the gravity of her own situation sank in. What had she done? The crimes she was wanted for—namely, marching into a federal building and abducting Carl Stanowitz's star prisoner—were enough to land her a life sentence even if she hadn't been involved with these subversive religious lunatics.

*Oh, Jesus!* She prayed inwardly, as Monica Henche loomed larger and larger. *If ever I needed You, it's now. Forgive me for not praying sooner, and somehow—get me out of this one!*

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## RIVER TRAVEL

"What is up with Julian?" Alana was pacing back and forth in the small floor space, as she had been doing off and on all day. "It's been nearly a day and a half since we called him, and not a word!"

"He did say twenty-four hours or more," Stuart offered. "Maybe it's just taking longer than he expected."

"Yeah, but no word?" Alana returned. "I think something's up."

"Why don't you call him again?" Cal asked.

"I guess we could," Stuart said. "I mean, secure or no, the less phone calls we have to make the better. But we could call him..."

"Why don't we wait till five," said Kim. "That'll give him another hour, and if he doesn't show then we can call."

Alana shrugged her shoulders and no one else had any other opinions, so the matter was settled.

The next sixty minutes seemed to crawl by extra slowly, and by the time a quarter to five rolled around, Stuart was getting restless. Finally he picked up the phone. "Why don't we just call," he said.

"Oh, Stu! I've been waiting for that all day!" Alana burst out.

Stuart punched in the numbers quickly, and

almost before he heard the sound of the ringing coming through the receiver, Julian's voice replaced it. "Stuart?!"

"Yeah, who else?"

"Heck, it sure took you long enough!" Julian shouted, sounding rather aggravated.

"What are you shouting at me for? You told me you'd call us back."

"Yeah, but how was I supposed to know you're that hi-tech? I can track almost anything that moves, but your signal was just non-existent!"

Stuart laughed. "Well, I hear this phone's top of the line, so I'm relieved to hear you say that. So what's up with you?"

"We've been in the area since noon. You were right though—they're all over you guys. There's probably more armed forces than little furry things in that forest! I don't know if there's any way we could get anywhere near you."

Stuart looked up at the others. "We're still covered," he said, covering the receiver for a moment. "What do we want to do? If we wait it out, we lose Julian, because he's not gonna want to hang around for much longer. But it sounds pretty risky to stick our noses out in this weather."

Kim's eyes lit up all of a sudden. "Let me talk to him."

"Julian?" Stuart said. "Here's my wife, Kim. She knows the area better than we do—I think she's got an idea."

"Hi, Kim," Julian said. "Where are you from?"

Kim laughed. "Originally? I'm Australian. Though I've lived on just about every continent. Anyway, here's my thought. There's an underground stream that passes through the caverns we're staying in. It cuts through the mountain and some pretty dense forest, and eventually appears again about two miles south, right near a little town called Tinkers. Do you know

where that is?"

"Just a sec," Julian poked around on his keyboard. "Gotta load up my virtual map here. Okay, Tinkers. Yeah, that's probably about forty minutes from where I am now."

"Do you think it'll be safe?"

"I would think so," Julian said. "They seem to be concentrating on the forest area this side of the mountain range. Knowing the government, though, I'd move out of that general area as fast as you can if you're gonna make a getaway. If they can't find you in the forest they're gonna expand their search to the outlying areas—and that means I'm outta here."

"Of course," Kim said quickly. "It'll probably take us a good two hours to make it though, maybe even three. Can you wait that long?"

"I'll wait as long as I can," Julian said, "but I can't make any promises. If we're gonna go down, there's no point in us all being caught together, right?"

"Right," Kim said, though a little uncertainly. She passed the phone back to Stuart.

"Okay, man," Stuart said. "See you then. We'd better get packing."

"Right. Bye then."

Stuart clicked off the receiver. "All right then, team!" he said. "Let's move on out!"



"So tell us the plan again," Alana said doubtfully as they followed the wide beam of light that led them deeper and deeper into the cavernous maze. "We're gonna, like, follow this stream out through the mountain?"

"That's the general idea," Kim said. "I just hope it goes through all the way."

Cal stopped in his tracks. "You don't know if it goes through?"

"Well," Kim rushed to explain, "not exactly. See, some folks have gone hiking along the stream a couple

times, and it definitely is flowing outwards, making its way to the outside world somewhere. Other times we've seen a stream from the outside that flows from the other side of the mountain, but it runs for a long ways through some pretty dense foliage in the forest on that side, before it joins a larger stream that runs through the town of Tinkers, like I told this Julian guy. But none of us have ever taken the time to go all the way through."

"Seems like we should have checked into this a little better beforehand," Cal shook his head.

"Oh, yeah, like I was planning all this!" Kim rolled her eyes. "Please, people, let's have a little *trust*, shall we?"

"Come on, guys, cool it," Stuart said. "Look, when we prayed about it, the Lord said this was part of His plan, so He's gonna lead us, okay? I mean, there are a million things that could go wrong, not the least of which is having soldiers monitoring the stream. But if He's guiding then we should be all right."

The others nodded, and proceeded on in silence.

Dylan was the one to break the silence, from his lofty perch on Cal's shoulders. "I can hear it!" he whispered loudly and dramatically.

The others stopped walking, and after a moment or two of careful scrutiny, Kim said, "So it is! It must be just up ahead here."

Just about fifty yards up ahead they rounded a small corner, from where they could hear the sound of rushing water growing increasingly louder. They were surprised to find the stream right at their feet.

"It's very quiet, for a flow this size," Cal commented. "Usually you can hear these for miles away. This one is very calm."

"Yeah, and that's certainly to our advantage," Stuart agreed. "Less of a tourist attraction that way."

Stuart waded out into the middle. The water reached nearly to his knees.

"It gets a little deeper further on," Kim said. "But never more than waist-high.—At least as far as we went."

"Well, let's go for it then," Stuart motioned to the others to follow him. "The current's not bad at all. We'll have to keep the kids up high though. Getting wet wouldn't do them any good. It's downright chilly in here."

"Oh, yeah," Alana agreed. "It's great. I haven't felt this cool in the last couple years. Global warming is great in moderation, but after a while it's like give me a good, cold winter any day. Ah!" She burst out unexpectedly, as her feet came in contact with the water. "And speaking of *cold*! This thing is like ... like a real stream!" She burst out laughing, as did the others.

"Mommy, it's dark," Maya squeaked suddenly.

"It will get lighter soon, Honey," Kim answered, then elaborated to the others, "As we get closer to the outside of the mountain there are little holes that let bits of light in. At least we'll be able to see where we're putting our feet down."

And so they carried on for some time more; one foot before the other, moving ahead largely by instinct, and always tailing the round, winking beam of Kim's flashlight. Soon their way got a little lighter. They could tell that they would be nearing the great out-of-doors before too long.

"This is as far as we've gone before," Kim said at last. "Just up there you can see we come out of the caves. Then I'd guess it's another mile or a little more downstream before we hit Tinkers."

"All right, well ... onward ever onward!" Stuart took a deep breath and plunged forward. His steps were fast and sure, and the others wondered for a second if he was as confident as he seemed, or if he was just trying to reassure them with his manly presence. Alana thought of asking him as much, but finally

figured that it would be better to save that line for a possible provocation later on, when there was no risk of them being overheard by the enemy.

"There's light up there!" Dylan shouted suddenly, and Cal instinctively wrapped his large and presently rather slimy hand over his mouth.

"Hold it, little guy," Cal whispered. "We don't want an audience, you know."

"Sorry!" Dylan said, a little more softly this time. "But please move your hand, Cal. It's muddy!"

"Oh ... yeah!" Cal looked at his hand and then wiped it quickly on his T-shirt.

Alana looked on without commenting.

Cal looked at her. "It's dirty already," he shrugged.

"Did I say anything?" She raised an eyebrow innocently. "Now, did I?"

"Come on, Alana," he jabbed her. "Do we *have* to be enemies right now? I could use you more on the 'friends and allies' side at present."

Alana shrugged, and kept walking.

"Okay, guys!" Stuart was a little ahead of the rest, and called out to them in a loud whisper. "Hurry up. We're almost out." He was standing just a few feet from where the mountain obviously ended, but the thin band of daylight that rippled around the cave's mouth was replaced by thick branches and heavy undergrowth. It looked like, for the time being at least, their way would be plenty secure.

"This is looking really good," Kim said exultantly. "Let's just hope it keeps up this cover all the way."

"Well, there's no way of telling from here," Stuart shook his head. "This river's about as winding as they come! Thank the Lord it's still shallow, though. I don't know if I'm up for a swim today."

"You know, we're gonna have to pick up our pace a bit if we're planning on having Julian still be around to fetch us," Alana said observantly. "We said two hours and it's already been nearly one-and-a-half. I

don't know how much further it is, but I wouldn't bet on it being right around the corner."

"Yeah, let's move it." Stuart doubled his pace, and the others splashed along behind him.

All of a sudden, Kim grabbed Stuart's arm urgently. "Freeze!" she whispered softly.

Cal and Alana noticed the halt and stopped in their tracks also. It didn't take long before they heard the grating shouts echoing through the undergrowth around them.

"Keep it up, men! Don't leave one stone unturned! They can't be far! We've got the whole place surrounded so we know they haven't gotten out."

"We'll find those little bastards, Sergeant," came the raspy reply. "Dead or alive, they'll be on our plates in the hour. Just give us some peace and let us do what we came for."

"Mind yourself, Private!" The reply was sharp and pointed. "I'm giving the orders around here, and all I want to hear from you is 'Yes, sir!' Is that clear?"

The low, mumbled answer could not be heard by the silent eavesdroppers, but after a second the sergeant's voice boomed out again. "Say that again, Private, and I'll have you court-martialed for insubordination."

The thick silence that crackled with tension could be felt even by those who couldn't see the deadly showdown taking place.

"Yes, sir," the sullen reply came at last.

"That's better. Now get to work, and mind your backside as you do, or you'll be sorry."

The scuffling of the bushes indicated that the superior officer was walking away in a rather notable hurry. Most likely he was glad to get out of the dubious situation in one piece.

"You idiot!" A new voice sounded. "Whatchyou egging him on for, man? You know he's a pompous ass. He won't take that kind of stuff."



“Let’s get on with it. We’ll show him—and the others.”

The underbrush seemed to betray retreating footsteps again, but then there was a sudden exclamation. “God, Warner! Check this out!—A stream!”

Maya suddenly let out a shrill squeal, and Kim spun around and engulfed the girl’s entire lower jaw with her hand, moving her lips in a string of noiseless reprimands. Maya seemed to get the point and did not squirm further. The others held their breaths.

“What the hell was that?” came the husky shout. “Did you hear something, man?”

With a great rustling of branches and a loud splash, the two soldiers appeared to have discovered the stream. Stuart and Kim locked eyes—the soldiers were nowhere to be seen.

“They must be just around the corner behind us,” Alana whispered almost inaudibly. Keeping silence for that amount of time was bordering on a loss of her sanity.

“I could have sworn I heard something. Sounded like a kid,” the soldier’s voice sounded again. “I’d bet anything they’re in this stream...”

“Hold it, man! Hear that?” the first soldier cut in.

As clear as could be, came the strangest noise that the young people had ever heard. It was clearly some sort of wild bird call, but in such an obvious imitation of Maya’s earlier squeal that it nearly made Kim jump out of her skin.

“There, you moron!” the second soldier was laughing hysterically. “There’s your runaway kid! Perched on a branch, she is—all full of fluff and plumage. Shall we fire at ’er?”

“Shut up, man,” said the first. More splashing. “Now here’s something worth guffawing over. Take a look at this, Dan.”

“What now?” Pause. “Brilliant, man! A cave! That’s

where they are—they’ve been hidin’ in the cave all along. I’ll radio the sarge right away.”

“No, we’ll do this ourselves. At least we can get a little further in. I want to make sure all the glory comes this-a-way, without passing stars on to some general’s turtleneck.”

“Yeah, man, I’m with you on that.”

After the tumultuous splashing subsided, the four young people looked at each other.

“Guess we’d better get the scram out of here, before we have to eavesdrop on any more domestic squabbles,” Alana said wryly.

She had walked a few paces behind Stuart and Kim when she suddenly turned, and saw that Cal was standing quite still, rooted to the spot.

“Cal! What’s with you?” she called.

Cal did not move. Then he brushed his gaze right past her and straight to Stuart. “I’ve got to go after them,” he said.

Alana nearly dropped her pack into the stream. “You what?! Just how many marbles do you have up there, braino?”

“Wait a minute, Cal,” Stuart said. “Why would you want to do that? They’ll kill you.”

Cal looked at Kim. “Don’t go, Cal,” she said.

Cal narrowed his eyes, and looked from one to the other. “There’s something about you all that I just don’t get. What is it with your lifestyle, anyway? Just sort of a ‘try to stay alive as long as you can and screw the rest of the world’ thing? Is that it?” His face was red, and his breathing was heavy. “I know those guys. Those are guys I lived with and worked with. Now they’re looking for me to kill me. Yeah, so that’s a problem. I know that would suck. But here you all have told me of this grand ol’ eternal life deal, and I’m gonna live forever and all that. And I’m supposed to just be happy for myself and turn tail like some sort of chicken and let all my friends go to hell?”

Kim brought her hands up to her face. She looked like she was about to cry.

“Hey, Cal, I’m sorry, man,” Stuart said. “You’re right. You’re right. I guess we’re not as in touch with the other side of these type of guys as you are. But what do you want to do?”

“Yeah, Cal,” Alana said. “You wanna just run up and say, ‘Chill, guys, let’s talk?’”

“I’m going after them,” Cal insisted stubbornly. He looked into Stuart’s face, as if trying to find answers to his tormented muddle of thoughts in the other’s searching blue eyes. “I would have wanted them to do the same for me. If I die, that’s tough, but at least they’ll have had a chance.”

“You really feel this is what the Lord wants you to do?” Kim asked.

“Positive,” Cal replied.

“We can’t let you go alone though,” Stuart said, and looked over at Alana.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Alana said quickly. “There is no way I am following that ex-marine to his death. Besides you need me to carry Dylan.” She snatched the little boy from Cal, pointedly avoiding his gaze. “I’m sorry, Cal,” she said. “It’s just not my time to go.”

“Hey,” he shrugged, “don’t mention it. Wasn’t my idea to invite you to begin with. It’s best that I go alone anyway. Just keep a candle lit for me—and if you don’t mind waiting in the town as long as you can. Maybe I’ll show up on your tail.”

Kim hugged Cal warmly. “We’ll pray for you, Cal,” she said.

Dylan had a worried look on his face. “Be careful, Cal!”

“Hey, little guy,” Cal had grown unaccustomedly fond of his traveling partner during the past couple of days. “I’ll be okay. Your big Jesus is going with me, right?”

Dylan nodded.

With a few other parting farewells—and a notable lack of emotion on Alana’s part—Cal turned back in the direction of the cave. He had taken four or five steps when he stopped suddenly, and slowly turned his head back to look at the others. They stood in exactly the same place as he’d left them, clinging to the retreating sight of him as though it was to be their last. Then Alana’s hand, hanging loosely by her side, fluttered in an almost imperceptible motion (which may have one day become a full-grown wave if it had been allowed to live beyond infancy). It might have been attributed to a passing breeze, except there was none. But Cal caught it, and a slow grin spread over his face.

“So long, Endtime soldiers!” he said, tossing out a phrase he’d found to his liking during the previous day’s reading.

With those words, Cal disappeared around the bend, and out of sight.



The five stream-travelers slowly splashed the remainder of the way to Tinkers without any further incident. It had taken the better part of three hours, but by the time they emerged from the undergrowth, they were overjoyed to see Julian’s big camper truck in the distance.

Moving as quickly as they could through the small, near-deserted streets, the three wet and weary travelers and their small living burdens came up alongside the large, tan-colored vehicle, with dark-tinted windows and a silver roof. Stuart was just poised to knock on the door when it was flung wide open.

“Stuart!” Julian burst out, greeting him with arms outstretched. “You made it at last!—And your friends too! Come on in!”

After a friendly hug, Julian stepped aside to allow

the others to pass on in.

“This is my wife, Kim,” Stuart said. “And of course you remember Alana. And these two little tykes are Dylan and Maya—mine as well.”

“Well, I’m very pleased to meet you.” Julian nodded his head to Kim, and grinned at the little guys. “Alana, so glad you get to grace my presence again.”

Alana rolled her eyes. Julian was obviously trying very hard to be a ladies’ man, and Alana looked over at Kim to see how she was taking it. Kim seemed to adapt remarkably well to their fawning audience—an art that Alana had never quite mastered.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Julian.” Kim delivered a token kiss on the cheek and what Alana would later refer to as a trademark Kim hug, since she seemed to be so adept at endowing the action with the perfect mix of motherly warmth and latent sex appeal.

*Definitely not my style*, Alana thought (trying to picture herself as the deliverer of motherly warmth), *but quite admirable nonetheless. Stuart does know how to pick ’em.*

“Look, Julian,” Stuart was saying, “before you rev up to get on out of here ... we’ve got a fourth man with us—Cal. You remember him? One of the soldiers who bailed us out of our last scrape.”

Julian looked around the room questioningly.

“No, not *with* us, I mean, he *was* with us...,” Stuart began.

“He went back to talk to a couple of his pals,” Alana cut in. “Some soldiers that nearly came across us on our way out. They missed us so he thought he should go help them out.”

“Oh, you are poor suckers, aren’t you?” Julian’s eyebrows shot up. “Why didn’t you tell me that right away? We’d better get out of here and fast!” “What are you talking about, Julian?” Kim asked.

“Remember what happened to your last sudden bosom buddy?” Julian asked. “Fawnie? The little

traitor gal who set the entire one-world army on our tail a couple days ago?”

“Hold it, Julian,” Stuart said quickly. “This is different. We know Cal. He already cut all his ties. He’s a wanted man. There’s no way he could turn on us.”

“You wanna bet? Some folks will do anything for a quick promotion.” Julian was starting up the motor. “Anyway, whether you’re sure or not, we’re getting out of here.”

“Wait, Julian! We can’t just leave him here!” Alana surprised everybody, including herself, by her heated order.

“I think we should ask the Lord about it,” Kim said.

“What is this? Are you guys totally blind or are you just playing horse and carriage?” Julian was on the point of exasperation. “The guy took off on you and you’re gonna stop and think about it? I don’t believe it!”

“Okay everyone, let’s calm it way down,” Stuart said. “Julian, stop the motor.”

Quite unlike himself, Julian obeyed.

“All right, Julian, I understand your concerns. But the bottom line is, he’s a friend of ours and we trust him. I think that the least he deserves is for us to ask the Lord what to do.” Stuart lifted his hand to silence Julian’s next question. “I know you aren’t really dug in on all this hearing from Heaven stuff, but we are. We have full faith in it—it’s our whole life. If you don’t trust prophecy, do you trust *us* enough to go on whatever we feel strongly about?”

Julian squirmed in his seat. He brought his hands up and pulled them roughly through his hair. Finally he said, “All right, fine. Whatever. Just do it, and get it over with. I won’t say that I’m not preparing to die, but I’ll give you your shot.”

“Thanks, Jule,” Stuart said. He turned to Kim and

Alana. “All right girls,” he said. “If we haven’t been desperate yet—now is the time.”

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## BONDAGE

Kate opened her eyes slowly—ever so slowly—and looked around herself, at as much of her holding room as she could see without moving. She did not care to test out whether she was actually able to move; the thought of movement was painful enough. Even shifting her eyes to the side seemed to be too much of an effort at this time, so she contented herself to study the paneled ceiling above her head.

It was brown, and seemed to be made of some sort of wood. Obviously she had been moved from the filthy cell she had been in earlier. Kate’s nose was still working just fine, and she was certain she would know if she was still in that hole of a place.

Kate paused in her recollections. Exactly what had happened to her over the past hours? She struggled for the most recent memory she could grasp ahold of, floundering around in a mind that suddenly seemed empty and useless.

*The ceiling, she suddenly recalled. The stone ceiling. I was in a jail with a stone ceiling.*

But why? And how had she gotten there? Kate started to panic, and impulsively lurched into a sitting position. The instant she did so she regretted it, for the simple motion sent her whole body into a near set of convulsions.

*What is the matter with me?* Kate wondered. She looked down at her hands, which were almost entirely caked with mud and dirt, and something else ... dried blood. Kate's heart started pounding. She looked at her legs, which showed easily through the holes in what remained of her new white muslin skirt. They were bruised and badly scratched. Kate's arms told a similar monologue.

But a true monologue it was, for the essential facts of the story were not corroborated by the most important witness in the case—her memory. Kate had absolutely no recollection of how she had come to be in this sanitized holding cell—for a prison it obviously still was, as evidenced by the lack of windows and the heavily sealed door on the far side of the room.

Kate pressed her mind back beyond the stone ceiling, floundering anxiously for her earliest memory before that. She remembered Alana ... Stuart ... her visit to the NSY<sup>1</sup> headquarters ... leaving the building...

*Is that really my last memory?* She started panicking. Somehow, despite her entire lack of any sense of time, the sick feeling in her stomach betrayed that that visit to NSY was not something that had happened recently. She had no idea what grilled that fact so firmly to her consciousness, but she could not be more certain of it.

As she hovered on the brink of despair, the door suddenly buzzed loudly and swung open. The deafening sound echoed in Kate's brain, further rattling her already jarred nerves.

A short, stocky woman in a white doctor's smock was leading a pack of a half-dozen or so soldiers. The woman peered at Kate through small round spectacles. Kate searched her eyes for some glimmer of sympathy, which such a pitiful remnant of humanity

as herself should surely have generated. She found none, only a steely coldness that reflected her own yearning back to her like a shiny silver coin.

"I can see she's been through set one already." The woman spoke in a high, nasal pitch that somehow seemed unfitting for someone so portly. "But you'd think they'd have cleaned her up before passing her on. So unpleasant to deal with this type of filth. It really hinders the whole sanitization process." She shrugged at her expressionless accompanists, who had no helpful advice to recommend, "Well, if that's what we're given we'd best get on with it." She nodded her head to the guard to her left, and he and a buddy moved towards Kate.

"Wait." Kate struggled to stand. "You don't understand. ... Where am I? I don't know what's happening! Can somebody please just tell me what is going on?"

Kate could have been invisible and inaudible for all the attention the guards paid her. They also apparently thought that she was made of some substance other than that which reacts to pain, for they took no notice of her many welts, but proceeded to grab her roughly by the arms and shoulders and drag her through the door and down the hallway.

This procedure took all of Kate's concentration to keep out the bloodcurdling yells of pain that she felt rising to her lips, but as she felt on the verge of giving in and breaking down in tears, a sudden thought rose in her mind like a beacon. She recalled her time with Jay in that fairground tent—a time which now seemed like so long ago. Suddenly, it seemed that she could recall every word he said, every line that he had read her from those strange little plastic-covered books that he seemed to know so well. Passage after passage rose in Kate's mind, like huge saturated cotton balls, wiping her clean of all the filth and fear and dirt and worry, and leaving her all pink and rosy inside.

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<sup>1</sup>NSY: "New Start for Youth" (See *Blood and Freedom*, chapter 7.)

Kate smiled despite herself, and in that moment she knew that whatever was to become of her, she would be okay. She did not have to handle it alone. Jay's Lord was there with her, and He would see her through.

The journey down the hallway was a relatively short one, and before long Kate found herself being seated in some sort of a dentist chair wannabe, and secured in place with five wide (and very obviously unbreakable) bands, which restrained her in various strategic locations. The soldiers then retreated, and were replaced by four highly sterilized assistants who looked much younger than their leader, but every bit as steely and unfeeling. Kate promptly relinquished all hope for any type of sympathy or conversion in her present condition, and focused all of her prayers on endurance.

"So," the woman crooned, "we don't want to betray our buddies, do we? We don't want to give information *willingly*, even though it would save our life? Well, that's just fine with *us!*" She laughed, and after a moment's pause the others joined in as well. It was obviously the action of choice. "Because we've been waiting for just such a chance ... to test our new device!" Another chorus of guffaws.

Kate strained to see the huge device, which took up a quarter of the tiny room, but could not do so from her position. The assistants were busy now, pulling various wires with tiny magnetic needle-like ends, and attaching them into any undamaged parts they could find on Kate's vital members. Kate opened her eyes wide as she watched one of the fine pointed probes being routinely inserted into her forearm, and couldn't believe that she did not feel a thing. Certainly it *should* have been painful! Kate wasn't sure if her body had been so wracked with pain that she had developed an immunity, or if perhaps the angel who was assigned to watch over her had seen fit to grant

her the compassion that she had not found at the hands of her captors, and was muffling the sensation for her. Whatever the cause, she thanked God in a murmured whisper.

The woman turned at the slight motion, and shrugged, apparently thinking Kate was commenting on the procedure. "Rather archaic, I know," she said. "But the pain is an important part of the process. Wears down the nervous system, you know. It all helps towards the end goal." She clapped her hands, and rubbed them together vigorously. "Which of course is ... you telling us everything you know!"

Kate shook her head and tried once again to explain her predicament, but stopped when she saw the obvious lack of interest in anything she might have to say. She sighed, and leaned further back in her chair.

At the woman's signal an attendant pushed a conspicuous button on the machine, which Kate could now see out of the corner of her eye. The wires connecting Kate to the machine were twitching slightly, and Kate guessed that they were sending out some sort of mild electrical current. She still felt nothing. Despite herself, though, her body began to twitch slightly. The woman nodded; apparently everything was going just as planned.

Kate couldn't help but smile. What were they hoping to accomplish? A new sound diverted her attention, and she watched one of the orderlies move over to where a printer was beginning to feed out pages of text.

After about ten minutes the printing stopped, and several of the probes were removed. The rest remained. The woman picked up a sheaf of paper and began droning off questions. Who was Kate working for? What had she done with Susannah Ornih? Who had orchestrated this conspiracy? What were the names of her contacts? On and on it went, and after each

one, the woman barely paused long enough for Kate to mumble out an “I don’t know,” or some other such noncommittal answer, before proceeding on to the next one. Kate wasn’t sure exactly what type of exercise in futility this was, but at least it was going so quickly that it couldn’t possibly last long.

*It must be some sort of newfangled lie detector test,* she suddenly realized. Then she smiled, *Well, they’ll know I’m telling the truth, that’s for sure!* That thought pleased her, for whatever information it was that she could not remember, she was certain she would not want these goons to know about it.



Nearly an hour later, Kate found herself thrown back onto her cot, staring up at the ceiling once again. Strangely, she felt quite a bit better than she had upon first leaving the room, and she marveled at the peculiarity of her situation. “If this is what suffering for Christ is all about,” she whispered aloud to herself, “I could certainly do a lot worse.”

All of a sudden, she felt a wave of heat wash over. She sat up quickly and looked around. The door was still closed and there was nothing around that would seem to give off such a temperature. She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. As her eyes drifted shut, vivid pictures began to form in her mind. She smiled as the events of recent weeks slowly began to come back to her ... Monica Henche ... freeing Su ... her foolish decision to go after Jay on her own advising... her abominable time in the holding cell .... Kate shook her head to realize that she was the cause of bringing all of this upon her own stupid head.

“And yet,” she whispered, “You still have not forsaken me! Why? Why are You still with me and helping me even though I ran off on my own?”

Kate smiled as she felt the reply echoing in her heart, radiating the same tangible heat she had felt a

moment earlier: *I am with you now and always. Nothing you can or ever will do could drive Me from your side. You are Mine, and I am yours forever. The moment you asked for My help, I rushed to your side, and I will not leave you so long as you want Me. We will fight this battle together, and together accomplish My perfect plan for your life.*

Kate’s eyes filled with tears. “I’ve sure messed that plan up, haven’t I? I mean, I really screwed up big-time. Look at me!”

*You can never screw up so badly that I cannot transform it into good in your life,* came the reply once more. *I structure My plan around the character and will of My children. I knew that you would do this, and so I have engineered it that even this can work out for My excellent best—and for your perfect happiness as well. Now trust Me as things unfold, that I will bring it all to good.*

Kate’s lips formed into a half-smile, as despite herself, her aching body and her uncomfortable position, she slowly drifted off into a peaceful, perfectly restful sleep.



Jay squinted up at the narrow, heavily barred window that formed his only link with the outside world. The late afternoon sun had tossed a couple of orange-hued beams his way, and he guessed it was nearing five o’clock. He had to guess, because his watch was now a thing of the past, having been removed by his captors upon his entrance into the top security facility where he now resided.

Jay sighed and stood up, stretching his arms out above his head. He could almost touch the ceiling, despite not being one of the taller guys around. *Good thing, I guess,* he thought, though he wouldn’t have minded the additional temporary discomfort in exchange for the permanent extra inches. *Nevertheless, I’ve had it pretty good so far.*

He was quite perplexed with how things had turned out so far, and was getting quite curious as to what special mission the Lord had for him. After his capture several days before, he had been shuttled straight into the maximum-security prison where he had been locked up ever since. He hadn't even seen guards for any other purpose than bringing him his daily meal. Jay guessed that he was in a temporary holding facility, though, because the surroundings were rather crude and not quite up to the standard he'd heard long-term prisons were. Anyway, what would be the purpose of keeping him boarded up indefinitely? The One-World Order philosophy apparently seemed to be more along the lines of "Executed before proven guilty."

The wound where the bullet had been extracted from Jay's leg was now covered with a sizable bandage that, with little else to divert his attention, now plagued him with a relentless itch.

He knew better than to expect a trial of any sort, but he also wondered what they would do with him this time.—Obviously they weren't going to try to get him to deny his faith—having previously tried and failed in that regard—so his best guess was that he was pretty much death penalty fodder. But then, where was the great testimony in that? No, there must be some other plan brewing out there, and Jay just had to hold on to that hope long enough for it to materialize around him.

He dropped to the ground and began a set of push-ups. After thirty he stopped, pulled each of his arms up above his head and stretched his triceps. Then he dropped down for another set.

Jay had just hit twenty-six when the loud buzzer sounded on the door. He finished the full set before drawing himself up to survey his visitors. One of the guards came up and delivered a hard kick on his right side.

"Up, prisoner!" the man barked. "You're being transferred. You know the rote. You can do this the easy or the hard way."

Choosing the former was obviously the way to go, given the looks of these brutes—each almost twice Jay's size—and so Jay stood right up and let them put the heavy metal shackles around his ankles and his wrists.

*We're not looking at a miraculous breakout in this get-up, that's for sure,* Jay thought with a smile, as he adjusted his pace to the somewhat awkward gait afforded by the chains, which connected his two sets of shackles together.

The guards led him up and down several long corridors, and Jay didn't pay much notice to which direction they were headed. It was all he could do to keep from tripping over his chains, and this was a prison he hadn't been to before anyway, so he doubted that keeping an eye on location would be of any use whatsoever should the Lord want to attempt a getaway.

Soon they found themselves in a busier section of the compound, and heading up to what Jay deduced was some sort of infirmary. At the entrance he was unshackled, and two sturdy plastic wristbands were snapped into place, joining his hands together, and then fastened with solid metal screws on either side.

"If you try any funny business," the guard explained, "all the exits are wired to trigger these bands with so much electricity it'll send you to Heaven and straight out the other side. Got me, my boy?"

Jay nodded. "Don't worry," he said.

"Oh, I'm not worried, boy," the man roared out in a fit of laughter. "I'm not worried, no sir! But *you's* the one that should be worried, in my mind. Yes, my boy!" He slapped his thigh in obvious glee.

Jay turned away from him, and was greeted by an efficient-looking nurse, who was wielding an



awesome-looking instrument. It seemed like a cross between a doctor's scalpel and an exacto knife. The nurse moved right over to Jay's jeans and tore a slit down the entire length, underwear and all. He tried to protest, but the nurse preempted him.

"Inspection time," she said curtly. "I'll have no funny business."

"Look, ma'am," Jay began, but before he could finish the sentence, the woman spun around, kicked her leg up, and before Jay knew quite what was happening, he found himself pinned to the floor with the blade's point nestled in the hollow of his neck.

"And that's just a 'hello,'" the nurse said. "Now do you get what I mean by 'no funny business'?"

Jay thought it would be better not to say anything, so he just nodded, trying hard not to swallow, for he had a feeling that his Adam's apple was right in the destructive path of that eager little blade.

"Right then, we're on target. Now get back up and let's try again."

Most of the commotion had settled down now outside the infirmary. There were two guards posted right outside the door, and two or three other nurses or orderlies doing various business around the fair-sized room. Jay was just glad he didn't have a bigger audience.

The nurse stripped down the other side of his pants and pulled them off, then proceeded to do the same to his shirt. Jay stood, feeling quite naked and very uncomfortable, while the woman conducted a routine (routine to her, that is) strip search. Jay winced, but the nurse's karate-fueled lesson stuck firm. He did not say a word.

When she was satisfied that he did not have any weapons or other gadgetry concealed in his private crevasses, the nurse threw him a little starched white gown. He struggled to put it on with his hands bound as they were, and finally managed to do a halfway

job of it.

Another nurse then came up and led him through a barrage of tests and measurements. He was weighed, poked, prodded, and had a tape measure wrapped around every conceivably measurable part of his anatomy. Then followed other physical examination staples—eye test, tooth inspection, back of the throat, and on and on it went.

Jay gave considerable thought before opening his mouth to speak again, but since the judo-nurse was on the other side of the room, and a younger, somewhat more pleasant-looking one was now working on him, he figured it was worth a try.

"What is all this for?" he asked in a low voice.

The girl looked up at him in surprise. Jay saw her name was on the badge on her chest: Susan. Jay realized that the karate-kicking nurse probably had her name on her shirt as well. Funny he hadn't even noticed it. *Guess I was too stuck on that dagger in her hand*, he thought. *Or maybe it was all those intimate moments we had together—wiped it clean from my mind.*

Jay snapped back to reality in a hurry as the young nurse spoke. "You don't know?" Susan was saying incredulously. "Why it's your pre-trip checkup, of course," she laughed. "I know, you're just making conversation, aren't you?"

"No," Jay shook his head urgently. "What's going on? What kind of trip? Where am I going?" His heart sank as he saw the first nurse head back in his direction. His heart sank further as he read the name on her badge: Helgott. *That figures*, he thought to himself. *I would get a Helgott!*

Susan also noticed Helgott's return, and busied herself with her work. Jay wondered if Helgott tried that karate kick on everyone she wanted to keep in line. He tried to imagine her pinning Susan to the floor with the exacto blade scalpel at her neck ... didn't

quite have the same ring to it. He groaned.

“Well, I’m off soon then,” he said, tentatively cranking out a smile in Helgott’s direction.

The woman turned her stony face to him, squelching any tendrils of amiableness that may have wanted to sprout. *So much for that try*, Jay thought.

“Susan, take him next door,” Helgott said briskly.

Susan grasped Jay by the arm, and two of the other nurses followed a few paces behind them—presumably a further continent of guards. Jay guessed that Susan was not as proficient in the arts of war as was Helgott.

A screened door on the left side of the room led into a small shower room. Jay’s eyes opened wide. Not Susan! The two other nurses stayed immediately outside the door, turning their backs to the room. Jay groaned. Susan obviously had quite a bit more of a sense of life than her predecessor, and Jay noticed that she was grinning a little as she led him into the white ceramic tiled room.

“Put your feet in here,” she motioned to two narrow rectangular trenches, about shoulder width apart. Jay did so, and some sort of aluminum-based protective covering rolled in from the front and the back, holding him securely in place.

“I hope I don’t need to fall over,” Jay commented, “or I may find myself without a foot or two!”

Susan was trying very hard to act professional, but was obviously not succeeding well. Jay thought he heard a little giggle, though it was smothered just as quickly in a studious-sounding grunt.

“Raise your arms,” she directed.

Jay looked up, and sure enough, there was a handy nook which seemed perfectly designed to fit the plastic wristband he was wearing. Susan snapped it into place. Jay felt like he was stretched out on a meat rack, or put up for display on a dart board.

Susan stepped back to survey her handiwork, and

offered a small, sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry,” she murmured, as she sheepishly pulled off his thin robe. “It’s standard procedure.”

“Don’t mention it,” Jay returned, then lowered his voice. “I’m just glad it was you and not that battleaxe!” Susan’s eyes widened. “Oh, don’t say that!” she giggled. She lowered her voice too. “She’s got ears everywhere, that woman! She’s horrible.” Then, as if suddenly realizing what she was saying and who she was talking with, she pulled herself back together. “I’m going to turn on the water now,” she said. “Brace yourself. The flow has to be pretty strong, you know, ’cause we don’t use body contact.”

“Oh, you don’t?” Jay laughed. “I was kind of getting my hopes up.”

Susan just shook her head and pulled a long hose from off the wall, then switched on the water. The sudden spurt of water rushing out nearly caused her to lose her balance, but she regained control quickly and aimed for Jay.

“So, what can you tell me about my destination?” Jay asked, raising his voice a little above the flow of the water.

“Nothing, really,” Susan muttered. “If you don’t know already, I’m sure I’m not the one that should be talking.”

“Tell me about yourself then,” Jay said. “How old are you?”

“I’m twenty,” she replied.

“You worked here long?”

“Only a month. I just got out of college.”

“College, huh? Isn’t that young to be done with college?”

Susan smiled. “I was in a special self-advancement college. You sort of work at your own pace and go by progress instead of by time. It’s more efficient that way. My dad’s in the army ... he’s always been a real work ethic man. I guess I picked up on the whole

trip.”

She switched off the water. “I shouldn’t be chatting with you like this. It’s against regulations.”

“Screw the regulations,” Jay shrugged. “What do you care?”

“That’s easy for you to say—if that’s your philosophy I’m not surprised you’re being shipped off overseas.”

Jay tucked the piece of information away, but continued his nonchalant conversation. He now saw an avenue even more potential than just finding out what was happening with his life. There was a certain spark in Susan that he’d come to recognize as the witness of God. Maybe, just maybe... “Wherever I’m being shipped, it’s through nothing wrong that I’ve done—unless you call resisting the one-world government a crime. Is that a crime in your book?”

“Why, of course!” Susan’s words sounded more certain than the tone that carried them.

Jay noticed, and pressed his advantage. “Well, I am a believer in the one true God—the creator of Heaven and earth, Who lives in my heart and Who speaks to me every day. I won’t take this registration mark, and that’s why I’m here.”

Susan looked at him thoughtfully. She had finished the soapy squirt-down now, and turned on the hose for the final rinse. Jay knew he didn’t have much time left.

“This whole deal here is nothing but Devil-worship. It’s all gonna fall apart in the end, and if you’re smart, you’ll bail out while you can.” He spoke the words quickly and urgently, looking her straight in the eyes.

Susan smiled. “It doesn’t seem to have done *you* much good now, has it?”

“You have no idea,” Jay said, with an earnestness that startled Susan. “I might look pretty messed up right now, standing here like some kind of slave labor, but I am a secret agent for the greatest government

in the universe, and I’m trying out some heavy-duty infiltration right now to see if I can win somebody over to my side.”

Susan grinned.

Jay continued, “The Lord told me that He had some reason for putting me through this, and I wouldn’t be surprised if this was it.”

Shower time was over, and the conversation was too. Susan put the hose back up on the wall, and gave Jay one last appraising look—from his hands so enticingly bound above his head, down the full dripping length of his body, and right to where his feet disappeared into their aluminum fortress.

“Come on, secret agent,” she said. “It’s time for a haircut.”

## BRIGHT DAISY

“I’m sorry guys, but we’ve got to get out of here,” Julian looked at his laptop for the tenth time in the last two minutes. “Troops are massing less than a half-mile from here, and it looks like they’re on the move this way. The thirty minutes your God cut out for you are up.”

“We’ve got forty-five seconds left,” Alana said persistently.

Julian rolled his eyes, and started the motor. He was just shifting into drive when Dylan’s voice rose up like a preschool siren. “It’s Cal! It’s Cal! He’s here!”

The others all plastered themselves along the end window of the camper, and sure enough—there was Cal, trudging wearily up the road. He had a pleased grin on his face, which the others took as a good sign. He was alone.

Stuart flung open the door. “Get a move on, man! We were just about to pull out.”

“Thanks for waiting, guys,” Cal said, as he stumbled up the little step and threw himself down on the narrow sofa. “Oh, I can’t say how glad I am to see you all!” He grinned at Alana. “Yes, even you. I never thought I’d say it, but it’s true.”

“So tell us,” Kim said. “What happened?”

Cal was only too pleased to oblige. The camper

lurched as Julian pulled out onto the road, and then took off down the road. “Well, I tailed ’em to well inside the cave. I wanted to make sure that I could see them before they saw me. Didn’t want any of those ‘shoot on sight’ deals, you know.

“So once they were inside the cave, I came up till I was just a few feet behind them, and got up real close to the wall so I was right out of visual. They didn’t have flashlights, so that helped too. Yeah, so when I felt everything was in place ... heck, I even said a prayer like you said, Stu!” Cal grinned and looked quite pleased with himself.

“So first I called out their names real loud, which they must have first thought was the voice of holy God or an angel, ’cause they threw their weapons in the air and dropped to their knees. Must have been the echo. Anyway, was a pretty funny sight ’cause the water was about thigh-high, so these guys started floundering around like a coupla baby birds thrown from the nest!” Cal slapped his knee and laughed aloud.

“I let them flounder for a couple of minutes, just ’cause it was so funny to watch. I couldn’t move or I’d burst out laughing. Finally I called out to them again and told them it was me, and then of course they were pissed to have made such idiots of themselves.

“Right away Dan was ready to call the sergeant, but my ol’ buddy Warner stopped him. I knew he would. Warner wanted to hear my tale. And so I obliged him. He wanted to know if I’d gone clear out of my loony brain or if I had some reasonable explanation. So I told them everything, told them all about God and Jesus and the downside of this whole crappy system we’ve gotten ourselves messed up in. They were pretty interested—at least Warner was.

“Anyway, I could tell Dan was getting trigger happy. He kept fidgeting with the talk switch on the two-way radio, and I was afraid if I didn’t leave while I could,

he’d try to call the others and Warner would blow his hand off or something. So I told them I had to split, that I was meeting some friends.

“Dan started whining immediately but Warner pulled his gun on him and made him stay put while I beat a quick getaway back down the river. I know Warner—he’ll keep that guy at bay or die trying. I’m just not sure what’ll happen to him once he gets back, Dan’s almost sure to rat on him and I don’t know if Warner’s rep can stand that kind of affront. He’s not terribly popular with the higher-ups.” Cal shook his head. “Anyway, I did what I could, and there’s not much more we can do at this point.”

“Besides pray,” said Kim quietly, reaching over to grasp Cal’s hand.

Cal looked up at her, surprised. “Yeah,” he said, with a smile.

“Cal,” Stuart said, “we’re all pretty impressed with what you did back there. It was beyond decent of you to risk your life like that for your friends. We’re just glad you’re on our side!”

Cal grinned. “Thanks guys,” he said, a lump rising in his throat. “I’m pretty rich to have pals like you too.”

Alana pulled out her invisible violin and added a touch of her typical sarcasm to the mushy moment, and the group all forced out a laugh.

“Well, let’s pump up a prayer for Cal’s buddy and then descend on Julian’s fridge,” Stuart said.



About ten minutes later, after the dust had settled, Alana looked up in between a mouthful of food. Squinting at Julian’s reflection in the front windshield mirror, she called out, “So, where are we headed, Ju?”

“Yeah, do you have plans, Julian?” Stuart called up towards the driver’s seat.

“Not for the moment,” Julian replied. “I broke off from the rest of my team for the time being.”

"You what?" Alana echoed. "I thought you were like the head honcho."

"Yeah well, I had to come back for you guys, and I couldn't very well tote my whole crowd along with me. So I left a couple of the other guys in charge, and they kept going." Julian glanced at his watch. "They're probably crossing the border by now—providing everything goes okay. I'm gonna keep in touch with them"—he motioned towards his trusty laptop—"and maybe meet up sometime later. But until then ... if you all don't mind I thought I'd tag along wherever you were headed."

"Well, sure, Julian," Stuart said. "We're glad to have you, aren't we?"

"Absolutely tickled," Alana said sourly, but her twinkling eyes belied her tone. Julian caught her eye in the rearview mirror and winked. She met the gesture with her very toughest look, and he just grinned.

"So where *are* we headed?" Cal asked.

Kim looked up thoughtfully. "I have a couple contacts in the city that we could check out," she said. "I'll have to get in touch with them first though, and see if anyone's got a place where we could lay low for a while."

She pulled a slender laptop out of her carry pack and pushed the power button. "I did most of our Home's follow-up work," she explained, as the machine booted up. "So I know most of these guys personally. I'd suggest we send out feelers to a couple and see if anyone takes the bait, and then of course confirm it with the Lord before we go."

"Sounds good to me," Stuart said. "So who've we got?"

"Let's see..." She pored over a rather cryptic-looking document. "We could try Bright Daisy ... or maybe the Professor. He might be our first bet. Actually let's e-mail both of them, and Lighthouse as

well."

"I gather those aren't their real names," Cal commented.

"Oh, A-plus, schoolboy!" Alana giggled. "Haven't you ever surfed the net?"

"I don't even know most of their real names," Kim explained, with a frown for Alana's disparaging remark. "A lot of our correspondence is heavily double-meaning, if you know what I mean. The whole follow-up ministry is one of the most dangerous of all, that's why we spread it out so much. Each person can only be responsible for ministering to four people at the most, because there's just too great a risk, and if one goes down, we don't want them to take the whole kit and caboodle with them. Like Jason." She shook her head sadly.

"What happened to him?" Stuart asked quickly.

"He was arrested a couple of months ago on his way to a pickup. The authorities seized his laptop and went right to work on it. He had it all pretty well encoded but it must have been a bit weak in some way, because two of his linkups got the knock. It was pretty sad. But hey, that'll happen, no? It's the Endtime, after all! Still, we try and do our best to keep the risk down."

"So you've only got four connections?"

"Technically, yes," Kim said. "But I do have links to another couple as well.—Not on disk, of course, but some folks I was hooked up with before, I'm sure I could track 'em down. Anyway, if we can get in touch with one of these four, they've got links to others. It's all pyramided out like that."

"Pretty fancy system," Alana said, sounding genuinely impressed.

"Why thank you, Alana," Kim smiled. "That was tough for you to say, wasn't it?"

Alana grinned. "Now that you mention it, Kim, it was. I'll tell you one thing, though, hanging around

all you sunshine people is making my comfortable gloom a lot harder to distribute. Sometimes I'll even..."—she rolled her eyes dramatically—"get these *conscience pangs* if I say something really foul. I mean, do you hear what I'm saying? *Conscience pangs*?" She laughed, and Stuart laughed too. "Now Stu there, he can appreciate what I'm saying, can't you Stu?"

Stuart laughed, and slapped her on the back. "You're just great, Al. Don't lose any sleep over it."

Kim had turned her attention back to the laptop. "All right," she said, when the conversation seemed to have returned to normal health. "I've buzzed them. Now we'll just have to see who's the first one to pick up..."

"What link-up do you use?" Julian called back.

Kim looked up sheepishly. "Alpha," she said. "I don't have the latest version, though. I was supposed to get it last month but the contact fell through. This one works okay, though."

"What's Alpha?" Alana asked.

"It's a synaptic communications system," Kim replied. "Sort of the next step up from the cyberlink. Very secure—and totally on the top of the government's hate-list!"

"For good reason!" Julian laughed. "It's supposed to be uncrackable."

"Of course it's not though," Kim said. "They just say that to make people feel secure. For the casual user it's only about as safe as PGP. But if you can cover your tracks good enough, it's pretty resilient. They may be able to crack it, but they have to do it manually, and it would take them the better part of a year." She shrugged. "Generalizing, of course. But anyway, it's pretty tough."

"You know something about all this, huh?" Julian asked.

"Yeah." Kim blushed a little. "I've had a lot of spare time on my hands, what with Stuart gone and having

to pretty much hole up at the Refuge for the last two years. I've been learning a little hacking in my spare time."

Julian laughed. "What do you know!" he said. "We'll have to compare notes sometime."

"Oh, we're hot!" Kim burst out suddenly. "Lighthouse is online." She clicked the message, then her face fell. "No show," she said. "He's out of town all week. He says if we're still around Sunday to give a buzz, he's more than happy to help."

"Well, three more potentials," Stuart said, then trailed off as Kim's face lit up again.

"Oh, yes! Bright Daisy's on!" she said, quickly sliding the cursor over and clicking on the message.

"Gee, these guys are pretty fast," Alana commented.

"Yeah, they must spend all their time at the computer or something," Cal added.

"Lucky for us, I guess," Alana said. "So what's she got to say?" Then under her breath, "Bright Daisy! What kind of a gal picks a name like that? I'm sure she and I are going to find choice differences between us."

"Okay, she'll have us!" Kim burst out triumphantly. "We can meet her in Central Park at eight thirty." She looked up at Julian. "Is that too soon?"

"Nah, we can make it."

"Okay." She clicked the send button triumphantly. "Eight thirty it is then."

"Central park, huh?" Julian fiddled with a keypad on the right side of the steering wheel. "I'm not so familiar with this area anymore." A sketchy map outlined itself on the smooth screen behind the wheel, and Julian smiled and nodded. "There you go, of course. I used to live around there when I was a kid, you know," he commented.

Kim had closed up her laptop and joined him in the front, while the others made another pass at the fridge. Stuart was sprawled on the bed with the two

little guys, reading some books they had brought with them from the Lab.

“Pretty long time ago, huh?” Kim laughed to Julian.

“I’ll say,” Julian returned, running his hands through his bushy hair. “Seems like yesterday sometimes, though.”

“So you’ve never been married?”

“Nope,” he replied. “I guess I’m just not the marrying type. There is such a thing, you know.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Kim returned. “I think it’s more a matter of finding the right person.”

Julian shrugged. “Whatever. I don’t really give it much thought. Got more important things to fog over. Such as ... so you’re into computers! You good or what?”

Kim paused, considering the question. “Yeah,” she finally said, with a grin. “I suppose I am. I would say, ‘for a girl,’ but it’s terribly sexist. And computer’s a pretty equal playing ground, you know. There’s not the whole brawn issue to contend with.”

“A lot of girls think it’s way out of their league.”

“Oh, no way!” Kim protested. “A brain’s a brain, no matter who it’s implanted in. I mean, some people lean more towards technical stuff, but I’m of the opinion that anyone can do anything they want to, if they want it badly enough and are willing to do anything to get it.”

“So computer was your thing, huh?”

“That and my kids,” Kim glanced back at the two little enraptured cherubs, who seemed to be anxious to catch up on all the Daddy-time they had missed over the last years—and which Kim was more than happy to let them do. “If I had to choose one, I’d choose them of course. Being a mother is the single most tremendous thing in the whole world.”

“I’d find people to disagree with you on that as well.” Julian laughed at his apparent inability to agree with Kim’s viewpoints.

“Are you exceptionally contrary today, or is this your natural makeup?” Kim asked.

“Just me, I guess,” he returned. “I don’t like taking things at face value. But that would make for pretty boring conversation, wouldn’t it? So you were telling me about your kids.”

“Yeah, they’re the total best. I wouldn’t trade motherhood for all the hacking in the world.”

“What’s it like, you know, with your whole Endtime thing—like how you guys are persecuted and stuff. Doesn’t that scare you, having such little kids? Like what if...”

Kim quickly leaned over and put her hand over his mouth. Her clear gray eyes were deadly serious, but Julian could see forbidden tears lurking just under the surface. “There are no ‘what ifs,’” she said softly. She leaned back in her chair and her eyes took on a faraway look, as if at that moment she were somewhere else entirely. “I wondered that myself, when I first got pregnant. But the Lord assured me of His love and His care for me, for us—and for them in particular. He created them, and He will care for them. That’s why I can say there are no ‘what ifs.’ Nothing will happen by mistake, or by accident. It’s my job to be careful to a fault, to pray every waking second, and to entrust any moments of sleep to the prayer of others. But beyond that, I know that we are cared for by the best Bodyguard this world has ever known. And He’s never gonna let us down.”

Julian let a moment of silence pass as he digested Kim’s words. “I can see you believe that with all your heart,” he finally said. “I guess that’s why you do what you do—you couldn’t do it otherwise. It’s one of those totally sold-out businesses, I guess.”

“That’s the stuff.” The moment had passed, and Kim was her laughing self again.

“So tell me about your hacking. How’d you get into it?”



“I came across a couple books on one of those contraband Web sites one day—well, one book and a couple of mega-essays. I’ve always liked computers, used to piddle in it here and there before I got married, but when I landed at the Refuge, I had time galore! I wasn’t usually sent on the scouting missions or pickups since I had kids and Stuart wasn’t there, so while the kids were busy, or once they were in bed, I had time to burn. I found myself reading that stuff one day, and things just clicked. From then on it was like, live to hack, you know?”

“I know,” Julian said. “I had quite my stint in that department—couple years back now though, before I got involved with the rebels. I wouldn’t mind getting back into it a little more.”

“Yeah, it’s quite the rush. We found it real useful too, especially in follow-up, because if you know how to cover your tracks you run a lot less risk of getting ambushed. Plus a couple times I tapped into some of the lower-level government sites when we needed info. That’s tough to do, and risky too, so we haven’t done it much. But it sure is a thrill! I’d do that every day if I could!”

Cal called up to the front, “Hey Kim, your laptop beeped.”

Kim jumped up and went back to check. “Oh, it’s the Professor!” she smiled. “Well, I guess we’ve got ourselves lined up okay for the time being, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Stuart replied, looking up from the worn *Life with Grandpa* volume. “You might want to feel him out anyway, though, just in case this lead doesn’t pan out for some reason.”

“Good.” Kim’s fingers clacked away on the keyboard. She paused a moment. “Speaking of panning out, we actually haven’t...”

“Central Park, up ahead!” Julian interrupted with a zesty shout.

“Stay off the main street, man!” Cal shouted. “The

city center’s full of scanners.”

“We’re in the car, Cal,” Alana said.

Cal looked from one to the other. “Aren’t the new scanners public knowledge?” he asked. “Julian?”

Julian shook his head. “What scanners? The ones on the street?”

“Well, they’ve had the walkers up for a while, the kind that scan you as you walk by. But the latest ones can scan for your registration codes straight through your car or truck or whatever. This here is one of the first places in the country they’ve installed ’em in, as far as I know. Lucky us to pick just the one! Anyone who doesn’t show up with ID sets off an alarm that sounds like an air raid siren and signals the perimeter block.”

“What’s a p’rimeter block?” Dylan asked.

“It’s a military taskforce,” Julian replied, then continued his explanation at a slightly higher level, “Believe it or not, they’ve actually moved small contingents of armed forces into most cities. At a moment’s notice, they can mobilize and cordon off any section of the city, not allowing anyone to enter or exit without verifying their registration code. They’ve been prepping this kind of thing for years now—‘urban warfare training’ they called it, though we had no idea at the time that this was what it was actually for. I won’t say I didn’t have my suspicions, mind you. So when one of these scanners is triggered, an alarm goes off—makes one hell of a sound, actually. Often, that freaks the target out so much that they’re easy enough to spot for any troops that move in.”

“So this whole place is rigged with scanners?” Kim asked nervously.

“Hey guys, it’s okay!” Julian reassured them. “My camper’s safe. It’s got deflectors built into the hull—custom made. We can withstand any sort of scrutiny.”

“I guess so.” Cal shook his head. “But it’s also

obvious you've got one of those. If we're scanned and they see this vehicle moving with no life signs registering—that's gonna trigger alarm bells anyway."

"Yeah, he's right," Stuart said. "Let's just park off the main street."

"We'd best not all go out to meet the contact," Kim said. "I have to go since I know her."

"I'll go too," Alana said quickly. "I've *got* to get a stretch. I feel like a canned tuna."

"Will you be okay—two girls?" Stuart asked doubtfully.

"Stuart," Alana said, looking him squarely in the eye. "Do I look like a *girl*?"

Stuart laughed. "Of course—you're right. What was I thinking?"

"Drop us off here," Kim said. She quickly ran over and sat down next to Dylan and Maya. "Mom's got to go meet up with somebody," she explained, putting her arm around each one of them. "I'll be back in just about fifteen minutes. Can you guys stay with Daddy and be real good for him till I come back?"

Maya's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Will he read us stories?" she asked.

Kim looked at Stuart. "Oh yes," she said reassuringly. "He will do nothing else the entire time I'm gone."

Stuart raised his eyebrows, but Kim had already kissed her little munchkins, and was now descending upon his lap. "I love you," she whispered.

"Whoa, ease up!" Alana said. "You're gonna make everyone think we're not coming back or something! It's always best to leave without saying goodbye, then you're sure to come back—unfinished business."

Kim laughed as she planted a kiss on Stuart's lips. "I would disagree with that approach to life," she said. "But we had better get out of here. It's already eight thirty-five."

"We'll pray for you," Stuart called

The two girls nodded and climbed out of the camper. Taking a deep breath, they stepped up onto the curb and headed towards the park.



"So I guess there's no scanners—or what did he call them ... *walkers*—in the park, huh?" Alana asked as they walked casually past the various evening strollers.

Kim shook her head. "Nope. Being some of the first public scanners, the walkers are quite bulky, and easy to spot. They're mostly on main walkways, by supermarkets, government buildings, stuff like that. I don't know what the vehicle scanners look like, but I don't imagine we'll trigger any here."

"So you've met this girl before ... what's her name?"

"Bright Daisy. No, I've never actually met her. I didn't go out much. But we corresponded a lot."

"So how are you gonna..." Alana trailed off, then grabbing Kim's arm, pointed to a rather plump figure sitting on a bench by a broken-down, molding fountain. Emblazoned across the girl's harshly unbecoming neon yellow T-shirt was a giant daisy.

Kim giggled. "I guess if we're looking for a bright daisy, we've sure found one," she said.

Alana rolled her eyes at the attire, and meditated on the accuracy of her earlier hunch about this strangely named cybershopper.

"I guess let's just walk up real casually. She's waiting for us."

The two girls moved forward slowly, with the perfect air of two friends on an evening stroll. They got within twenty or so feet of the girl when all of a sudden Alana looked at Kim. "What's wrong with you, girl? You're sweating like a basketball player!"

"I don't know," Kim shook her head. "I don't know, I feel so hot."

"You sick, girl?"

"No, I feel fine..."

Bright Daisy looked up, and her eyes locked with Kim's.

"Oh my God." Kim grabbed Alana's hand in a vice-like grip. "Turn around Alana. Turn around real slowly. Talk to me, make a funny face."

Alana started warbling on about something or other, as she and Kim slowly turned and began walking back away from the fountain. On a hunch, Kim suddenly turned. The woman was on her feet now, and had a weapon drawn.

"She's onto us," Kim said, grabbing Alana's arm again. "Run!"

The two girls broke out into a run, leaping over a bench and nearly trampling a young poodle in their haste. Behind them they could hear a loud strident voice shouting various profanities, and several bullets whizzed dangerously near their earlobes.

A loud wailing sound suddenly echoed through the square. "Oh my God!" Kim shouted again. "The perimeter block."

"Quick! Over that wall—we can make it!" Alana said, pointing to a walled enclosure that surrounded some sort of building.

"I ... can't." Kim was gasping for breath, but still running. Her pace was slowing. "I can't go on anymore. Oh my God, I can't breathe."

"You can make it, Kim! Keep going!" Alana was dragging her by the arm now.

"I can't. You go ahead, Alana. Tell the others." Alana spun around and grabbed the girl by both shoulders, shaking her till she saw stars. "You snap out of it right now, you hear me, Kim? I'm not gonna have any of that 'I'll be a martyr for Jesus' trip. Big no way! You are going to get up off this ground and you are going to RUN! You got me?"

Kim ran. She had no feeling in her legs—or the entire lower half of her body, for that matter—but she ran. They got to the wall just as they could see

soldiers beginning to section off all incoming roads.

"It's our only chance of getting out. We can do it," Alana said. Before Kim could answer, she bent down and grabbed the girl's legs, lifted her up and tipped her up over the side.

Kim screamed and tried to grasp the top of the wall for support. She came crashing down unceremoniously on the other side, but without any major injuries. Alana scaled the wall with apparent ease and jumped down beside her. They found themselves on a grassy lawn that apparently formed the back yard of a small old folks' home of some sort. No one seemed to be around at the moment, and a quick look up at the windows of the building in front of them showed no onlooking spectators either.

"Look! There's the camper!" Kim pointed. Sure enough, just outside the front side of the property and clearly visible through the large, trellised gate, sat their camper, snugly parked and waiting for the getaways.

Alana followed her gaze. "It couldn't be," she said. "That's not at all where we parked."

"But it is!" Kim maintained. "Come on. Let's go. We've gotta beat it from here and fast."

They wiped off the plaster dust they'd gathered in their hasty leap over the wall and strolled calmly and as nonchalantly as they could across the small lawn, then up the rock-lined pathway that led to the front of the building.

As soon as they unlatched the gate, the camper door flew open, and Kim and Alana saw Stuart motioning for them to hurry. With a final sprint across the silent street, the two leapt into the camper and collapsed inside.

Kim and Alana could hardly speak for the better part of the next half-hour. "Just drive. Fast," Kim had croaked before passing out on the camper floor.

Alana was in a slightly better condition, and

managed to give a brief description of the strange events that had just taken place. “Good thing you guys moved the camper here.” She shook her head, mopping her forehead with a nearby dish towel.

“We came to get you,” Dylan piped up cheerfully.

Alana smiled innocuously at him, a sort of “what a sweet, dumb little boy you are” smile.

Stuart noticed and grinned. “Dylan’s right,” he nodded.

“Course I’m right,” Dylan said, his chest swelling with pride.

“Once you girls left we remembered that we hadn’t specifically heard from the Lord before you went in, so we thought the least we could do was to go ahead and check in with the Lord and see if He had anything to say, even though you were already gone. We thought it was just a routine check-in, but...”

“Man, but it wasn’t!” Cal said, and Alana noted curiously his strangely wide eyes and face shiny with perspiration.

“What’s eating you, man?” she asked curiously.

“This whole prophecy deal—it’s just like, whoa!” Cal shook his head incredulously.

“What did the Lord say?” Kim seemed to be regaining her senses, and propped herself up on one elbow to hear what was going on.

“He said that we should beware, because you were in danger. But instead of telling us to go in after you, He told us to take another road, and to park right here. He said we should pray desperately for your lives to be spared.”

“Gadz!” Alana said. Then she nudged Kim. “Maybe that was when you started sweating.”

Kim nodded. “I didn’t have an inkling of anything. Serves me right for being so out of tune. I should have remembered to check in before we left. But the closer we got to that bench the more I felt something was wrong. Then when I looked into her eyes, I just

knew—that wasn’t the girl I’d been writing for the last year. There was something seriously wrong, and *she* was it.” Kim sighed. “Then I figured it had to be some kind of a trap—nice time to find out, at the last minute.”

“So what does this all mean?” Julian called from the front. “Your Bright Daisy—she’s been a spy all along, a turncoat?”

Kim shook her head. “Nah, I don’t think so. A couple of the guys met her at least a dozen times. I’ve heard lots of stories about how sweet she was, and receptive. The bad guys must have gotten to her somehow, and then just used her account. They were probably just waiting for us to contact her so they could get back to us and set the trap.”

“And we walked right into it, like a coupla morons,” Alana grunted. “Isn’t that just like us though.”

“Well, thank the Lord you both made it out safely,” Stuart was hugging Kim, and she grinned.

“Amen to that,” she said.

“So what do we do next?” Cal asked.

“The Professor!” Maya squeaked.

Everyone turned around to look at the little curly-headed girl.

“What did you say?” Kim asked slowly.

Maya blushed and crawled under the bed.

“She said ‘the Professor,’” Stuart said.

“Is that supposed to be a sign, you think?” Cal asked. He was becoming more and more spooked by the strange crowd of people he had become associated with.

“I don’t know why she would have said that, unless she was paying really close attention—like an hour ago,” Kim said.

“Maybe she’s starting her prophecy career at a young age,” Stuart laughed. He crawled under the bed and fished out the still-red-faced little girl. “It’s okay,” he whispered in her ear. “You said something

really good. We're all very pleased with you."

Maya looked at him, and then beamed a huge smile. "The Professor!" she said again. "I said, 'the Professor.' I'm a prophet." Instantly she jumped up, legs far apart and arms raised dramatically in the air. "You ask for a sign?" she squeaked dramatically.

Kim reached down and quickly swooped the little girl into her arms. "Maybe let's save the replay for later, shall we?"

"Hey, so where we are we headed, navigators? I'm flying blind here," Julian called from the front.

Kim sighed and looked around at the others. "Well, the first thing I'm anxious to do is make sure not to make the same mistake twice."

"Oh yeah to that," Alana said. "That and somewhere to hit the sack tonight too."

Cal looked at his watch. "Nine fifteen," he said.

"Well, I guess we should find somewhere to pull over for the night," Stuart said.

"Yeah, and then we can have time to check in Upstairs and make sure the Professor is really the one we're supposed to get in touch with before we contact him again."

"I know just the place." Julian smiled, and turned the camper sharply to the left. The engine roared on through the darkness.

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## THE DESERT OF DEATH

The early morning light had barely begun to peek through the grimy, slit-shaped window at the top of Jay's cell when the rough clanging of the door jolted him into wakefulness.

"On your feet!" bellowed a commanding voice.

Jay, having already learned the benefits of instant obedience at this stage of his life, leaped to his feet with admirable haste.

Two soldiers came forward and shackled his hands into a hefty set of handcuffs, then chained his legs and connected the two.

"Let's go," the first soldier spoke again, and jabbed Jay with the butt of his automatic.

Jay moved as best he could down the halls, wishing that he had thought to smooth his hair and scratch himself before he had been so impaired. He knew better than to ask where he was going. As a prisoner of the worst type, he imagined that the soldiers had been given pretty stiff instructions about any remote sort of fraternization.

He occupied himself during his long walk through dimly lit hallways by thinking about Susan. It was strange how he found himself so drawn to her memory. It was certainly nothing to do with her physically, because this type of recollection was

different than the usual memories that danced through Jay's mind after an encounter with some lively lass. This was ... well, spiritual. Jay would have blushed if anyone else had been able to read his thoughts, but it was true. He was definitely thinking of her in a spiritual way.

*Maybe this is the burden of the Spirit,* he mused. He pondered various old Letters he'd read where Dad had felt so compelled by a certain person he'd met that he had been brought to tears and desperate intercession for them.

*Oh, Lord, be with Susan!* Jay did not say the words aloud, but he formed them consciously in his mind, pronouncing each one clearly as though in hopes that that would help them get through better than the sort of prayers that floated along more abstractly. *I know You must have led her to me for a reason, and I hope I did all I could in getting Your message to her. Please do whatever You can to bring her to a full knowledge of You ... free her, Lord...*

Jay nearly fell over himself as the soldier in front of him stopped. "Wait here," the first soldier said to the other two. The two took their place on either side of Jay, while the first disappeared inside some doorway.

All of a sudden, one of the soldiers started to cough, just lightly at first, but then with increased intensity, to where he seemed to be gasping for breath. He was wheezing and choking and seemed almost ready to pass out.

The other soldier looked over. "You okay, man?"

There was no answer, just more coughing. The man was doubled over now.

All of a sudden, Jay felt an uncomfortable feeling in the bottom of his stomach; the type of feeling he used to get in public prophecy meetings when he was getting something and didn't have the guts to give it out. *Oh no!* he thought to himself. *No, Lord! Not that.*

The stomachache persisted.

Jay groaned inwardly, but he knew he had to do it. He lifted his shackled hands towards the coughing man.

"Freeze, convict!" shouted the other, pulling out his weapon and pointing it straight at Jay's head.

Jay didn't say anything, but kept moving his hands—ever so slowly—until they rested on the man's back. The second he touched the soldier's uniform, the man's coughing began to lessen, but his body was still shaking, and he appeared unable to breathe.

"In the name of Jesus, in the name of the one true living God above all others, I ask for a manifestation of Your Almighty power. You are the Creator of Heaven and earth, and I ask You to release this man's lungs, and free them. Heal him now, Jesus, and show Your mighty power."

The onlooking soldier seemed transfixed, for surely he should have stopped Jay by this time.

But the coughing had completely stopped. The dazed soldier raised his head slowly, until his bleary eyes locked with Jay's.

"It's the power of Jesus," Jay whispered. "Nothing is more powerful."

At that the man startled, and seemed to regain his senses, and with them his tough composure. He wiped his mouth off on his sleeve and shrugged Jay's hands off of his back.

"Back in place," he muttered gruffly.

Convict and captors resumed their position just as the commanding officer returned through the door, oblivious to what had happened in his absence. As they began to move again, Jay looked up suddenly. There, standing in the doorway of the opposite hall, was Susan. One look into her eyes and Jay knew that she had seen what had happened.

They passed her by before he could say anything—and what could he have said anyway? He didn't want

to get her in trouble by making it seem that they had a friendship going. All of a sudden an old song flashed through his mind, and without another thought he started singing it: "I'd rather die for something than live for nothing, I'm gonna live my life for something real..."

"Shut up!" A heavy jab with an unpleasantly shaped weapon sucked the tune right out of Jay's lungs, but he prayed that the little bit of message he had been able to give out would take further root in Susan's life.



An unusually brisk breeze was blowing as Jay stumbled out of the back of the army truck in which he had been sandwiched for over an hour. A young attendant came up and shoved a rough cloth bag into his arms. Then his three captors moved without a word towards the huge lot, which was teeming with vehicles and an unusual amount of people clad in the same neon-orange jumpsuits that Jay himself was wearing.

He didn't have much chance to wonder about the bag's contents, because it took all his focus and concentration to keep moving along at a fairly steady pace, still balancing his chains and shackles.

They passed a couple of soldiers who were herding a group of a dozen or so convicts, mostly men, along in the same direction.

"Hey, threesome!" one of the guards called out tauntingly towards the soldiers who were with Jay. "Keep a close eye on that *one* prisoner you've got, huh? Wouldn't want him to get away!" He broke out into a raucous laugh.

"He's top security, that's why..." one of Jay's guards began, but the other shoved him roughly.

"Forget them, they're jerks," he said.

"Jerks they may be, but if we're gonna have to fly alongside 'em..."

The other shrugged. "Suit yourself, but you're wasting your time."

The group moved on in silence.

Jay smiled a little to himself. *Top security*, he grinned. *I like the sound of that. If I'm going to be a prisoner I might as well be a special prisoner.*

In the midst of that comforting thought, Jay suddenly froze. He could hardly believe his eyes. He blinked several times, then looked around again. He laughed softly to himself. *Darn*, he thought. *I almost thought I saw Kate for a minute! Lord knows what I'll be imagining next!*

There were an assortment of planes ready and waiting, and they all seemed to be loading up to capacity with orange-clad prisoners. Most planes were plainly emblazoned with airline logos, but others were clearly military aircraft. Jay could tell by now that he and several others were nearing an air force bomber that had been made over into some sort of rough passenger transport.

"What is going on here?" Jay whispered to himself. *I get special treatment again*, he thought, as they stepped up the ramp. *But I've always wanted to go in one of these bombers.*

Jay was shoved into a seat. The interior was only dimly lit, as there were no windows in the cabin. Obviously, the place was not normally used for passenger transport.

"I have no idea why they're having us go in this. It's disgusting if you ask me," one of the guards was griping.

"Yeah, you'd think we'd get better treatment than these wretches we're transporting." The soldier kicked the hapless prisoner nearest him.

"Well, the sooner we get rid of 'em the better, that's all that counts. And if these ones need this extra loading caution, I'm not gonna be the one to gripe."

The other mumbles gradually silenced as Jay's

chain was latched securely onto the bench that lined the wall of the plane. His ankle restraints were also chained to the ground.

Jay sighed and leaned back against the rough wall as the plane started to taxi on the runway. His cloth bag was shoved in between his arms, and by moving them just a little he was able to peer inside. There was one fiercely ugly homespun sweater, and a thin gray blanket.

*Hmmm*, Jay thought, wondering what he should conclude from this priceless knowledge. He turned his attention to his companions on the plane.

There were about ten guards, all heavily armed, and maybe 16 prisoners. He couldn't make out their faces, or even if they were male or female, because of the lighting. But there was no mistaking those orange suits.—They even glowed in the dark!

*Obviously they're going to kill us*, Jay thought to himself, *but why fly us somewhere to do that? Why not just do it at home and truck all our bodies somewhere? And why give us blankets and sweaters?*

Something was definitely afoot, but trying to figure it out was proving too tiring, so Jay made himself as comfortable as possible and closed his eyes.



Jay awoke with the now-familiar lurching of the plane. *I had no idea it would be so different flying in this type of plane. You sure feel the bumps and jolts and air resistance more than in the larger ones.*

His eyes having somewhat adjusted to the light, Jay looked around at his fellow-passengers. The guards all seemed to have been popped from the same mold, from their haircuts right to their steel-toed boots. The prisoners were obviously unique. Directly opposite him was a huge, hulking fellow who was nearly as wide as he was tall. He seemed more flab than muscle, and had ripped off the sleeves of his jumpsuit, apparently anxious to reveal two bulky,

tattoo-covered arms, each proclaiming various statements such as “Craig the Skull” and “Death to the Crème.” Jay could tell there were more, but only those more notable ones stood out from the relative distance.

A few seats over was another man, thinner and crafty-looking, with a shiny bald head and a long, crooked nose. One large gleaming scar featured prominently above his left eyebrow. Definitely another one not to mess with. Jay had a renewed appreciation for the guard-to-prisoner ratio.

As his eyes continued moving along the side of the plane, all of a sudden he nearly fell off his seat. Sandwiched between two leering guards—was *Kate!*

*Oh my Lord!* Jay moaned inwardly. *I didn't dream it—she was here after all!* He couldn't even begin to imagine what could have brought her to such a fate, and he hoped that it had nothing to do with him.

At that very moment her eyes opened, caught his, and she smiled. She lifted her eyebrows at him, and he guessed from her look that she'd been watching him and waiting for him to notice her.

Jay widened his eyes, and Kate got the message: *What are you doing here?*

Kate bit her lip. She shrugged her head to the side, and nodded towards him.

Jay gasped. *Me?* he mouthed the words. *You came to find me?*

Kate nodded, and looked ashamed. Then suddenly she smiled. She looked straight into his eyes, and he was startled.

*“I can hear your voice,”* he said. His lips were not moving. Neither were hers.

*“Yes,”* she said. *“Maybe that means we're going to die. That always happens in movies right before people die.”*

*“I hope not,”* Jay mentally replied. *“I can't see how it would serve any specific purpose in this situation.”*



"I guess we'll see."

"Why did you come after me?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't really stop to think about it before I did. I thought I could try and get you out, you know, like I did for Su. I guess I forgot it wasn't me at all."

"The Lord must have had a plan," Jay said.

"You think? Maybe I just screwed up real big."

"Nah, no way!" Jay shook his head. "There's no way something big like this could happen through a mistake—unless you're like really way out there, blatant disobedience, stuff like that."

"The second I got in the door I knew I shouldn't have. I prayed then, Jay, really I did. But it was too late—and now here I am."

"Well, there you go! He must have a plan," Jay replied. "I hate to say it—but I am glad that you're here. That is, I'm not glad that you're here, but I'm glad that you're here.—You know, if it had to be anybody..."

"I know," Kate smiled. "Me too."

"Prepare for landing!" The loud booming voice startled the two out of their inner conversation. The plane's human factions slowly churned into wakefulness, with the guards reinforcing their seatbelts and exchanging light conversation as the plane suddenly angled steeply and began its descent.

The whole way down Jay felt sick to his stomach. He looked over at Kate and wondered how she could seem so composed. She almost looked as though she was prepared for anything. Then he thought about what she had said. He'd never have guessed that she was feeling as torn up as she sounded when she'd talked to him.—Of course she hadn't *talked*, but neither Jay nor Kate ever entertained the notion that they had made up that conversation. It had been too real, too *there*.

*It was almost more real than talking*, Jay thought to himself. It was as though, along with the words

her mind was forming, he could also sense her thoughts, her feelings, and all the unspoken emotions that carefully avoid finding their way into everyday conversation.

They locked eyes as the plane plummeted from the sky. The landing was less graceful than they were used to, and even the travel-hardy soldiers on board shouted a chorus of boos and jeers for the somewhat less than competent pilot, who didn't deign to respond.

When they finally screeched to a stop, all the able-bodied men jumped up and bolted out of the plane, glad to get their feet on firm ground. The captives weren't going anywhere on their own, and there was obviously no rush to let them out.

Left alone in the plane, the inmates started to air out their swear words, something they'd obviously missed doing during the closely monitored trip thus far.

"Where are we?" one man called.

"Some God-forsaken island in the middle of nowhere probably," laughed another. "Bet they're gonna dig a big pit and bury us all alive in it."

"Good thing they left us blankets to keep warm under the ground," another returned scornfully. Everyone laughed.

"Hey Sweetheart, what are you in here with this crowd of tough guys for?" someone called over to Kate.

"Yeah, pretty lady, you here for morale or something?" Craig took up the torch of Kate's persecution. "'Cause I want you to know that if I wasn't so badly tied up I'd be right by your side every moment."

"Shut up, skull-head," said the bald character, and then he turned to Kate. "They call me Ringo. What's your name?"

"I'm Kate," she said, somewhat nervously looking around and drawing strength from Jay's com-

passionate look. She was the only female on the plane.

“Well, Kate, what brings you to these parts? You must be an awful dangerous criminal to be part of this special assignment.”

“She’s very dangerous,” Jay said quickly, when it didn’t seem that Kate was quite up to the close scrutiny of these baser sorts.

Ringo turned his attention to the dark, curly-haired young man opposite him. “And just what makes you her spokesperson? You two know each other?”

“Yeah, you could say that,” Jay countered. “We’re both in here for the same crime.”

“And what’s that, pretty boy?” Craig asked.

“We’re revolutionaries,” Jay grinned. “Anti-government, counterculture, to hell with the System, call it what you like. It’s the way to go!”

Ringo looked mildly impressed, or at least as much as was possible for an impassive character such as himself. “You reject the global creed and all that?” he asked.

“You bet,” Jay replied. “Reject and send it packing with a kick in the pants.”

Craig seemed at a loss for words. “They wouldn’t even *let* me get registered,” he murmured, his lower lip quivering like someone had just popped a pin into one of his tires. “I would have done it, but they wouldn’t have me. Said I was white trash, never gave me a chance. And now here I am, I’m gonna die. Gonna end up in some big mass grave with the likes of you revolutionaries who chose to be here willingly. I never was meant for this, I wasn’t. Was born for greater things, my mamma always said.”

“Shut up, skull-head,” Ringo said curtly. “We’ve had enough of your blubbing.”

“It’s okay,” Kate spoke up quietly. “We’re all scared. But you don’t have to be.”

All heads turned to look at Kate, as much because

it was the first time she had spoken as because she had chosen to make her opening by defying Ringo, who appeared to have enthroned himself as the appointed lord and heir over the little gathering.

Ringo just grinned a little, apparently not threatened by Kate’s mild remark. “So she talks,” he said with a chuckle. “Perhaps you’d like to tell my friend numb-skull here why he shouldn’t be afraid.”

Kate smiled. “Thank you, Ringo, I think I will. I won’t lie to you—I’m just as scared as the rest of you. But deep down, I know that everything’s gonna work out okay, because I believe in a power bigger than myself, and I know that He’s the One Who led me here and Who’s gonna guide me through this, whatever happens.”

“She’s talking about God, ain’t she?” said one shrimpy man towards the back of the plane. “Ain’t she talkin’ ’bout God? Thought you couldn’t talk ’bout God no more.”

“Yes, I’m talking about God,” Kate continued, glowing at the chance to bring some good out of the mess she’d gotten herself into. “I’m talking about God, I’m talking about Jesus, I’m talking about angels and spirits and ghosts of all the Christmases that have ever passed or that will ever come. This room is full of angels and spirits right now.”

A couple of the men guffawed, and even Ringo, hard as he tried to maintain his composure, let out a smirk. “You see angels ’round here, girl?” he asked.

“No,” Kate said with a smile. “I don’t see them. But I know they’re here. And maybe if you want to see them, you can. Each one of us has an angel who’s sent to guard us and keep us through our life. But most importantly, Jesus is always watching over us, waiting, wanting us to just come to Him and see how much He loves us. And all you’ve got to do is ask for Him, and He’ll fish you out of whatever mess you’re in.”

“You mean if I ask Jesus He’ll get me out of here

and let me get registered so I can get a job an' be respectable?" Craig asked eagerly.

"Jesus can't always rescue you from your circumstances," Jay said, avoiding the last part of Craig's question, "but the important thing is He'll be with you through them, no matter what happens to you."

"Hell, it's hot in here. What, they leaving us to cook or somethin'?" one man bellowed. Lifting his hands above his head he started pounding furiously on the side of the plane. "Hello out there! Anyone left alive? Remember us?"

Kate brushed aside the distraction, intent on finishing her point in whatever short amount of time she had left. "You can take Jesus right now—anytime. Any one of you." She looked sheepishly from one to the other. "I know you're probably not gonna want to do it right now, but all you've gotta do is ask Him. Just ask Jesus, tell Him you want Him.—Say it anytime, and He's there. Anytime. Okay?"

Ringo didn't say anything, and before anyone else could answer the sound of voices started coming closer, and everyone craned their necks towards the plane's opening.

"Wherever we are it's not Siberia," someone said. "More like..."

At that moment the plane's door was pried open, and a troop of soldiers piled in. They had all peeled down to their tank tops, but still their bodies were nearly drenched with sweat.

"Welcome to the Sahara, people!—The desert of death!"

The soldiers busied themselves with unlatching and re-chaining the prisoners, while the officer continued.

"Now don't even think about escaping, because you should know that there's nowhere to go. Absolutely nowhere, you understand me? For those

of you who are wondering what's going on—don't worry. You won't have to wait long." He laughed cruelly. "Although once you know, I daresay you'll wish you didn't."

The soldiers all laughed, and one of them called out, grabbing Kate's hair. "Hey officer, what do we do with this one? I could keep an eye on her myself!"

"Stand down, private!" the officer hissed. "I'll have none of that. You all stay clear of that female. She's very dangerous. She's part of a group that has heaped loads of casualties on us, so keep your distance."

"Maybe we should give her a little bit of a return dose, like some payback time, huh?"

"You'll do nothing of the sort," the officer returned acidly. "I have strict orders. No one is to go near her." He turned to look at Jay. "Or him. Is that clear? Not a soul, or you'll deal with me. They get the solitary tents, and don't leave 'em unguarded at any time, is that understood? I want a double watch on them at all times."

"Yes, sir!" the men chorused.

Jay and Kate looked helplessly at each other as they joined the rank and file in going off the plane.

"You were serious about that revolutionary shit, weren't you?" Craig whispered as Kate passed in front of him.

She nodded silently, but one of the soldiers noticed and smashed his rifle between Craig's shoulder blades. "I said silence, convict!" he yelled. "Do you hear me when I talk? Or do you want me to say it to you in some other language you speak more clearly?"

Craig didn't say anything. After years in and out of prison, he knew better.

The procession moved on in silence.

Jay looked around him. As far as he could make out there was nothing but desert sand, stretching out into oblivion in every direction. Straight ahead, though, some sort of tent city had been erected. Jay

could count at least 15 huge army tents that were right in sight, with probably more out of sight behind the others. Sandwiched here and there amongst the larger ones were an assortment of smaller tents. Jay supposed that a couple of those were planned for him and Kate.

*Too bad, he mused. They could at least have put us together—given us one last night!*

The heat was almost unbearable, and everyone was glad when they arrived at the tent area, where there were at least patches of shade as they made their way through to their destination.

“Home, sweet home.” The officer kicked open the entrance to one of the tents, and shoved Kate towards it. Kate barely kept her balance and, clutching her cloth bag, stumbled inside the tiny tent.

“See you at sunrise,” the officer called. “Now keep it moving, all of you.”

Kate fixed her eyes on Jay’s face as he passed by, and then he was gone. The sound of a strongly reinforced outside zipper closing, and some sort of padlock securing it, sealed her desert prison. She dropped onto the provided mat and burst into tears.

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## TEA WITH ASHTON

“Is this where we’re supposed to meet him?” Stuart whispered.

“Yes,” Kim said. “Let’s keep walking. He can’t be far.”

“At least you know what this guy looks like—that’s a better start than our dearest daisy friend.”

“Well, I only met him once, and that was years ago. I haven’t got the greatest memory, you might remember.” She stopped suddenly, and grabbed Stuart’s hand in excitement. “There he is! That’s him!”

Stuart turned to look at the short, balding man who stood a hundred feet or so away from them. His bristling moustache jutted out of his front lip like a homegrown comb. Thick sunglasses hid his eyes, and he was dressed in the quaint fashion of the mid-1950s.

“Here goes then,” Stuart said. “Good thing we got the okay from up There this time. I feel a lot safer than you must have felt venturing out into the unknown, so to speak.”

“Don’t rub it in, Stuart.” Kim frowned at him. “Come on, let’s go.”

They sauntered over to the older man. They made as though to pass him, then Kim paused thoughtfully, and looked over at him. “Professor?” she whispered

softly, questioning him with her eyes.

The man quickly pulled off his sunglasses. “Jeremiah?” he said, looking up at Stuart.

Stuart looked surprised. “I’m Jeremiah,” Kim confessed. “Sorry. I always loved that name.”

The Professor looked a bit befuddled, then seemed to resolve to take it all in stride. “Right, well,” he said. He had a notable British accent. “Let’s be off. We don’t want to stand around in the sun too long. Never know who could be watching us. I’ll lead off ahead—you keep close enough behind to not lose sight of me.”

“Sounds great,” Kim replied. “It’s so nice to meet you again!”

The Professor looked at her with a puzzled look. Then he smiled. “Yes, we have met, haven’t we? I hadn’t remembered right off. Was years ago—you were a little thing then. But look at you now ... and Jeremiah too! I really had no idea...”

“I know, you envisioned some wise old Bible scholar, didn’t you?” Kim grinned.

“Well, either that or at least some aging computer buff. You really do know the stuff, don’t you?”

Kim smiled. “I like to think I do,” she said.

The Professor returned the smile, and then nodded as if to bid them goodbye. “I’ll see you then,” he said, and began moving down the street.

Stuart and Kim stayed a few more moments, talking together but being careful not to let the Professor out of their sight. Then they moved off in the same direction he’d gone.

The street he’d chosen was fairly populated, even at this hour of the mid-morning. Stuart had no trouble keeping sight of him, but there were enough people around that their connection to each other was not terribly obvious.

At last he turned into a smaller, narrow alleyway, which for all it lacked in size seemed to make up in class. Contrary to the unwritten law of conduct that

seems to limit alleyways to holding mostly slums and habitations for the dregs of society, this seemed to be some sort of resting place for the well-off. Into a small, dim coffee shop the Professor vanished, and after loitering out in the street some minutes more, Stuart and Kim finally followed him.

He was seated in the very back, barely visible in a partially enclosed booth.

“I’ve ordered drinks for us already,” he said with a smile, as they approached. “It’s best to keep our contact with the staff here to a minimum. The drinks are on me, of course.”

Stuart and Kim smiled in appreciation.

“This is a favorite retreat of mine—away from the bustle of the big city and all its modernizations, but still respectable enough to accommodate my style.”

A frizzy-haired waitress came by with a tray of drinks, and deposited them on the table. She seemed to be making a point not to look at any of their faces, and scurried off as quickly as she’d come.

Kim looked questioningly at the Professor.

“This place is unofficially a stomping ground for some of the higher-ups of the less-than-desirables,” he said, then laughed at how strange that sounded. “Let’s just say they get an exclusive clientele here, who generally wouldn’t want to be identified.” He pulled a cigar from a gilded case in his breast coat pocket, lit it and motioned around the room with it, before putting it in his mouth. “That’s the reason for the Saturday night lighting and the cozy little compartments. It’s all been thought out, you see. They don’t check your registration, either—though they know I’m registered. That’s the way it goes. You strike a deal of some sort with them, and they give you a certain amount of units on credit from their own registration codes. It’s a real don’t-ask-don’t-tell kind of place.”

“It seems quite ideal,” Kim agreed.

“Yes.” The Professor took another puff of his cigar. “Don’t know how much longer it’ll be safe to come here though. I’ve got my human eyes and ears keeping me informed of life on the streets, and the way the government seems to be headed—and this whole system is sweeping through the city like the plague of the twenty-first century.” He shrugged as if he was hesitant to voice any more opinions along this line, even as safe as he felt in this refuge of sorts. He turned his attention back to his two companions.

“So what can I do for you two delightful people?”

“To be honest with you right from the start,” Kim began hesitantly, after looking to Stuart, who smiled supportingly, “we’ve been having a bit of trouble with the law ourselves. Our refuge home got busted recently, and we’re on the lam. We’re looking for a place to lie low...”

“Not just we two, actually,” Stuart added quickly. “We’ve got two kids, and there are three other friends of ours who are also homeless.”

“We do have a camper, but we need someplace to drop out of sight for a little while. If you even had some place where we could park for a few days, till the frenzy dies down and we can make our way to greener pastures—or find out where it is that the Lord wants us. He seems to have indicated we stay around here for now, but we’re just hard up for a landing strip.”

The Professor twisted his cigar into the gray marble ashtray, then ran his hand thoughtfully through his bristly moustache. “A place for you to stay...,” he mused. Then he looked up, his face breaking into a giant smile which seemed to transform his entire countenance from something that looked like a relic left over from the last century into a face that was beautiful and alive—even young-looking.

“You have a beautiful smile, Professor,” Kim said, reaching over the table to squeeze his hand.

“Please,” the man smiled again. “Call me Ashton. And you are—?”

“Kim,” she said, “and this is my husband Stuart.”

“It is nice to meet you two,” he sighed. “It’s been hard for me these last few years since things have been increasingly tightening up. Hardly a day goes by but that I regret that rash decision I made to take on this infernal registration. My only consolation is that I can be of help to you and your friends—it makes me feel that perhaps my life has not been useless, or that maybe I will be less harshly judged on account of any kindness I can bestow.” He looked up, and his face looked worried and heavily creased. “Stuart, Kim, I would be more than happy to help you. You can all come and stay with me. I think we can arrange it so that no one will suspect. I have a perfect plan.”

Stuart suddenly froze, and grabbed Kim’s hand. “Look over there!” he whispered.

The three half-turned their faces in the direction of the television, which was nearly out of their sight. “I just thought I saw Kate on that screen—is that possible?”

“The first troop shipments were deployed yesterday, and are now settling in for their long night, awaiting their own combat duty in the morning.” The young owl-faced reporter obviously held no small relish for the story he was reporting. “These will be the first to try out the controversial new battle deployment technique unveiled by our great leader earlier on this week.”

The scene cut to an animated diagram of a map, with several highlighted points with glowing red button-marks. The owlish narrator continued: “The minesweeping battalion will push westward, and optimistically hope to cover at least a mile a day. At this rate it will be slow progress, but army officials assure us that it will leave in its wake a sure and safe path for the invading army to follow.”

Stuart and Kim looked at each other, puzzled.

“There have been relative amounts of protest over what some feel amounts to a gross human rights violation in using convicts for this task.” The screen cut to a clip of a half-dozen or so bedraggled-looking college students, who looked like they had been deprived of several years’ worth of breakfasts. They were waving ragged placards with various human rights slogans, and looked thoroughly uninspired with their job and the tuneless ditty they were chanting.

“Looks to me like they’re just waiting to get paid so they can get out of there,” Ashton laughed under his breath.

“Yeah, I’ll say,” Stuart said. “They’ve always gotta have a few token stooges take up screen time to convince the masses they have freedom of speech.”

“You’d think they could find better actors for the part though,” Kim frowned. “But what is this thing they’re talking about—minesweeping?”

Ashton shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure, but I think they want to send a full-scale army south into the rebel territories, and the only way through is the desert. But the rebel forces have rigged it with thousands of mines—a whole new breed of mines apparently, and quite undetectable to the regular sensors that take care of the clear-and-disarm. So I guess the government determined that with the full scale return of the death penalty for even the remotest acts of treason, the cheapest and quickest way to get rid of traitors is to put them to good use, so to speak.”

Kim shuddered. “Sounds like a horrible way to die—and knowing what’s coming too!”

“Why don’t they just attack by air?” Stuart asked.

“Well they have,” Ashton replied, “and they’ve made some dents, but not nearly as much as they would like. At this point it seems like the rebels can hole up indefinitely. The only way they can really overrun them as thoroughly as they’d need to is to move in

with ground troops.”

Kim suddenly turned to Stuart. “Did you say you saw Kate on that screen?” she asked.

“I’m sure I was mistaken,” Stuart said. “She couldn’t be over there.”

“I hope not,” Kim said. “Wasn’t she going after Jay?”

Without another word, the three friends dropped their eyes to the table, their thoughts engulfed in heavenly petition, on the chance that their friend so far away might be in desperate need of them right at that moment.



The sound of a loud foghorn and an incessant loud barking woke Kate from her fitful sleep. Just as she rolled off her mat, the front of her thick tent was jabbed with something dull and heavy. A loud voice came barreling through the thin walls: “Be ready to move out at 0600 hours, sharp!”

Kate ran her hands through her tousled hair, and rubbed her eyes. What would this day have in store for her? She had no idea what was to become of her, but the promised peace had not left her. She felt enveloped in its warm embrace. *If I am going to my death, she thought, then let it be like this—with this glow inside of me. I could die like this a thousand times over!*

She threw herself back on the mat and traced her finger along the walls of the tent around her. It seemed like any other tent material, but Kate could see that it had been reinforced with some thick fibroplastic matter, in order to make any kind of departure impossible from within. It also seemed to have an insulating quality against the harsh desert elements of both night and day. But for the securely zippered door, the entire tent seemed to be crafted out of a single and seamless stretch of material that formed not only the walls around her, but the floor and ceiling

as well.

*The perfect desert prison*, she smiled to herself. *And the perfect nightmare for anybody with claustrophobic tendencies.* She seemed a bit surprised that she could still smile, still find humor in the strangeness of her situation. *If I get out of here alive, I'll sure have a tale to tell my grandkids!* And then the thought of herself as a grandmother with a couple of little tykes on her lap seemed so hilariously far removed from the absurdness of her reality that she burst out in a quiet little laugh.

"Thank You, Lord," she whispered, drawing her hands together on her chest and closing her eyes again. "Thank You for that strange peace You give, that brings with it an ability to see the good in the worst of situations, and to believe that no matter what is to come, You are there too."

Kate wondered what time it might be. Her watch had not been returned to her since she had been stripped upon entering her first prison cell. "Seems a bit pointless to give somebody notice of departure time when they have no way to tell time themselves," she said aloud. And somehow, that also seemed funny, and Kate indulged in another small moment of laughter.

All this comic relief improved her spirits dramatically, and by the time the gruff guard came around to let her out, Kate felt as though she'd eaten a four-course meal. Her communion time earlier that morning had left her spirit rich and full, and she felt as though her normally puny and self-conscious spirit had been entirely cast aside, and that some new Wonder Woman hybrid now walked within her skin.

Straightening her neon jumpsuit and fluffing out her well-matted hair, Kate crawled out through the opening. She blinked at the early morning sun, which hung low and bright on the eastern horizon. She held out her hands as the guards fastened the shackles

onto them, then moved down to her ankles.

The heaviness of the chains cramped her Wonder Woman style a little, but her spirit still soared. She followed the guards as they picked up a few other prisoners from solitary tents, and then made their way towards a great, teeming orange mass on the far side of the tent city.

There seemed to be several thousand prisoners, if not more, all blending together into one iridescent hulk, and standing before a small makeshift wooden platform, whereon stood a couple of high-ranking army officers.

Kate sighed in relief as she saw Jay coming out of the last little tent they stopped at before joining the throng. She slowed her pace and slipped in alongside him as he joined the line. Reaching out her hands, she grabbed his brown ones and squeezed with all her might.

"I'm glad we're together in this," she whispered. "I couldn't have done it on my own."

"You wouldn't have," Jay whispered back, with a twinkling smile. "You came for me, remember?"

Kate laughed. "You've got them too, huh?" she asked.

"Got what?"

"The giggles. I've been cracking myself up all morning over the stupidest things. You'd think I'd be bawling my eyes out or something. Is this what your books call 'dying grace'?"

"Could be." Jay kept his head low to keep the guards from noticing their conversation. "Either that or it's the calm before the storm—or maybe it's an assurance that we don't have much to worry about. I guess I'd rather prepare to die and be surprised than the other way around though."

"The Kate I know and love wouldn't have agreed with you," Kate grinned, "but my new split personality that I've discovered today is on your side all the way."



The line slowed as they merged into the crowd. A loudspeaker squeaked some feedback.

“Kate.” Jay turned around and brought their two shackled hands together, lifting them up towards her face. “There’s no one I would rather be stuck in the desert with than you, and I mean it.”

Kate blushed and tried to think of something to say, but couldn’t. “Aw Jay,” she finally stammered.

The tender moment was interrupted by the ranking officer, who finally got his act together on the loudspeaker in front of them. The microphone’s operational capacity had apparently not deigned to join them on that day, so he had been handed an old dusty megaphone, and it was from this that he bellowed out with all his might. As it was, Jay and Kate—being near the back of the crowd—could hardly hear him. They strained and gave their full attention to this important moment.

“This is it!” the man’s voice ebbed over the muttering crowd. “This is the moment you’ve been waiting for. You—the scum of society, the dregs of humanity—you who have railed against humanity’s progress in this ultimate enlightened age, who have scorned the one that brought it all to pass—you who have wasted your lives in pursuit of your own dreams ... today, as a token of his great mercy, our world leader has decided to give you the freedom you have so eagerly sought.”

Jay and Kate looked at each other, eyes widening.

“This desert that you see before you marks the road to that freedom. It is a wide road, and...”—the speaker faltered for a minute, hesitating as he searched for his next words—“and one filled with dangers. But those of you who can survive will live to find your freedom—and those who do not, well, let’s just say if you’re one of those lucky fools who believe in a better afterlife, you’ll finally get your chance to find it.”

The man dropped the megaphone on the side of the stage and jumped down. The speech was over. Immediately the crowd exploded in a barrage of questions and murmuring. Each person was mostly trying to figure out what was going on. Apparently the leadership was anxious not to give out too much information ahead of time. One thing, however, was clear—whatever was the reason that they were being herded towards that stretch of desert sand, it could not be a good one.

“Move forward by groups,” an officer on the left side of the crowd called out. “Passengers of flight 101, move forward now.”

Many of the convicts at the front of the crowd moved over in the officer’s direction, shuffling slowly in their foot and leg irons, until a large group had gathered.

“All right, form yourselves into a row.”

The men and women, their eyes filled with questioning glances, scuffled into a single-file line, as a dozen soldiers ran up and down the line, pushing and prodding them so that they were as close together as physically possible.

“Now remember this,” the officer called again, “move as a team—band together. That’s the key—stay close together. That’s the best way to survive.”

It was a strange sight to behold. A line nearly half-a-mile long stood waiting, as if a race was about to begin, but nobody moved. Half paralyzed with fear they stood, trembling like leaves, but powerless to change their fate. A gun went off. It was the starting signal.

Jay and Kate watched in riveted horror. Not one of the prisoners moved.

“Move forward, Goddamn you!” one of the officers shouted.

A group of soldiers came running up from behind, each holding a couple of attack dogs on a taut leash.

The soldiers hurried towards the quivering line. The men, seeing the ravening animals approach, frantically began to shuffle forward. The soldiers positioned their dogs by the starting line. There was no turning back.

The men had not gone more than fifty feet inside the perimeter when an explosion rocked the ground. The first mine exploded, amidst gasps of horror from the other prisoners. The line panicked, and as each prisoner shuffled where he could, several more explosions were heard. But the screams of terror and moans of death coming from the first line of prisoners were already drowned out by the shouts of protest and panic among those still waiting to be sent on their own way to so-called freedom.

Several of the waiting prisoners now attempted to break rank, shuffling wildly out into the open desert as fast as their shackles would allow, in the opposite direction of the horror that was taking place. They didn't get far. A few gunshots and released dogs later, the remaining crowd of waiting prisoners huddled fearfully in a group, hoping that somehow, they would be spared the horrible fate of those before them.

The first line of prisoners had now completely scattered themselves across the desert before them, though they had stopped moving, as if debating amongst themselves what to do.

"Move!" an officer bellowed on loudspeakers. "This is your only path to freedom!" This was followed by several more gunshots. A few more prisoners among those in the first line fell, their bodies joining the sands littered with ripped pieces of jumpsuit and severed body parts. The prisoners instantly began shuffling again, but several of them, rather than heading forward, began to turn back towards the main body of prisoners, and away from the fields of death that lay before them. They had scarcely gotten far when they, too, were machine-gunned down by soldiers

waiting with glee for their chance to do so.

Kate turned away, her eyes filled with tears. "This is horrible," she wept, burying her face in Jay's chest. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

Jay shook his head. "I don't think so," he whispered.

Explosion after explosion shook the ground, and still the prisoners scurried on, each holding to the only—be it ever so faint—hope of their survival: moving forward. Not fifteen minutes had passed and little more than half of the prisoners of the first line remained standing. Some of the men had stopped, afraid to move another inch forward or back. Many were now crouching down, or digging themselves into the sand, hoping this strategy would protect them from the bullets that had caught the others who hadn't moved.

"Let's send the dogs after them," a soldier lustily called.

"Don't!" bellowed their officer. "They'll be blown to bits! They're expensive animals."

The irony of the situation sent Kate into a fresh round of weeping.

"All right then, get the next sweep ready. They'll do a second check and if all is clear we can move the perimeter up and then they'll have to go forward. We'll bring the dogs to them." The officer smiled a slow, cruel smile that brought a shudder even to Jay's seasoned spirit.



Back in the secluded coffee shop, Kim's eyes met Stuart's. They had little more information about their absent friend than before their long, intercessory silence, but at least now they knew that wherever she was, whatever fate was befalling her, she was in the safekeeping of the Almighty God.

"Very well then." Ashton leaned forward and rubbed his hands together thoughtfully. "Where do

we go from here? I don't want to settle down—anywhere is dangerous if you stay too long.”

“Yes, you're right,” Stuart agreed. He looked at his watch. “We've set a tentative meeting time with our team in about twenty minutes. If you can think of some rendezvous point we could drive to, then we could go out separately to further allay suspicion.”

“Excellent idea,” Ashton said, nodding. Lowering his voice still further, he launched into a discreet description of times and places, while Kim and Stuart listened attentively, nodding every so often.

Presently Ashton stood up, nodded curtly to them and moved towards the automated cashier.

Stuart and Kim rose discreetly from their seats and walked out the front door, back into the alleyway.

As they stepped back onto the street, Kim leaned her head back, soaking in the warm mid-morning sun. “Feels nice to be outside again,” she said. “But city air sure is dull compared to the mountain.”

“Yeah, you've been living in paradise for the last two years, haven't you?” Stuart grinned.

“Paradise in most ways,” Kim smiled coyly, “except for one, that is—one very important one.”

“Well there's no more fear on that account, my love,” Stuart said, spinning around and circling her with his arms. “This part of paradise is stuck on you for eternity.”

Kim just smiled, throwing her arms up around his neck and burying his lips in hers.

A loud honk snapped them out of their reverie. Plunged into instant alertness, they spun around, only to laugh with relief. It was the camper. The two dashed over and dove into the door, which was shoved open as they came up.

“Caught you two smooching in public,” Alana chided as they piled through the tiny opening.

“Mommy!” Maya called, as the two kids dove off the bed and landed squarely on top of their mother.

Kim crumpled under the weight, laughing and hugging and kissing them all at once.

“Isn't this the tearful reunion,” Alana said. “Reunited at last—after a grand total of what, forty minutes?”

“What brought you guys here?” Stuart asked. “Meeting time wasn't till ten.”

“On our way to the meeting point,” Julian said. “We were passing on the other side of the street when we caught sight of you. Darn good thing you stopped to smooch, actually, or you'd probably have missed us altogether.”

Kim looked at Stuart and grinned. “The Lord works in mysterious ways!” she smiled.

- 11 -

**MINESWEEPERS**

The late afternoon sun cast crimson shadows over the desert sands, lending an air of surrealism to the horrifying spectacle that had been going on all day. Jay and Kate had shrunk as far back within the crowd as they could, and had occupied themselves with a barrage of quiet Scripture-quoting. Kate was not nearly as versed in this area as Jay—her entire spiritual repertoire consisted of “Hail Mary” and the Lord’s Prayer, which she was fairly certain ended with “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, amen.” For this reason, she was largely content to sit with her eyes closed and her ear pressed against his lips, while he repeated over and over as many words of comfort as he could find coming back to his mind. Somehow it helped to drown out the terrified screams of the dying men not far off, and helped to bring a slender wisp of peace into the hellish atmosphere.

The convicts around them, without this grasp on sanity, seemed to be going mad before their own eyes. Jay suddenly stopped talking and looked around them. Their numbers had shrunk so that there were under five hundred of them left. Most were sitting on the desert sand in dejected heaps. Many had their hands over their ears—some had filled their ears with

sand in a desperate and madness-driven attempt to ward off the sounds that reminded them of their fate soon to come. It was obvious that the chance of anyone making it out alive was too small to count on, yet they had little choice but to try anyway. The few whose mental faculties had not taken leave of them waited patiently, hoping or praying for the best, while the others either talked frantically among themselves, spinning hopeless plans of escape, or losing themselves to the delirium of the hot desert sun.

The guards were not paying much attention to the prisoners, caught up as they were in the spectacle happening beyond the perimeter. There were a good two hundred of them on guard, but they were content to keep a lazy eye on things and pretty much left the convicts to do what they wanted with their final hours.

The prisoners had not been given any food all day, but somehow it didn't seem to matter. No one would have been able to keep any food down even if they had had some. A huge barrel of foul-smelling water sat on the far side of the circle of captivity, next to which were placed several old ladles and a bucket of used cups. Loathe at the thought of drinking the odious substance from the sickening-looking vessels, Jay and Kate drank only enough to keep themselves alive.—And even that seemed a doubtful prospect at this point.

"We've got to do something for these guys," Jay whispered to Kate.

Kate looked up at him. Her eyes were so red from crying that they stood out in her face like two open wounds. She had not one tear left inside of her, and desperation had driven her to bravery. "What can we possibly do?" she whispered back.

"I don't know, but we've got to help them," Jay said. "We must be here for a reason—and if we're going to die, we may as well go down fighting. Give the Enemy something back in his face. If we can win

back a few more of his captives, I'll be happy."

Kate nodded, although the thought of comforting anyone at this point seemed beyond her. She was glad for Jay's strength, and was content to follow in his wake.

Jay stood up casually, and shuffled over—ever so slowly, for his ankles were already swollen from the leg irons—to where Ringo stood. He had been standing in that position for over an hour, gazing off towards the boundary line without moving a muscle.

"Hey, man," Jay said as he approached.

Ringo turned his head slowly in Jay's direction. "Hey yourself," he said. "Guess we're gonna be up soon."

Jay brushed the observation aside, focusing his attention fully on the mission he was determined to see through while he still could. "You know what Kate was talking about on the plane?" he asked.

"Kate?" Ringo said. "Oh, your girl. Yeah, her angel shit. What of it?"

"It's true," Jay said. "Everything she said is true, and I just wanted to tell you that. Because we're stuck in this hell on earth, and things are gonna get a lot worse before they've got any chance of getting better. But they *can* get better—Jesus is the answer."

Ringo shrugged. "I don't know, man. I'm not the superstitious sort. I like to keep to myself and leave God to His Own business, you know? I appreciate the effort and all, but it's just not my style."

"You'd rather face *that* alone?" Jay gestured towards the boundary line.

Just then a head popped up. Craig had been sprawled out behind Ringo, and had apparently heard the whole conversation. "I-I'll do that," he said, his great blubbery eyes watering a little. "I'll admit it to you, man, I'm scared. I'm scared shitless. I've never been this scared in my freaking life. I don't want to die and I certainly don't want to die by stepping on a

landmine. Any medicine you've got, I'll take it."

"Yeah, take him," Ringo grinned—as much of a grin as was possible under the strained circumstances. "He's the praying type."

Jay acknowledged Ringo's reservations and moved over to sit down next to Craig, who was now bawling unashamedly.

"I'll pray," he wept. "I'll meditate. I'll sit in the lotus position and stand on my head. I'll offer incense to Ra. Just tell me what to do, man, I'll do it. I just need some peace..." He trailed off miserably.

"Hey, it's okay," Jay said. "Pull yourself together. Jesus is here with us right now..."

Kate looked over from where she still sat, immobile, and felt ashamed of herself. Struggling to get to her feet, she limped over to where Jay sat with Craig. Craig looked up at her and smiled. His eyes were still watery, but even she could see the difference. He looked somehow more together than he had been a moment earlier. "I guess whatever happens it'll be okay in the end," he said with a sad smile. "Jesus is here with me?"

"Yeah, you bet," Jay reassured him.

"Jay, I'll stay here with him," Kate said. "You go and talk to some of the others. There's so many that need help."

Jay nodded and stood up, and Kate took his place at Craig's side. "Let me tell you about Jesus, about His life and some of the things He said," she said, placing her hands on his fat ones. "I don't know near as much as Jay does, but I'll tell you everything I know."



It seemed like no time at all had passed before Jay and Kate heard the dreaded announced. "Flight 802, report to the perimeter."

Although Jay and Kate had come with their special band of convicts, they had been previously informed

that their flight was to be considered part of battalion 802, and therefore they knew that their time really had come.

Craig was starting to blubber again, and Kate's insides felt paralyzed with fear. "Come on, big guy," she said mechanically, reaching her hands over to pull him up. "Let's go together."

"I know I shouldn't be scared any more, what with this whole Jesus deal and all," he sobbed, "but I just can't help it. I've been so bad, oh, if my momma could see me now! She'd be so ashamed!"

"Your mama would be proud of you," Jay said, coming up behind the two. "We're on our way to a better place. Take heart!"

Kate sighed deeply at the relief of having Jay nearby again, and she nestled up as close to him as she could.

"Move on forward, people! Form yourselves into a straight line. You know the drill—you've been watching all day."

In the distance Jay could see a plane landing, and another one circling low above the ground, waiting to land. "How many prisoners do you have to massacre like this?" he asked aloud.

Kate jumped, and even Ringo opened his eyes wide.

The burly commander froze at the audacious words, but when he turned around, there was a superior twinkle in his hardened eyes. "More than you could know, my pretty little boy," he said. "As many as we need to do the job."

The perimeter had moved a good distance from where they had started off that morning, and as the newly arriving crews had been put straight to work cleaning up the debris, the ground on which they stood seemed frighteningly ordinary. The only thing that gave credence to the atrocities which were being committed within it was its scarred surface, which was as pockmarked as the lunar landscape—and in

each crater had been sacrificed some life ... just like the ones who were now to set out upon it.

Kate steeled her mind and tried not to think about what was coming. *Oh God!* she prayed desperately. *Oh Jesus, just be near me! Be near each of us as we walk through this valley of horrible shadow.* The sun was now sinking low behind the horizon, and twilight was starting to fall. Flight 802 would be the last ones to march today, and those who survived the first run would likely be culled back and put out again tomorrow for a fresh try at their fate.

The loud sound of the gun burst through their thoughts. It was starting time. Slowly, gingerly, the unbroken line of men and women moved forward into the mined territory. They moved as slowly as they could, for the nearest ground was obviously the safest. This particular area had been covered at least three or four times, for each time someone seemed to step where another had missed.

Kate found that the best method she could employ was to keep her eyes straight upon the horizon. Every now and then her feet would hit upon something firm and large, and she would instinctively leap over it. She couldn't bear the thought of looking down. It was too horrible.

She looked over at Craig. His eyes were filled with tears. "Keep looking up," she whispered. "You won't make it if you look at ... them."

Then it happened. The first explosion was always the hardest. It was someone way at the end of the line, but the convicts stood so closely together that the domino effect sent them all reeling. Jay was thrown onto Kate and tried to steady her at the same time. She locked her eyes into his.

"It's okay," he said. "It's gonna be all right. The Lord's gonna see us through this, I know He is. He didn't bring us here to die!"

"He didn't?" Kate asked hesitantly.

"No," Jay said firmly. "I'm sure He's got some plan—we've just got to keep going."

Kate nodded, and tried to suppress the great lump she felt rising in her throat. "Keep going," she said. "Yes, we've got to keep going."

The further they walked, the slower the pace seemed, but the perimeter had moved up behind them and the dogs were nipping at their heels from the safety of the much-covered ground. The next few steps the line took brought off another four explosions. Another few paces. Another two mines. And so it went. After another ten minutes or so, they had hardly moved fifty feet from their original starting point, but less than half of their group was left.

Kate was still holding Craig's hand. Jay could see that Ringo, his face still hard and set, was a couple men down. He nodded curtly at Jay, but Jay could see the wild desperation in his eyes. "Jesus, bring him to know You! Don't let him die without that knowledge!" he whispered.

Another step. All of a sudden, Craig grabbed Kate's hand in a vice-like grip. She turned to him, her foot frozen in midair. "What is it?" she whispered.

Craig's eyes were wide, and filled with a glory that Kate had never seen before. His face was radiant, as though he was basking in the reflection of a light source invisible to the rest of them. "I see them!" he said exultantly. "Those angels you told me about—I ... I can see them." Before he even finished speaking, a nearby explosion rocked the ground beneath them. Craig, Kate and Jay were thrown violently to the ground.

Shaken, Jay stood up. "Kate! Kate?" he said, leaning over to touch her arm. "Kate, are you all right?"

Kate opened her eyes, sat up, and then pressed her hands to her head to relieve the pressure that still lingered in her ears from the deafening sound of

the explosion. “Yeah—yeah, I’m fine!” she finally said, breaking into a relieved smile. But it quickly vanished. “Oh my God—Craig!” She turned to see where Craig lay, a short distance behind her.

Not daring to look, Kate stood frozen to the ground as Jay ran and turned Craig’s limp body over to reveal a pool of blood sinking into the desert sand beneath him. A large piece of shrapnel had imbedded itself into his neck. He was gone.

“Oh my God! No!” Kate screamed, burying her face in her hands as she burst into tears. Slowly Jay stood back up, and walked back over to Kate. “At least he went quickly,” he said at last, with a sigh, “which is more than can be said for all of these poor souls.”

For a moment they just stared out at the ghastly scene before them. The desert plain was covered in dead and dying bodies, and the moans and cries of those who were not yet dead hung over the field of death. All around them the sand looked more red than yellow, and over everything was a fine layer of shredded orange cloth. There were only twenty or so members of Flight 802 left, and no one seemed anxious to go anywhere. It would be a while before the perimeter was moved up, since the ground they were on was on a first-time sweep.

Jay turned around and looked back at the cluster of flint-faced soldiers. One of them picked up a megaphone. “Come on back!” he yelled. “It’s quits for tonight. We’ll do another round in the morning.”

“How can they be so heartless?” Kate whispered. Her face was burning with rage, and she screamed out, “How can you be so heartless? Is this all some big game to you?”

The soldiers just laughed, but Jay could feel the underlying tension. “A lot of them are just like us,” he whispered in Kate’s ear. “Just trying to survive in the task they’ve been assigned to do. We’re a lot better off than they are, because we know that whether we

live or we die, we know where we’re going. They’re gonna be haunted by this for the rest of their lives.”

“I thought you said we weren’t going to die,” Kate said quickly.

“Well, I don’t know that for sure,” Jay replied. “I’m not God. I just know the feeling He’s put in my heart, and I think He’s going to get us out of this.”

“Well at least we get one more good night’s sleep before we get another shot at death,” Kate sighed, as she started moving back.

“No, wait!” Jay caught her hand and held her back. “I don’t think we’re supposed to go back.”

“Not go back?” Kate echoed. “What are we gonna do, spend the night out here? The desert basically freezes over at night!”

Jay found a clear patch of sand and squatted down on it, pulling Kate down next to him. He shut his eyes and said fervently, “Jesus, we don’t know what to do. You’ve sent us here and we know You must have a plan for us. We don’t know what that plan is, but we don’t want to miss it by leaning to our own understanding. Show us what to do, Lord. Speak to us!”

There was a pause, and then Kate coughed nervously.

Jay’s eyes burst open. “You’re getting something!” he said. “Say it, Kate!”

“I can’t...,” Kate whined. “I can’t do this in front of you. I don’t know...”

“Just say it! Whatever you feel, whatever you hear, don’t think about it—just say it.”

Kate took a deep breath, paused, and then launched out. “Do not worry or fear about what lies before you.” She rattled off the words quickly, hardly thinking about what she was saying, being so caught up in the frenzy of the moment. “I have gone to prepare a place for you, and I send My angel before you now.” She stopped. “That’s it,” she said.



Jay nodded, then started where she had left off. He felt the Spirit flowing and he knew that they were not alone. “Follow in the path that I shall lay before you. Follow in the footsteps wherein you shall be led, for My angel shall not lead you astray, but shall bring you through this time in full safety. And look to the one who goes beside you, for there is one who would learn of you.”

Jay stopped. It was finished. He opened his eyes and looked at Kate, puzzled. “I don’t know about that last part.” He shrugged his shoulders.

Kate smiled.

Jay turned his head, and there was Ringo. He had apparently joined the couple during the prayer, and now looked up with tears in his eyes.

“I want to go with you guys,” he said. “Wherever you’re going, I want to go. I want your God and I want your faith. You know that prayer you were talking about on the plane?—And ... and again before we started walking? I asked Him. Jesus. I told Him I want Him, and He kept me alive. Now I want to follow in that angel’s path. Take me with you!”

The statement was such a far cry from what Jay had come to know of Ringo’s personality that it took him entirely by surprise for a moment. Then he pulled himself together and burst out joyfully, “Of course! Yes, please come with us! We’d be glad to have you!”

“All right then, let’s be off,” Kate said, standing up. “We’ll want to make as much progress as we can before it gets totally dark.”

The three turned for a moment to look back at the cluster of soldiers, several of whom had turned curious glances in their direction.

“What are you doing, you fools?” one called.

“They’re gonna stay in the minefield for the night,” laughed another. “Well, have a good sleep, convicts—sleep in the *grave!*”

A chorus of laughter followed the jeer. The three

waited awhile until the soldiers were gone, and then turned their back on the camp and set their faces towards the unbroken desert sand. It was a relief to see fresh sand instead of the blood-filled mess they had been treading on up till that time. As one foot followed another and still another, they looked at each other, their faces reflecting the awe of what their faith had told them at the beginning. They were walking on the water, and they were not sinking.

Ringo looked at Kate, then at Jay. “I can’t believe it,” he said softly, then broke into a shout. “I can’t believe it!” His shout sounded hollow in the emptiness of the desert. “I can’t believe it!” He yelled again at the top of his lungs.

“Man, you’ve just begun to see stuff you’ve never dreamed of,” Jay grinned. “You’ve hooked up with the most powerful force in the universe, and you’re gonna see stuff so crazy you could never have thought of it in your wildest dreams.”

Ringo laughed aloud. “I think I believe you, man. I think I do!”

Kate looked back the way they’d come. The empty barricade was still and quiet. The soldiers and the remaining convicts had gone in for the night. Above them the sky was turning from twilight blue to inky black.

“Um, I hate to be the one to bring a touch of doubt to this festive occasion,” she said, “but our current fate isn’t looking a whole lot more promising than it was. Our hands are shackled, our feet are shackled, we’re each carrying ten-pound chains on our bodies, we haven’t eaten all day and my throat feels pretty darn parched—and we’re just starting our journey.”

“You forgot to mention that we’re still in the minefield,” Jay said, with a twinkle in his eye. “Kate, look at this—we’re walking through ground that’s so thick with mines that the first mile took almost a thousand lives. We’ve been walking a half-hour and

nothing. Don't you think the same angel that has led us this far is gonna see to these other things too?"

Kate looked down, a little ashamed of herself. "You're right Jay, I'm sorry. I'm just so darn hungry and thirsty right now I can't think of much else."

"Well let's keep moving then," Jay said. "Whatever the answer is, maybe we can come to it before it has to come to us—and the sooner the better."

"Not only that but if we settle down we'll probably freeze to death," Ringo interjected. "Gets pretty darn cold around here outside of those insulated tents!"

Without another word, the three continued their onward trek. They had no idea where they were going, but still they walked on, their weary feet shuffling in the fine desert sand, just trusting that the promised angel was guiding their weary steps.

At last Kate felt that she could walk no more. "I can't make it." She shook her head desperately. "I'm exhausted, and the progress we're making with these chains on is pitiful. We'll never get anywhere—probably when morning comes we'll still be in sight of the tent city. I can't bear it!" Her head was throbbing relentlessly, and her ankles were bleeding. She dropped down in the sand.

Jay sat next to her, shivering a little as the cold night air swept over the desert.

"So what are we gonna do?" Ringo asked. "I'd offer to keep going and try to find help, but there's no way of guaranteeing we'd hook up again in this desert. There's no type of markings of any sort anywhere.

"Oh, Lord!" Jay cried aloud. "Please show us! What would You have us to do? You've led us this far, surely You have a plan for us!"

His words rang across the vast, open expanse that surrounded them, mocking them with its emptiness.

Kate's eyes filled with tears. "He's not going to desert us now, is He? Is this some big joke He's played on us?"

"Don't say that, Kate! It's the Enemy!" Jay said, but his voice was weak and tired. "We've just got to hold on, I know the answer's out there somewhere. Sometimes it doesn't come like a bolt of lightning, but it will come."

"I guess we'd better settle down here for the night," Ringo said, after another long pause. Then he cocked his head a little, "Your God didn't say *anything*?"

Jay bent his head down. "I don't know," he said quietly. "I can't hear anything and I don't know why. I do know that He's with us, though, that's for sure. Maybe He's just testing our faith and patience. He must be getting ready to do something very special."

"I wish I had your faith, Jay," Kate said quietly.

"Let's get some rest," Jay said. "I'm sure that we're right where He wants us." He shuffled some sand with his hands, heaping it as best he could over Kate's legs. "It's not much," he said, "but it should keep in some of the warmth."

Ringo helped him in the task. "It doesn't seem too cold tonight, but just to be safe we'd best not both go to sleep," he said. "Let's take shifts. You sleep first, I'll walk around. Keep a lookout, and keep warm. I'll wake you up in an hour or two and you can take a shift. We don't want to stop too long because we're not going to be able to make much progress once the sun's up."

Jay nodded, glad for the chance to rest. Moments later Jay and Kate were sound asleep.

## SEX WITH A PURPOSE

“It should be right around here somewhere...” Stuart scanned the street names up ahead.

“Come on, man,” Julian said impatiently, “you’ll have to give me some advance if I’m gonna...”

“There!” Stuart burst out. “There it is! Sycamore Lane. Turn right here.”

Julian swung the vehicle abruptly to the right and a couple passengers in the back went flying against the side wall. “Sorry about that!” he called back cheerfully.

“I don’t know why you wouldn’t let me use the built-in scanner map on it,” Julian said to Stuart.

“I just don’t get a good feeling off of that thing,” Stuart shrugged. “I don’t know—anything computer-related has an element of risk to it these days. You know? I mean, what’s to say they couldn’t tap right into it and track us down?”

“I told you, my rig is bug-proof,” Julian smiled.

“Turn here again,” Stuart said quickly. “Yeah, I know, Ju, I just felt better about it. Anyway, we made it safe and sound—the old-fashioned way!”

“All hail to us, then!” Alana said, coming up behind and smacking Stuart playfully on the head. “We are true children of the millennium after all!” Turning her eyes up and out the front of the vehicle, she froze

in mid-motion. “Well gadz and fried glory beans!” she exclaimed. “Is that our campsite?”

Turning the corner they had come to a cul-de-sac, where up a little slope a magnificent gate could be seen. Beyond the gate there appeared to be acres upon acres of finely manicured lawns, enough flowerbeds to keep a small funeral parlor in business, and scores of tall, stately trees. Behind it all—just barely in their viewing range—was a huge mansion, looking as though it had stepped straight out of “Gone with the Wind.”

“I didn’t know they still grew houses like that,” Alana whispered.

Kim scrambled up behind her, while Cal, who could not fit into the opening that led up to the front of the vehicle, enjoyed his own personal vantage point as he stood behind the two girls.

“That’s it,” Kim nodded. “Wow, it sure is fine!”

“You been here before?” Julian asked.

“Nope,” she replied. “But I’ve heard all about it. Melissa used to visit once a month or so. She hasn’t been lately though, not since things have been heating up. We had to scale our personal visits way down. But ... yeah, this is pretty much just like she described it.” Kim laughed to herself. “I think we all kinda figured she was exaggerating when she told her tales—Melissa can be like that, you know. But...”

They had reached the tall, ornate fence. Julian leaned out of the window towards the entry keypad, looking for some button he should press to ring for help, when the gate buzzed loudly and swung silently open on its own.

Julian slapped his head. “I keep forgetting all these type of places are equipped with bar code surveillance. I don’t know what they even put the keypad there for.”

“Maybe it’s from before,” Stuart said.

“Or maybe they like to have a mechanical option if

their holy system ever freezes over,” Kim grinned as they drove up the long, elaborate driveway. “Oh, and there’s our host now!”

Ashton had obviously arrived home not long before them, as evidenced by a sleek gray limousine which could be seen just pulling around the back of the house. He nodded and lifted his hand in a slight wave. The camper pulled up in front of him, and Julian rolled down his window.

“Glad you made it safely,” Ashton nodded.

Julian smiled, and reached his hand through the window. “I’m Julian,” he said.

“Pleased to meet you, Julian. You can pull around the back, it leads right into the garage. The sooner you get in there the better, I’d say—lessen the chance of someone snapping satellite shots at the wrong time. I’ve told my housekeeper that a distant cousin is bringing his camper in to be stored here for awhile, so she shouldn’t suspect anything.”

Julian nodded and pulled the camper around the corner. As they neared a tunnel-like garage, the front panel slid open. Julian pulled the camper inside the huge and well-lit garage. The inquisitive friends counted no less than four limousines, each in its own designated cubicle. There were also two sports cars and a shiny new-looking Mercedes. Two or three slots were empty of vehicles, so Julian pulled the camper into the closest one.

A door on the far side of the garage opened just as the team began to pile out of the camper, and Ashton stuck his head around the side. “Through here,” he motioned to Stuart, who had just come out. “Just come through real quietly, it leads to the back door of the house.”

Stuart nodded, and began piling the kids out of the camper.

“Where are we, Dad?” Dylan asked, looking around himself in delight. “Wow, look at that car! Can I go

for a ride in it?”

“I don’t think so, Dylan,” Stuart replied. “It’s not ours.”

Kim clambered out of the back, and scooped one of the kids up in each arm, setting them down on the little bench that was nearby. “Now people, here’s the story. Are you ready for it?”

“We’re all ears, Mom!” Dylan chirped, putting his arm around his little sister.

Maya opened her eyes wide, looking at Dylan in horror. Then she burst into tears.

Kim looked puzzled. “What’s the matter, Honey?” she asked.

“I’m not all ears!” she sobbed. “I have *two* ears. Dill has *two* ears. Not *all* ears.”

Kim grinned and looked at the others, who had caught the punchline and were laughing quietly in the background. She stuck her arm around Maya’s neck and planted a warm kiss on her cheek. “It’s okay, baby,” she whispered in her ear. “It’s just a saying—an expression. I’ll tell you all about it sometime. But you don’t need to worry, okay?”

Maya gulped down her last sob and smiled bravely through her tears. “Okay, Mommy,” she said, with a patient smile. She turned to Dylan. “I forgive you, Dill.”

“Forgiveness is her big thing this week,” Kim whispered to Stuart, who nodded understandingly. Then she turned her attention back to the kids, “Okay, this is what I was going to tell you before we got all sidetracked. We’ve come to visit a very kind man. His name is Ashton.”

“Ashton,” Dylan repeated.

“I like Ashton,” Maya smiled. “I can forgive him too.”

“All the things that are in this house belong to him, so we can’t just go touching anything we want, all right?” Kim continued. “We’re going to have to have

a ‘hand alert’ time, okay?”

“Yes, Mommy,” Maya smiled.

Dylan just nodded wisely, as though he had been in possession of this superior knowledge since the beginning of time.

“All right then—off we go. Do you have your backpacks?”

Stuart tossed Dylan his, then picked Maya up in his arms, where she retrieved hers and clasped her arms blissfully around his neck. Closing and locking the camper doors, Julian took up the rear and they all walked quickly towards the garage’s little exit door.



Not long after, the team had comfortably settled into the small but lavish quarters introduced to them by their host. The small back door they had entered by way of the garage led down a narrow flight of circular steps, deep below the house into some sort of basement. A thick, safe-style door opened into a plush mini-apartment, complete with two bedrooms, a kitchen, bathroom and small lounge area.

“These are my private quarters,” Ashton had explained. “None of my staff are allowed down here, they know I use it as my retreat, a place to get away from it all. And it’s way below the rest of the house, so as long as you don’t pull out a full-piece orchestra, you shouldn’t be heard upstairs.” Then he smiled. “Funny,” he chuckled, “when I first built this place it was just after I’d met you people, a few years back now. I had some sort of a vision from God, and as I was just getting to know Him at the time, I thought it was so outstanding that I determined to follow through on what He told me.—And this was it.”

“He told you to build this place?” Kim asked, looking around herself in awe.

“In so many words,” Ashton replied. “It was just a dumpy basement, but I had it converted into a multi-purpose personal getaway spot, just-in-case bomb

shelter, and perfect spot for hiding government refugees!”

“We’ve come to the right place!” Stuart said, and laughed aloud at God’s marvelous provision.

After the introductory pleasantries, Ashton excused himself, as he had business to tend to above ground. “I’ll be back after dinner,” he replied. “I have a great deal to discuss with you.” He smiled knowingly, and then vanished.

Dylan and Maya began by exploring every corner of the place. Cal poked his head in the fridge. “Mmmm,” he said. “Fully stocked—only the best! I suppose we can help ourselves?”

“Yeah, I’m sure we can,” Kim said.

“What’s this, Mommy?” Dylan tugged on Kim’s leg. She looked down at his puzzled expression, and took a magazine from his hand. Immediately she burst into a hysterical giggle. “Oh Stuart!” she called. “Your son has found something!” She tossed the magazine to him.

He flipped it over to look at the front cover. “*Playboy!*” he laughed aloud. “Well, God does supply all our needs!”

“We’d better stick those under something,” Kim said. “Ashton’ll be embarrassed as hell if he finds out we came across them.”

“What is it, Mommy?” Dylan said persistently, wondering what on earth was going on.

“Just some silly old magazine, baby,” Kim smiled. “Don’t you worry about it. You’ve got better things to worry about, like...”

“No!” Dylan screeched playfully, darting away as fast as his portly legs could carry him. “Not naptime!”

Maya stuck her head out of the bedroom. “It’s not naptime, Mommy!”

“Oh, yes it is!” Kim ran after Dylan, picked him up and disappeared inside the bedroom with the two kids, shutting the door behind her.

“Gadz but they’re intense!” Alana collapsed into a chair. “I’m getting a migraine just looking at ’em!” She looked fiercely at Stuart. “Just think, that’s all *your* fault, Stu!”

“And proud to admit it,” Stuart smiled.

“Hey, this stuff is good,” Cal said, scooting a chair up to the table toting a TV-dinner.

“I guess we get the rest of the afternoon to kick back, huh?” Alana asked.

“I don’t have any other plans,” Stuart said. “Maybe once the kids are down we should have a little check-in time Upstairs.” He paused and heard another screech coming from the adjoining room. “But I have a feeling that’ll be a while. I think we can take our time.”



The afternoon passed by in wonderful, sleepy slow motion—in turn being eaten, read, prayed and slept away. Just about the time when boredom was beginning to set in, a set of telltale clicks and whirs drew their attention to the heavy door at the entranceway. Another thirty seconds and Ashton stood in front of them, beaming in his own genial way. His mustache was bristled even more than usual, and he held a white paper bag in his hands.

“My friends!” he said, glowing with warmth. “Have you found everything you needed? I just restocked the kitchen last week, so I expect what’s here will last you at least a day or two. I’ll bring some more stuff down a little later, when my crew turn in for the night and I can raid the storage unawares.” He winked at Kim. “Wouldn’t want anyone suspecting our little secret!”

“Please, come and sit down.” Kim greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. “We can’t begin to thank you for all that you’re doing for us. It’s a lifesaver!”

“Yeah man, it’s downright decent of you,” Alana said, brushing her hair out of her eyes a little. She

felt wildly out of place around this refined, civilized specimen of humanity, but was determined to do her best to put forth a positive image. After all, she may as well save her dastardly deeds for the enemy—there were plenty of those to go around without antagonizing the few friends who were willing to stick their necks out for her.

“The pleasure is all mine, I assure you,” Ashton said, settling down on the couch and making himself comfortable. He pulled out a cigar and lit it, then unexpectedly reached his hand down into the couch cushions. He fished around for a couple of seconds, then pulled out a long silver spoon from deep inside the couch. “There,” he smiled. “I knew something wasn’t quite right under there. Oh!” he said, looking over at Kim. “Here you go—I brought something for the little ’uns.”

Dylan and Maya’s faces lit up at the obvious reference to them.

“What is it?” Maya asked, rubbing her hands together in delight.

“Go and see,” Ashton said, passing them the paper bag to Kim.

Kim peered inside the paper bag, smiled, and passed it to the kids, who took it off into a corner of the kitchen, where faint oohs and aahs could soon be heard rising like prayers of thankfulness to the heavens. For children who had not had much excess in the way of new toys and playthings, this was a moment to be treasured.

“So you had something that you wanted to tell us?” Stuart asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I do,” Ashton said. “Of course you’ll have tales of your own to tell, I’m sure. But I do have this quite heavily on my mind, so I don’t mind if I go first. And I am so terribly long-winded!”

“Are you in some sort of trouble?” Kim asked.

“Trouble? Me? Oh no, nothing like that.” He smiled. “I’m a model citizen. If the government knew I was a mole, why, they’d turn over in their coffins.” He chuckled at his own joke, without noticing that he was the only one doing so. The others were too engrossed in anticipation to have time to pull out their manners and laugh politely.

He continued more seriously, “But I am worried, because I’ve grown increasingly suspicious that there is something frightfully sinister going on, and I’ll be darned if I’m not going to do all I can to stop it.”

“What sort of thing?” Julian asked slowly.

“I don’t know exactly,” he said. “There’s a lot of different offices in the government building where I have to go occasionally to take care of business, and I’ve formed an acquaintance of sorts with a certain Joseph Tow, one of the moderately high-ups on the civil action committee. I’ve heard he even keeps tabs on troop movements and such. Well, I don’t rightly know what he does, but I’ve gotten some funny snippets out of him.

“Tow and I, we’re ... you might say, coffee buddies. We frequent the same little joint at the corner of Barnes and Arriba. He’s a placid enough man, but a heavy drinker, it seems. One morning he came in for his coffee—nine o’clock in the morning, mind you—and the guy was sloshed right over! Guess he came down to clear his head because he ordered it black.

“So as I’m sitting there drinking my own brew, he comes and plops down next to me, and starts spouting off to me about some savage invasion that’s being planned. Not in an entirely sorry way, mind you, but sort of boasting about it.”

Ashton sighed, and took another puff of his cigar. “There was another terrorist bombing broadcast on the television. I think that’s what tipped his wad. He starts saying it’s only a matter of time before all those terrorists—‘those Christian extremists,’ were his exact

words—are nothing more than a puff of smoke, so on and so forth...” He shook his head.

“How long ago was this?” Cal asked.

“Not terribly long—beginning of the week. Of course I didn’t inquire further—looks funny when you do. And right after that I guess his coffee kicked in, ’cause he clammed right up. Hasn’t said another word to me since. But I had reason to believe that the bombing was a government setup to gather support for the more drastic measures they are already starting to use against that small Middle Eastern stronghold of resistance they have thus far been unable to eliminate.”

“That’s pretty heavy stuff,” Stuart said. “But where do we come into this? Why are you telling us?”

“I don’t know, to be sure,” Ashton said, searching their faces. “But all these years I’ve known you folks, you’ve done so much for me. You’ve introduced me to my God and Savior, Who has changed my life in a tremendous way. Even when I’d already taken the registration mark out of ignorance, He forgave me and gave me another chance to make things right. Since then I’ve done everything I could—helped out with goods and services as much as I’ve been able to. But it’s so little! With a hand-level registration mark you have to be more careful. I’ve found they can sometimes pay much closer attention to you. So I’ve never really had the guts to do more, to do anything that would make me stand out or arouse the suspicions of the higher-ups.”

A lump rose in his throat, but he pushed bravely on. “Sometimes I feel like I’ve lived a life that’s been entirely useless and devoid of all purpose. But in those times when I stop and listen to that little Voice, like you all have taught me, He keeps talking about something. He keeps telling me there is some reason that I was placed where I was, and that He has some great plan for me to do.”

Ashton looked hopefully around at the small group of young people. “And judging from the information I have become privy to, I think I’ve found out what that is!”

“To sabotage this attack on the Christian resistance in the Middle East?” Julian asked, trying not to sound skeptical.

“I don’t know all the details of this attack, but I have a gut feeling, right here...”—he punched himself hard in the lower abdomen to show where he meant—“that this is the one. This is the time, the thing I’m meant to help with. And then—just as I get this assurance ... you all show up! Like a bolt of blessing from Heaven! What more could I want? We’re being guided!”

“What exactly can we do to help you in this?” Kim asked.

Ashton grinned sheepishly. “Well, I didn’t say it would be easy, but here’s what I figure. This fellow Tow is a loose cannon. He’s a wino and I have a hunch he’ll spill just about anything given the right conditions.”

“And those conditions would be...?” Stuart asked.

Ashton hesitated, then noticing the children were playing quietly in the next room, said, “I’ll get right down to it. Tow is a bit of a kinky fellow. In another of his looser moments he confided in me that he likes to get his thrills in the bedroom, so to speak.”

“Is he some kind of a pervert?” Alana wrinkled up her nose.

“No, not like you’re thinking—nothing real off the beam. But like most men, he likes to visit with lady friends...” Ashton was obviously not entirely comfortable discussing this personal subject in such a large group of people. “And he was confiding to me that the greatest turn-on for him would be to sleep with a woman who...”—he paused dramatically—“is not registered.”



“What?” Alana burst out, as Stuart nearly fell off his chair in surprise and Julian and Cal doubled over in laughter. Kim just grinned.

“Where’s the turn-on in that?” Alana asked.

“I could imagine that...,” Stuart started, and Kim jabbed him in the ribs.

“I’m perfectly serious,” Ashton said. “I have no idea what his psychological makeup is, but he said that very thing to me. He just hadn’t a clue where to find one. He even asked me—get this—if I ever came across a lady of that genre who might be willing to oblige him, that I shouldn’t hesitate to refer her to him.”

“So you’re thinking one of our girls should pay a visit to this lewd creature?” Stuart said slowly, looking sidelong at Kim and Alana.

Ashton sighed, and ran his hand through his mustache. “I know,” he said. “I know what I’m suggesting is pretty low. But how else do you fit these pieces together? It’s all coming together like clockwork, and I have a gut feeling about this whole Middle East deal. I have a feeling that there’s something we could do to prevent a great catastrophe, and that we should take that opportunity. Of course...,” he added quickly, “of course we’d have to do the reconciling thing first, you know, check in with your Boss and all.”

A few minutes passed in silence as the idea sank through the various layers of people’s consciousness.

“Wow, that’s quite a mouthful,” Stuart said.

“So...” Julian turned and looked hesitantly at Stuart, carefully avoiding the girls’ gaze. “You guys do these type of things? Like ‘sex with a purpose’ missions? Being like Christians and all ... that’s not a problem?”

Stuart sighed and scratched his head, looking over at Kim for assistance.

Kim grinned, feeling a bit in the spotlight, but figuring that somebody had to explain it. “Well,” she

said, “it’s definitely not something that we’ve done much of, and I would say it would be the exception. But as far as our religion or way of life goes, it’s not something that we’d kick right out of bed without praying about it, so to speak.”

The others grinned at her pun.

“Of course it depends on the person who would be doing it too, you know, it has to be a personal decision of course, and then okayed by the Lord.”

After another moment of silence, Alana suddenly threw her hands up in the air. “What? What? Why do I feel that everybody is purposely NOT LOOKING AT ME? Am I being put on the spot here for something?”

“Nobody said anything to you, Alana,” Stuart laughed. “Are you getting the burden for this?”

“No, thank you very much, I am not,” she retorted. Then she looked over at Ashton. “Is he old? What does he look like?”

Ashton smiled politely. “He’s middle-aged. I don’t know that I would be qualified to judge the looks of another man, but...he’s not a Mr. World candidate, but I would say I’ve seen worse-looking men.”

“Great, that helps a lot,” Alana muttered. “How am I supposed to decide this type of thing without even seeing a picture of the guy?”

“Alana...,” Kim said.

“What?” she snapped. “It’s not like you’re gonna go and do it—you’ve got your kids, and a husband to boot!” She threw Stuart a scornful glance.

“Look, Alana,” Ashton said, turning around to face her, “this was a bad idea. I should never have brought it up like this. Forgive me for putting you on the spot.”

“Nah, save it all.” Alana stood up and shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans. She began to pace around the room nervously. “I don’t want to blow you guys’ big ‘save the Christians’ deal, but just the thought of going to be a personal sex slave to some unknown drunkard is kind of a lot to absorb so soon

after dinner.”

“Let’s just forget it all,” Ashton said.

“No, give me a break,” Alana said irritably. “What am I gonna do, chicken out on you guys? How would that look on my tombstone? ‘When faced with going on a super-sleuth mission deep into the heart of the evil government, which also involved pleasuring some perv on the side, the deceased declined politely, and then faded into obscurity, never to be heard of again.’ Big no way, that’s not me.” She took a deep breath. “Let’s do your little séance thing, ’cause I’m game. Yeah,” she nodded again, as though trying to psyche herself up. “Yeah, we’re gonna do this.” Her head shot up, and she caught Cal’s eye. “Yes, soldier-buddy, do you have a problem?”

“Not at all,” Cal said.

“All right then, let’s do it. Call down those spirits!”

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## THE ANGEL’S PATH

It was still dark when Kate felt herself being gently shaken.

“Wake up, Kate!” Jay’s voice sounded so distant, as if it belonged to another time altogether. Kate tried to roll over, hoping it was a bad dream and that she could brush aside any possibility that the events that still hung vividly in her memory had actually occurred. Attempting to do so, however, she screamed out in pain from her shackled hands. Her eyes fluttered open.

“Oh my God,” she wailed. “It wasn’t a dream, was it? It was all real...” Still overcome with pain and fatigue, Kate couldn’t stop the tears from streaming down her cheeks.

“It’s okay, Kate,” Jay reassured her. “I wish I could hold you in my arms and tell you that, but you’d probably be in worse pain than you are now.”

Kate cracked a little smile.

“Come on,” he said gently. “We’d better keep moving. We have to try to get to someplace where we can find some cover before the sun comes out—or we’re going to be dead meat before noon.”

“What time is it?” Kate whispered, licking her swollen tongue over her parched lips.

“It’s past midnight,” Ringo said. “I can tell you that

much.”

Kate looked up in surprise for a minute, then smiled as she remembered that all their watches had been confiscated. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m still a bit fuzzy. I’m getting myself together.” She sighed, and struggled to get to her feet. “All right then, we’re on our way.”

The three began trudging forward in silence.

“Does anyone know where we’re heading?” Kate asked after a while.

Ringo lifted up his hands and pointed a bony finger up towards the clear night sky. “If we keep the North Star directly behind us we should reach some form of settlement before long. How long, I can’t say. We aren’t really making very speedy progress with these restrictions, and through this sand, to boot.”

“I wonder if we’re still in the mined area,” Jay said, more to pass the time than out of any real curiosity to know. Somehow it seemed irrelevant at this point in their journey.

“It’s impossible to say,” Ringo said again. “No one knows just how much of this territory has been mined. Some say that the mines stretch all the way up to the border—wherever that is.”

“Well, the sooner we lose the mines, the greater our chance of running across some friendly passersby,” Jay said, “so I guess that’s our current prayer request.”

“You people pray a lot, don’t you?” Ringo observed.

Jay laughed. “I guess you could say so. After a while it comes so naturally you hardly notice that you’re doing it. But I’ll tell you, it’s tops, that’s for sure. It’s saved my life and neck more times that I could dare to speculate.—Probably more times than I even know.”

“I admire you,” Ringo said, and Jay looked at him quickly. The tone in which he spoke those words indicated that they were not words that he spoke

often—if indeed he ever had before. Ringo smiled to see that Jay had noticed his earnestness. “I think I’d like to live like you.”

“It’s not a life for everyone,” Jay said. “Doesn’t always lead us in the easiest paths, but we do know that what we are doing is worthwhile, the best cause—worth living or dying for.”

“Oh my God!” Kate shouted suddenly. “Is that—a light?”

The other two looked up quickly, scanning the horizon. They saw nothing.

“What did you see, Kate? Where was it?” Jay asked.

“I thought I saw a very bright flash—off in the other direction, still ahead but more to the right.”

They all strained in that direction. If the light had indeed been there, it certainly wasn’t any more.

“Perhaps we should go in that direction,” Ringo suggested. “The desert is full of dunes and hills. A person or caravan might go up and down and only be seen from time to time.”

Jay pondered the option silently, as though receiving a confirmation. “Yes,” he said finally. “We were told to follow the angel’s path, weren’t we? This looks like a signal for us to follow!”

And so they did, moving onward, every painstaking step set down with the greatest of effort, spurred on only by their desperate hope for survival, praying that each time they set down their foot that it wouldn’t be the last. And on they went.

At last a pink glow could be seen over the distant horizon, and they knew that it was most likely nearing six o’clock in the morning, the same time they had been awoken by the soldiers the day before. Soon the sun would begin its early morning jog, and after that would only start beating down upon them all the hotter.

“Our time’s up, people,” Ringo said, then his mouth dropped open. “What the hell is that?”

Jay and Kate looked in the direction of his hand.

"It's a hut!" Kate shrieked. "By the angels of Heaven, it's a hut!"

The three fugitives scrambled across the remaining area, hardly willing to believe that their eyes were not tricking them. They soon came to the little stone hut with a thatched straw roof. Ringo threw himself down in front of the step and started kissing it joyfully.

"We worship you, O house!" he chanted over and over in a singsong voice. "We worship you! May you live for ever and ever!"

"Come on in, man," Jay said, helping him up. "You're going delirious on us."

They stumbled inside the tiny, one-roomed edifice, and collapsed on the cool stone floor.

"Oh, God in Heaven," Ringo moaned. "This is the answer to those prayers we've prayed, isn't it?"

"Oh boy," Kate said, "what are the chances of finding the perfect three-man hut in the middle of the Sahara? That angel knows his stuff."

"Oh, Jesus! Thank You for saving us, and for bringing us into this place!" Jay burst out. Almost before he finished his sentence, he was sound asleep. The other two dropped off even faster, and never heard his first words.



Jay stirred fitfully in his sleep, then suddenly sat bolt upright. He looked around himself, puzzled, then it all came back. He looked around at the bare, windowless walls. It was dark inside, but he could see light coming in under the crack in the door. Outside it was still day. He marveled at how cool he felt. The temperature inside the hut was perfectly refreshing, though by the position of the sun he guessed they were now in the full heat of the afternoon. What sort of a stone oasis was this? If it was not made directly in Heaven, certainly the earthly mason had been inspired every step of the way.

Ringo rolled over suddenly, and as Jay turned to look at him, he suddenly let out a loud exclamation. Ringo opened his eyes, and Kate stirred sleepily.

Ringo sat up. "What is it, man?" he asked.

Jay was speechless. Then he said slowly, "Look next to you."

Ringo froze. Moving slowly and carefully, he turned his head a millimeter at a time until he had it craned all the way over. He carefully looked down. Immediately his head spun back to Jay. "What are you scaring the life out of me for, you jerk?" he fumed. "I thought there was some sort of rattlesnake or man-eating dingo. That's nothing but a stone jar."

As the words came off his lips he suddenly stopped. "Stone jar?" He repeated, turning his head again to look at it.

Kate sat up. "This place was totally empty when we came in last night," she said slowly.

Ringo bent over and sniffed the pot. "It's water, man! It's water! God, it smells as fresh as a baby's bottom."

Kate giggled, more of out general euphoria than at his ill-expressed attempt at a joke. "How are we going to drink it with our hands like this?" she asked.

Ringo had already decided to improvise, and bent his head over until he could reach half of his face into the water, where he began lapping it up with his tongue. The others looked on greedily, and with every second their thirst seemed more intense.

At last Kate couldn't stand it in any more. "Ringo! Give us a turn, you hog!" she exclaimed.

Ringo jumped up. "Oh, yeah," he said. "Sorry, guys. I got carried away. I think I was in another place there for a moment."

"Yeah yeah," Kate said, "just pass it over."

Ringo nudged the pot with his hands until it was directly in front of her. Being smaller, Kate could fit almost her whole face in it, and she reveled in every

bit of the sweet freshness. “Oh, Lord!” she breathed, shoving the pot in Jay’s direction. “Thank You that You have not deserted us or left us alone.”

“Your God’s a pretty swell guy,” Ringo said, lying back down on the stone floor. “I can honestly say there’s no other being I’d rather be stuck out in the desert with. I think He’ll get first prize for sure—in my books anyway.”

“You can say that again,” Kate sighed.

Jay finished drinking and looked down at the pot. “Do you guys notice anything weird?”

“No,” Kate said. “What is it?”

“The water in this pot—it’s just as full as it was when we first started drinking.”

The others looked at the pot. It was true. And the water looked just as clear and transparent and fresh as it had before three sweaty, sand-covered faces had been soaked in it.

“Oh God, it’s the Twilight Zone,” Ringo laughed.

“This is so great, I can’t even believe it!” Kate squealed out loud. “Jay, do us some praise stuff, would you? We should be celebrating, like heavy-duty homage stuff, reverencing and kowtowing—the works! Anything He wants, boy, I’ll give it in a flash! Do you realize what He’s done?”

The others figured that they did, but did not want to deprive her of her moment of glorious expression, and so they just nodded dumbly.

Kate flowed on blissfully. “He’s snatched us from the frying pan, from the fire, and stuck us on the top part of the burner.” Kate grinned at their stunned expressions at her strange metaphor. “We’re sitting on the burner, in the middle of the flame, fire’s all around us—and we’re okay! And you know what else?”

The boys shook their heads, laughing.

“We’re gonna get out of this alive! We are! I know it! *That*,” she pointed to the water pot, “tells me it for certainty. Right? I mean, think about it. If you’re not

gonna rescue three people who are lost in the desert, and you want them to eventually die off, why bother to send them water to prolong the agony, right? Oh, glorious Lord!” Kate collapsed back onto the floor.

Jay began softly quoting the words to the well-beloved Psalm, while the other two instinctively closed their eyes in quiet, thankful meditation: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name.” As his words slipped around them like a warm, protective covering, they fell once again into a sound and healing sleep.



By the time they awoke again, night had fallen over the desert. Jay crawled over to the door, but just as he was about to open it, Ringo grabbed his arm. “Stop!” he said. “Listen to that.”

Jay stopped.

“What is it?” Kate asked. “It sounds like ... wailing or something.”

“It’s a desert storm,” Ringo said knowledgeably. “It must be a sandstorm of some type. Look.” He motioned towards a little pile of sand on the floor near the minute crack under the door.

“It’s past sundown,” Jay said. “We’ve been sleeping all day.”

“Looks like we’re up for a little more sleep,” Ringo said. “We’re not going anywhere in that gale.”

“I guess so,” Kate said. She wriggled over to the water pot and dropped her face into it. It was every bit as fresh and cold as it had been earlier that afternoon.

“I don’t mind that one bit,” Jay smiled. “At this point, I’ll take all the rest I can get. We’re probably going to need it.”

The others nodded. After passing around the ever-plentiful water jug, they curled up on the floor again.

The hours flew by, and still the three weary travelers slept on. Jay was laying sprawled out on

his back, with his shackled hands spread over his midsection. All of a sudden he became aware of a light forming in the room. He sat up quickly, and as he did, he was surprised to see—himself, still lying down. He stood up easily in this new out-of-body form, and looked around himself, mostly looking for the source of the light that was growing in brightness.

Right in front of the door was where the light seemed to be concentrated. Instinctively, Jay dropped to one knee. “Speak, Lord,” he said, “for Thy servant heareth.”

“Rise up, Jay,” came a glowing voice from within the light.

“Who are you?” Jay asked.

“I am a messenger,” replied the voice, “and I have come to you in a dream that I might give you a message. That message is this: ‘Ask and you shall receive, for unto him that asketh it shall be given, even unto the half of the Father’s kingdom. Ye have not because ye ask not—ask in faith that the world may be given to you.’”

Jay kept his head down, pondering the message in silence. “What should we ask for?” he asked at last.

“That is up to you,” the messenger said, and Jay noticed that the light was starting to fade. “But remember—it all depends on you.”



Jay awoke with a start. The lack of light from under the doorway indicated that night had already fallen. “Whoa, time flies!” he muttered aloud.

Kate stirred at the sound of his voice, and slowly opened her eyes. He formed a kiss with his lips and flung it out to her. She smiled.

Ringo rolled over. “Oh man,” he said raspily. “I haven’t slept this long or this well since I was in high school. This is the life, man! Pass me that water jug, Jay.”

Jay shoved the pot over towards him. “I had a strange dream just now,” he said thoughtfully.

“A dream?” Kate asked. “What was it about?”

“I was here in this same room, but I could walk around, and this angel or something was giving me a message. I can’t remember the exact words, but it was like, ‘Ask and you will receive’ type of thing. The impression I got was that we’re getting the bare necessities through the Lord’s protection and safekeeping, but that we could have more if we would just ask for it.—The angel said whatever we need.”

Kate opened her eyes wide. “Wow, that’s something to chew on.”

“You mean we can like put in our orders if there’s something we’re missing?” Ringo laughed. “I mean, man, we’re missing *everything* out here!”

“Well, I believe it, so let’s do it,” Jay moved over towards the center of the floor, and sat next to Kate. “What do we need most.”

“I know,” Kate said. “We need to get rid of this baggage.” She motioned towards the heavy chains and shackles.”

“Yeah, and how’s that supposed to happen?” Ringo asked scornfully. “They’re gonna just dissolve or something?”

“Yeah well, how’s a water pot gonna stay full and cold and clean for two days with three slobbs drinking from it?” Kate said impatiently.

“We’ve just gotta have faith,” Jay said. “That’s what the Bible says, ‘All things are possible to him that believeth.’”

“It says that?” Ringo opened his eyes wide. “I mean, like it says it and it means it? Like anything is possible, like you can do *anything*?”

Jay nodded. “I mean, you know, within reason, like good things and needful things and stuff like that, but basically ... yeah, that’s the bottom line.”

“Whoa!” Ringo brought his hands up to slap his

forehead, though it took quite an effort to do so. It seemed worth the effort to him. “That’s something else! That’s far-out! I like that, man. Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s do it!”

And so the three crouched down, and Jay said, “Let’s each go around and add to the prayer. Doesn’t have to be anything long or fancy, but I think the Lord would like to hear from all of us, since it’s all of our miracle. I can start.”

The others nodded.

“Jesus,” he began, “we know that You are the all-powerful God of Heaven and earth. You sent us this sign of encouragement to assert our faith and belief in You, and that You would answer us. We need Your help now, Jesus!”

As Jay stopped, Kate took up the lead. “Yes,” she prayed somewhat hesitantly. “We need to get rid of these chains so we can walk, and we don’t know how You’d do it, but we really need one of your miracles.”

Ringo looked around at the two others somewhat hesitantly, then launched in with zeal. “O most holy Father, we worship You! We come before You and offer incense at Your feet, O great One! O powerful One, we need You to break these chains so that we can walk more quickly. We worship You and we bow before You!”

Jay and Kate smiled quietly to themselves, but whatever Ringo may have lacked in style or content, he made up for in sincerity. As the prayer finished and they opened their eyes, Ringo was grinning with satisfaction. “That’s cool stuff,” he said. “I could learn to like that. It gives you this awesome feeling, kind of like a punch in the stomach, only better. It’s definitely hooked up to something, that’s for sure.”

“So what do we do now?” Kate asked, looking down at their chains. They still seemed very real and very heavy.

“I guess we start walking,” Jay replied. “You know,

‘As they went they were healed.’”

“As they what?” Ringo asked.

“It’s a verse in the Bible. These guys asked Jesus for healing, and He said, ‘Go find a priest.’ As they started walking away, they were healed. In other words, they have to get off their butts and start moving before they see the answers to their prayers.”

“Oh, I get it,” Ringo smiled. “So let’s go for it, then. It’s dark out, so we may as well get on our way.”

They opened up the heavy wooden door, and a small landslide of golden sand poured into the room. They clambered over it—their chains still lugging heavily behind them—and stepped out into the clear, starry night.

“Oh, smell that air!” Kate breathed exultantly.

“It’s great,” Ringo agreed. “But which direction are we supposed to be headed in?”

They looked around themselves.

“I guess we’d better keep going the direction we were,” Jay said. “We came from back there, so let’s just take it up behind the hut, keep moving forward.”

No one else had any better ideas, so the three moved forward. No one dared to mention the chains again. Perhaps the Lord had forgotten. Or maybe ... no, surely He must have a good reason for the delay. It must just be a test of some sort.

Kate was the first one to notice the difference. Her wrist felt itchy and as she reached down to scratch it, she let out an exclamation. “Oh my God!” she cried. “Look at this!”

The others moved quickly over to her. “What is it?” Jay asked.

“Look at my chains! The locks are open! No wonder it’s felt so wobbly!” She wriggled her hands, trying to get them free. Jay lifted his and easily pulled open the unlocked wrist bands. The heavy chains fell onto the ground.

“Oh my God!” Kate squealed, waving her hands

around. “I’ve got wings! I’ve never felt so light!” She looked down at her feet. “These are open too! Check your locks, I bet they’re open!” Kate sat down and tugged on her shackles until they came apart in her hands. She started running around the sand dunes in great flying leaps of joy.

Jay and Ringo examined their chains and found, to their joy, that they were also open. In a few minutes the three stood in front of a heap of chains.

“He did it!” Ringo said, shaking his head in amazement.

“Yeah, and He probably did it way back at the house, just we didn’t notice or look around for it,” Jay grinned.

“I guess we were waiting for something to drop from the sky,” Kate laughed. “One thing I’ve noticed since I’ve started getting on better terms with your God—I guess I should say *our* God—is that He doesn’t really strain Himself on something that we can do just as easily. You know? He’ll do what we can’t do, but He always leaves just that little bit on our end so that we can really appreciate it.”

“That’s for sure,” Jay smiled.

“And now we’re free! We really are!” Ringo said exultantly.

“Yeah, but we’d better keep moving, because we’ve got a good distance to cover before daylight. And now we can go twice as fast. Let’s get going!”

Joining their hands together, the three set off across the desert sands, following the path of the angel.

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## DATE NIGHT

“Come in here for a second, would you, Alana?”

Alana sighed, exasperated, and strode over to where Kim was standing by the double bed.

“Yeah, big mama, what’s up?” Alana asked, sprawling on the bed.

Kim looked out into the living room to where the boys were enthusiastically conversing over their late-night cereal bowls, and quietly shut the bedroom door. Dylan and Maya were sound asleep in little makeshift beds and their rhythmic breathing filled the little room with quiet racket and warm, stale air.

Kim came over and sat on the bed next to Alana. “I just wanted to make sure you’re okay with all this,” she said with a little shrug. “You don’t seem like the big open-heart-sharing type, and I’m not asking for any soulful revelations—I just want to make sure that everything’s okay with you and that you’re not feeling pressured into this just because it seems to be the right thing to do.”

Alana studied the macramé bedspread in silence.

“Because a thing’s not completely right unless it’s done in full faith, and with that dead-on conviction that it’s what God wants you to do. Even if you’re set to do the right thing, if you’re not fully convinced of the rightness of it in your heart and mind, it



sometimes ends up being worse than not doing it, because maybe then you can't pull through, or you're more likely to muck it up, or it just lacks the final umph to kick it through, you know?" Kim continued quickly, anxious that her attempt at encouragement hadn't come across wrong. "I don't mean that you couldn't do it ... what am I saying here? Just if you're okay, that's all."

"I know what you're trying to say," Alana sighed, throwing her hands behind her head and rolling onto her back. "If I'm so peaches-and-cream about the whole thing, then why the upside-down smile, right? I don't know. I know it's the right thing to do, I'll say that. And I certainly don't have any moral dilemma about the sex thing—even less so now that I'm getting to know you guys and your screwy doctrines.—Not screwy bad, mind you, but definitely screwy."

"Then what is it?" Kim asked.

"I don't know..." Alana said. "It couldn't be worry or nervousness, because I don't get that type of thing. I also don't get those what-if-I-get-there-and-don't-know-what-to-do vibes, so it can't be that..."

"Did you hear everything the Lord said and promised when we were just out there?" Kim asked. "Sounded to me like you're gonna have half the host of Heaven cheering you on."

"Oh, like that really gives me the perkies!" Alana groaned. "Only all the angels and God the Father, God the Mother, God the Son—anyone else like to come in for the show?"

Kim laughed. "It's not that bad—you know it!"

"Of course it's not that bad," Alana said. "But look, what exactly am I supposed to do to this guy?—Besides be poking matter?"

"I think we should play it by ear," Kim said. "First of all, we don't even know if there is anything going on—no, I take that back. We *do* know, because the Lord said there was. He said there was a special

reason why He wanted you to meet this man, and work your way into his home, and that when the time was right, He would show us the next step. So if we just go bit by bit, I'm sure things will unravel themselves nicely into our laps."

"Yeah, I guess so," Alana sighed. "So, tomorrow night it is, huh? Gosh..."

The door flung open suddenly and Stuart burst in. He smiled to see the two girls on the bed. "Well hello, Alana," he said with a mischievous smile. "Are you going to spend the night with us?"

Alana leaped up off the bed. "Oh no you don't, Big Stu," she said, jumping onto his back and wrapping her legs around his torso. "You can save *that* for your dreams! What is it with guys anyway?" She started pounding him in mock fury. Stuart reached behind him and grabbed her under the arms, trying to flip her over his head. She held firm.

"You guys," Kim said, shoving them out into the living room area. "Keep your battlegrounds out of the bedroom, please, or you're putting the kids back to sleep!"

Stuart finally pried Alana loose from his midsection and flipped her over on the carpet, where he held her legs down firmly with one of his, and pinned both arms out flat on the ground.

"Stuart," Alana hissed. "You let me go right now. I have never been this humiliated in my life, and soldier-buddy over there has been witness to it all. I've got a reputation to live with, you know!"

Stuart laughed and let her go.

"God!" she said fiercely. "Years of lifting weights—and what for? I can't even fight off a puny little attacker!" She saw him register the taunt and come flying for her, so figured she'd better run for it while she could. Retreating into the safety of the bathroom, she shut and locked the door behind her. "Puny attacker!" she called through the door.

"I'll get you tomorrow, weight lifter!" Stuart laughed, as he went into his room.

Kim was sitting on the bed laughing. "You two do bring out the preschool spirit in each other, don't you?" she grinned.

Stuart smiled. "Sure seems that way. Alana's quite a gal. You, on the other hand..." He sized her up and stroked his chin appraisingly. "Care to know what you bring out in me?"

"I have a pretty good idea," she said, playing with her top button flirtatiously. She popped the button open. "But tell me ... what exactly would it be?"

Stuart kicked off his shoes and came to lie beside her. "It's kind of hard to explain," he whispered. "It would take a long, long time."

Kim reached over and ran her fingers lightly down the back of his neck, cradling them softly in between his shoulder blades. "We've got as long as it takes," she whispered. "Tell me."

Stuart rolled over and switched the lamp off. "Come here," he said.



It was just after eight o'clock the next evening when Alana slipped out of the back door behind Ashton, and ducked quickly into the garage. Kim came running out behind her. "Hey," she whispered, pulling Alana in for a hug. "We're gonna be praying for you, okay? Every second till you're back here with us."

"Yeah." Alana tried to smile nonchalantly, but she was rattled and couldn't hide it. "Yeah, thanks. I'll need that." She lowered her voice and said, "Pray he's cute, okay?"

Kim smiled. "Well, one thing is sure—he's desperate! He asked to see you pretty fast when Ashton called him."

"Yeah well, good thing for him—if he's hard up he won't be picky about the merchandise. Hey, I gotta go. See you, Kim. Take care of all them guys!"

Kim smiled and slipped back out of the garage.

Alana looked around the garage and finally spotted a modest sports car in the back with the lights flickering. As she walked towards it, the engine started, and Ashton pulled out. "Hop in," he called, shoving the door open for her.

Alana stepped in and arranged herself carefully on the seat.

"You look good," Ashton said. "I gather you don't wear this kind of stuff much."

"Much?" Alana snorted. "Try ever!" She twisted the silky black fabric with her hands. "I feel like a two-bit hooker or something."

"You're nothing like that, Alana," Ashton said fiercely. "I've known the Lord long enough to know that He does some pretty unconventional things, and I have a feeling that this is one of them. Don't degrade yourself. Keep your eyes focused on the way the Lord sees things. He told us to do this, so we can't go wrong."

"Yeah yeah," Alana said.

Ashton's few attempts at small talk died off there. If ever in her life Alana had been in the mood for small talk, it would not have been now, and she was not the type to indulge in trivial politeness at times when her metabolism was in turmoil. So the rest of the trip was a quiet one.

Before too long Ashton turned into a wide, tree-lined avenue. The houses that lined the block were wide and spacious, with low, sweeping roofs and elaborate gardens. He turned up to the right and pulled up alongside a sleek steely blue low-rider.

"Here we are," he said, turning off the motor.

Alana looked at Ashton, her big brown eyes quivering in the dim light. "Would you ... pray for me?" she muttered almost imperceptibly.

Ashton could tell how much that request had cost her, and was happy to oblige. Grabbing her hand he

poured out his heart with all the eloquence of a British-born aristocrat. By the time he had finished, Alana was smiling.

“You hit the nail on the head, man,” she said, slapping his leg. “Thanks. That was great. So how do I look?” She jumped out of the car and twirled grandly around.

Ashton looked at her with a half-smile on his face. The long black dress was sleeveless and cut up into thin shoulder straps. It reached past her ankles, and the shimmery surface was flicked with silver inlaid thread. Her short black hair had been styled into an uncharacteristic French twist, and her makeup was more classy than gothic. She only held out with silver metallic nail polish as a tribute to her true inner self.

“You look ... quite unlike your normal self,” Ashton smiled. He had only known Alana for a couple of days, but he could tell by the way she wore the outfit—with the air of a person balancing a stack of books on their head—that she had not stooped to such levels in a very long time. “But I’ve got to admit—it suits you.”

“Hey, who knows? Maybe this’ll be the new me!” she grinned. She grabbed her handbag off the car seat and slammed the door zestily.

Ashton moved past her and rang the doorbell.

Joseph Tow had apparently heard their commotion, because the door opened almost before Alana had gotten up the steps. “Do come in,” he murmured.

Ashton held the door and Alana walked past him begrudgingly. Once inside, she looked around curiously. The room was decorated in a manner that suggested no expense had been spared. It almost bordered on bad taste, as though the owner was trying to make a statement about his financial status. She turned her attention to Tow. He was not altogether bad looking. His prominent nose was almost aquiline, and a certain mole was placed tastefully upon his

right cheek. He somehow looked younger than she had expected, though he was clearly approaching at least forty.

*Well, there’s a first time for everything,* she thought to herself.

Ashton and Tow had moved a little away from her, and were conversing in low tones. A furtive look in her direction every now and then confirmed the course their conversation was taking. She turned her back to them and twiddled with her purse.

“Oh, Jesus,” she found herself praying in a whisper, “You know me better than I know You, and You know I’m not real big on talk. I always feel like I don’t know what to say, but I’m gonna try and do this more because it’s pretty low for me to just come sucking up to You when I need something and no other time. But I do need You now. I wouldn’t admit it to anyone else, but I’m scared. This whole deal is just so not me. The dress, the hair—for Christ’s—er, *Your* sake, the *handbag!* Jesus, I don’t do handbags! But here I am, and in a few minutes Ashton’s gonna pull out and I’m gonna be left with this weirdo. I really need to know that You’re right here, You know, with me and all. You can bring anyone else You like—God the Father, angels, ghosts, the works. Just be here with me, please.”

Alana suddenly noticed the muttering in the background had stopped, and spun around to find the two men staring at her.

“Well,” Ashton said, “I guess I’ll be off then. Mister. Tow here will show you around and make you comfortable.”

“All rightie then,” Alana said, with forced effervescence.

“I’ll be back to get you about two o’clock,” Ashton said.

“Oh, please!” Alana protested. “No, I can find my way back.”

"I insist," Ashton nodded. "It's not safe walking the streets at night—especially in your condition." He raised his eyebrows significantly. "I'll be back then. Okay?"

Alana nodded.

With a farewell to Tow, Ashton stepped outside the door and shut it behind him. Alana thought she caught a strange look that he sent her way. What was it? Pity? Fear? Worry? She couldn't tell, and at that moment, trying to analyze it seemed to be too much work. She took a deep breath and steeled herself for the long night that was ahead of her.

"So, what's your name?" Tow was saying.

"Alana," she replied. "And I'm thirsty. You got anything to drink?"

"Sure thing, Alana," Tow grinned. "Come right this way."

*Here we go, Alana thought. He doesn't waste any time, does he?*

"This is the den." He flung open a door with a flourish.

Alana walked up the slight step into the room. If the room they had first entered had hinted of bad taste, this one was a decided improvement. It seemed to have been modeled in a sort of rain forest motif, with tropical plants hanging in strategic locations and a delicate fountain filling the center of the room.

Alana gave the room her highest praise. "Not a bad pad you've got here."

"Thank you," Tow said. He walked over to a bar in the corner and pulled out a bottle. He didn't offer Alana a choice, so she just took the small whiskey glass he held out.

"Thanks," she said, and sat down on a low-lying black leather sofa. "So here I am—what now?"

Tow smiled, a crooked smile, but not an unfriendly one. He came and sat down next to her. "Tell me about yourself."

"You want to know about me?" she asked, with a little laugh.

"Yeah, sure. I mean, the reason you're here—I suppose Ashton told you. I wanted to converse with someone who was not registered."

"Oh yes, conversation," Alana nodded. "Right. Okay, let's converse. What do you want to know?"

"Why aren't you registered?"

Alana cocked her head to the side a little. "Um ... too much trouble," she offered. Then she sighed, and put her glass down on the table. She wasn't used to drinking hard liquor, and although she had a pretty good alcohol tolerance, she could feel the percentages dulling the outlying edges of her senses. "No, I don't know. That would depend if you're thinking of now or then."

"You've come across a new reason of late?"

"Well, I've always been sort of a Devil-may-care type, and that was always my reason for now. You know, be different from the norm. But then more recently..." Alana suddenly stopped on that train of thought. *I wonder how much I should be telling this guy? I don't have a clue what his position on renegades is.* She shrugged her shoulders abruptly. "Yeah, so I guess that about sums it up."

"You said you'd had a change of motive," Tow persisted.

"Oh, I don't know," Alana bluffed. "Sometimes your perception changes, you know? You think things are red but then you see they're blue. You're still doing the same thing but suddenly you find some great new explanation for it. I don't know. It doesn't all make sense, but hey, what does?" She smiled and picked up her glass, satisfied at having answered his question without making a single iota of sense. "Got some more of this drinking stuff?" In truth she had had about as much as she wanted, but she was ready to grasp at anything to change the subject.

“Sure,” Tow said, getting up and getting the bottle from the bar.

While he was still in motion Alana pressed her advantage, determined not to be put on the defensive again. She was here for a reason, and she was darned if she’d let herself get cornered into a sidetrack without pumping him for any and all needed information.

“So, what do you do?” she asked.

“Me? I’m a systems analyst. I work at Trinitech.”

“Oh, big name company,” Alana crooned, laying on the charm as thick as she could stand. “All bells and whistles for you, huh? You a big shot?”

Tow laughed, and shrugged a little. He was obviously not a humble man. “Well, you could say that.”

“I’m very impressed by importance,” Alana lied. “Impress me.”

Tow drank down his whiskey and poured himself another. “Impress you, huh? Well ... let me think about that. What could possibly impress a tough girl like you?”

“I don’t know,” Alana said, tracing her fingers along the side of the couch. “Tell me about your work. What’s something really great you’ve done?” Tow leaned back and ran his hand through his hair. He hesitated, with the air of a schoolboy trying to decide which of his great deeds he should describe to the object of his affection. “All right,” he said. He seemed to be wrestling with his inner conscience.

Alana guessed he was trying to decide if he should say something or not. She leaned over and poured him another drink. Gambling on his personality type, she gave a casual laugh. “Of course all that stuff you do is probably classified, so you’re probably best off not telling me any of it.”

Tow paused with his glass in midair, as though he had suddenly come to his senses. He looked at her seriously. “You’re quite right,” he said.

Alana laughed and stood up, filling up her glass again. Inwardly she kicked herself as hard as she could. *Great!* she fumed. *He was playing right into my hand and it’s not even nine o’clock yet, then I go and blow it.* She sat back down on the couch, but as she did an amazing thing happened to her. Over the drone of the light chit-chat that was going on, she suddenly heard a quiet voice echoing in her mind, repeating something she’d heard Stuart say: *Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of you.*

Alana’s eyes widened. “Can I use your bathroom?” she asked quickly.

“Sure thing,” Tow said. “Just up the hall to the right.”

Alana strolled casually out, then dove into the bathroom. She flipped down the toilet seat and sat on it, putting her head in her lap. “You spoke to me!” she whispered aloud. She had no idea why the event had surprised her so, but hearing those words form so clearly in her mind had caught her completely off guard, and she needed a few minutes to recover.

“I mean,” she said, standing up and talking to herself in the wide mirror, “it’s one thing to be like transformed and zapped like the instrument of God before the entire Devil-worshipping world.—But hearing a voice in your head that’s like Almighty God, now *that* is seriously whoa!” She turned her head to either side. “Nice mirror,” she said, posing for a minute with her best smile. “Sure wish I had one like this at my place.”

Two or three minutes later she strolled back into the den. Tow was sprawled on the couch, at least at a twenty-degree greater inclination than he’d been when she left. The bottle also was noticeably emptier.

“You are a stunning woman,” Tow said. His words were slurred.

Alana came and sat down next to him on the couch.

“So what’d you bring me here for, Tow?” she said. “To talk? You want to talk with me all night?”

“You got other things in mind?” Tow lunged closer to her, and Alana winced at his strong breath.

“Well, um, let me see,” she said sarcastically. “Nope, can’t think of a thing. Guess I’d better be going then.”

She started to stand up, but he grabbed her hand and pulled her back onto the couch. “Come here,” he said. “I want to show you something.”

“Oh?” Alana braced herself for the great revelation, but to her surprise he stood up, still grasping her by the hand, and began marching out of the room.

Alana followed uncertainly. *I guess the great revelation happens in the boudoir*, she thought.

Tow was very unstable on his feet.

“Do you get this drunk all the time, or just when you get unregistered girls over for the night?” Alana asked as they walked up the stairs.

Tow laughed. “I’m afraid it’s a habit of mine,” he laughed, and then burped unbecomingly. “It’s a damn shame though, seems to take more and more booze every time to do it good.”

“So you do it intentionally? That’s your purpose?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“I can think of a few reasons why not. Doesn’t it give you a hell of a hangover? I don’t know, seems you could enjoy things better if you were coherent, no?”

Tow turned and looked her straight in the eyes. “What’s there to enjoy?” he said simply. For a moment she thought she saw a flicker of some type of inner hunger, but as she wondered how to respond, the moment passed, and his old look returned. “Come on,” he said. “In here.”

He pushed open a door, into what Alana could easily tell was supposed to have been a bedroom. This was obviously not the part of the house where he

usually took guests; one look at the paraphernalia that covered the room like a layer of silt was enough to tell that. Tow didn’t seem to notice. Then he saw Alana looking around the room in dismay, and grinned. “I straightened up a little today,” he said. To Alana’s horror he appeared quite serious.

He dropped her hand and moved over towards the bed.

“Here we are then,” she said, grimacing to herself.

But Tow didn’t stop at the bed, instead moving over to a large desk with a large desktop computer that was at the far end of the room. “Pull up a chair,” he said, switching on the monitor. “I want to show you a thing or two.”

“Okay,” Alana said. “This is good.” Words flashed across her mind again: *That the excellency of power may be of God, and not of you.* “Oh, yes,” she whispered again. “Very good indeed.”

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**THE VIGIL BY THE CACTUS**

It was nearing sunrise, and there was no shelter in sight.

“What are we going to do, Jay?” Kate asked. “I don’t feel at all tired, but I have a feeling that when this sun breaks out on us, it won’t be long till we’re nothing more than crispy toasties.”

Ringo nodded. “It was hell in the shade when we were back with the army guys. Out in the open—we won’t last more than a couple of hours.”

“So what do we do then?” Jay stopped and turned around to face the others.

Kate took the opportunity to sit down. “I don’t see any shelters in sight,” she said.

“Wait, man,” Ringo said. “What about that angel-guy you saw back at our last place. Didn’t he say whatever you wanted you should ask for?”

“We,” Jay said, correcting him. “We, us—not me in particular.”

“Yeah, whatever, man, but doesn’t that include things like shelter and food?”

Jay considered. “I guess so,” he finally said. “I don’t see why not. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it earlier.”

“A lack of faith, man!” Ringo laughed.

Jay turned to him, surprised. Somehow it didn’t

sound like the type of thing Ringo would say. But he had said it, so that was that. And more—it was true.

“I guess sometimes we’re afraid to ask something for fear it’ll be too much, and it’ll show the Lord up or something, you know, like He won’t be able to deliver and then we’ll be stranded.” Jay laughed. “I know it sounds crazy.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Kate said with a smile. “I feel like that all the time.”

“Then I say we should ask for the biggest—the most!” Ringo burst out, throwing his arms out wide for emphasis.

“What like, ‘There’s no place like home?’” Kate laughed, clicking her heels together as a Dorothy in Oz reference. “Wishing ourselves back home or something?”

Ringo twisted his lips around. “I wasn’t thinking *that* big...,” he said.

“No, I think you’re right,” Jay said excitedly.

“You think we should wish to be home?” Kate asked incredulously.

“No, not that exactly,” Jay said, “but don’t you think we could ask the Lord to send someone along to rescue us? I mean, why should we just pray for shelter and food, and then keep on walking through the desert tomorrow? Why shouldn’t our trip be ended?”

“Well, maybe we’re not where we’re supposed to be yet, maybe we’re supposed to be somewhere else,” Kate said hesitantly.

“Did or did not the angel say we could ask for *anything*?” Jay asked.

“You tell me, I didn’t hear him,” Kate said wryly.

“He did.”

“Well, if you’ve got the faith for this, then I’m game,” Kate sighed. “It’s a stretch, you know, but stretching is better than pulling a muscle I guess.”

“Yeah, I’m up for it too, man!” Ringo said excitedly. “Let’s do it.”

And so they all dropped down on the sandy desert floor, and draped their arms around each other into some sort of human pyramid. Jay led out in the prayer, and when no one else contributed and the petition seemed to be over, they all stayed motionless for the better part of five minutes.

At last Ringo groaned and fell over to the side. “I’m sorry man, I just had to move. My knees were killing me!”

“That was so powerful!” Kate looked up, her eyes shining.

“Wasn’t it, though?” Ringo laughed, as he rolled back in the sand. “I could almost feeling the lightning strike. We’re gonna get our ride, man, you can bet on that.”

Jay sat back too. He had a strange smile on his face. “I think I agree with you, Ringo,” he said.

“What’s the look, Jay?” Kate asked.

“What look?”

“You know, the look. You don’t usually look like that.”

Jay shrugged, and jumped up. “I don’t know,” he said. “It just struck me as sort of awesome all of a sudden. I mean—think of what we’ve been through in the last couple of days! Can you ever imagine yourself worrying about anything again?”

Kate laughed aloud. “You’re right,” she said. “I don’t know if I ever will be able to.”

Ringo looked thoughtful. “I think I will,” he finally said. “But I haven’t been into this Jesus stuff as long as you guys have. I might think differently at a later time. You can ask me again later.”

“Come on, guys, let’s keep moving,” Jay turned back to face the way they’d been heading. “The sun’s nearly up and we’ve got a ride to meet up with!”

“Oh yeah!” Ringo said, and they started on their way again.





“Um, Jay,” Kate said hesitantly, as they stopped to fight over the little spot of shade that a cactus gave off.

“Yeah?” Jay asked, as Ringo shoved him aside to take his turn out of the sun.

“What happened to our ride? It was over an hour ago that we prayed, maybe more.”

“Yeah, man, what’s up?” Ringo asked.

“Move over, my turn,” Kate said, and collapsed into the tiny shaded spot.

“I don’t know,” Jay replied. “I don’t know any more than you do—but we can’t give up our faith just ‘cause we don’t see the answer straight off, right?”

“I guess so,” Kate sighed. “It’s sure getting hot though. I thought the angel said just to ask.”

“And we did,” Jay said. “So now we’ve just got to wait. You ask, then you wait. Ask and wait, that’s how it works. Doesn’t always jump right into your lap, you know. But it’s gonna come.”

“Oh my God! Holy Mary, mother of Jesus and Lord of all the angels! Is that ... is that something out there?” Ringo had staggered to his feet and was squinting out across the shimmering desert.

It was hard to see anything in the liquid heat, but after studying the object that Ringo had so enthusiastically pointed out, they all agreed that it was colorful and it seemed to be moving.

“We’ve gotta go for it, man!” Ringo said, starting off.

“Wait up!” Jay said, grabbing him by the back of his jumpsuit. “Let’s get our act together. We can’t even tell which way they’re going. Maybe they’re coming to us.”

“Yeah, and maybe they’re not,” Ringo retorted. “I for one am not gonna wait here, fighting over some ten-inch block of shade!”

“Lord, what should we do?” Jay said, rubbing his hands vigorously across his stubbly chin.

Kate looked at him inquiringly. Ringo turned around too, and threw him a withering look. “That’s good, man, that’s the way to do it. Just bring your God into the picture, then what am I supposed to do, run off?”

Jay stood there in silence, waiting for an answer.

“Well?” Ringo asked. “What’d He say? Can I leave now?”

“They’re coming to us!” Jay said triumphantly, looking up with a glowing light in his eyes.

Ringo was quite taken aback by Jay’s determined enthusiasm. “They’re *what?*” he said.

“They’re coming to us,” Jay repeated. “They’re on their way here now. It’s the answer to our prayer.—We asked, He sent. They’re coming to us!”

“So what do we do?” Kate looked off toward the horizon uncertainly.

“I guess we just wait. They’ll be here before long. At least we’ve got some shade.”

Ringo looked uncertainly from one to the other, apparently trying to decide if he really was willing to stake his life and any possible hope of rescue on the faith of these two obvious lunatics. “All right, fine,” he finally said, and threw himself down in the sand. “But if you’re wrong, just ... just ... just put on my grave that it wasn’t my fault. Write ‘he told them so,’ something like that.”

Kate giggled.

The minutes dragged by. After about fifteen had passed Ringo jumped up. “What’s with them, man? What are they doing out there, taking a pee?”

“They’re getting closer,” Kate said. “I can see them more clearly now. Seems to be some sort of camel train—a bunch of ‘em, looks like.”

“I wonder if they’ve seen us?” Jay mused.

“Let’s make sure,” Ringo said, squatting down. “Jump up, Kate!”

“What?”

“Jump on my shoulders. We’re wearing neon orange, for Christ’s sake. Just flap your arms and they’re bound to notice.”

Kate looked uncertainly at Ringo’s wiry frame, then hesitantly climbed up onto his shoulders. Holding onto his hair for dear life, she swayed and leaned precariously in all directions as Ringo slowly raised himself back into a standing position. Jay came running over to stand behind the odd monument, just in case it should topple in mid-action.

“Now shout!” Ringo instructed her.

“You shout!” Kate said. “I’m doing the waving.”

“HEY OUT THERE!” Ringo bellowed dutifully.

Kate flapped her arms like an overgrown scarecrow.

There was no way to tell if they had been spotted or not. The procession moved steadily in their general direction, but they were too far away for Kate to see any specifics. All of a sudden a piercing beam of light ricocheted off of one of the camels. Kate was so surprised she fell over backwards, landing squarely on top of Jay.

Leaving the two to sort out their tangled selves, Ringo was scrutinizing the distant camel train. “Haaaaah!” he yelled suddenly. “They’re signaling to us!”

Jay and Kate scrambled up to look.

“They must have like a mirror or something. They’re reflecting the sunlight in little flashes. I guess they’re trying to say that they saw us.”

“Either that or, ‘Stay right where you are—we were hoping for some red meat for dinner,’” Kate joked.

“Are they doing a message with their little flashing?” Ringo asked. “They keep doing these little stops and starts.”

“Maybe it’s Morse code,” Kate suggested.

“No way, Morse code went out of use years ago,” said Jay.

“What?” Kate turned to look at him.

“Yeah, you didn’t know that? I read it in the paper years back. I don’t know, they just signed it off. Too old or something.”

“Well, maybe they don’t know that it’s out,” Ringo suggested.

“Either way, I don’t know Morse code, so it doesn’t really matter. The important thing is they saw us, and they’re on their way.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Kate said, noticing that the cactus patch was free and diving for it before the other guys had a chance.

“Well, we’d better take turns standing up here so they don’t accidentally pass us by,” Jay said.

“Yeah man, your turn for the first shift, Kate and me done our duty for the hour.”



It took just under an hour before the camel party came anywhere near them. Having ascertained that they had in fact been seen—a wildly gesticulating camel driver had made that point clear quite some time previous—Kate and Jay preferred to vie for the shade instead of traipsing across the desert in hopes of meeting up with their supposed rescuers a few minutes more quickly. Ringo, on the other hand, was having a hard time containing himself.

“Look at them, man!” he burst out, treading out a little path in the sand as he paced back and forth in front of the cactus. “They’re high and cool on their lofty beasts, and we’re sweating it out here like a bunch of losers!”

“So what do you want us to do, Ringo?” Jay sighed.

“Well, let’s go out to meet them.”

“Why? We’ll just tire ourselves out even more. They’ll be here in ten or fifteen minutes.”

“I can’t wait ten or fifteen minutes, man! I’m dying of thirst *now!*”

“Go for it then, Ringo! Be our guest!” Kate said

curtly.

Ringo looked at her in surprise. "All right then," he said suddenly. "I think I will." With that, he set determinedly off towards the oncoming camels.

Jay looked after him doubtfully. "You think we should go along too?" he asked.

"Why?" Kate laughed. "As you said—they'll be here soon enough. I mean, you can go if you want, but to be honest I can't move another inch. I'm plumb fried."

"Yeah, me too," Jay agreed.

And so they waited. Having settled themselves at last into a comfortable position wherein each of them was repository for half of the cactus' bounty, Jay and Kate were surprised to suddenly feel themselves jostled and kicked.

"Wake up, you losers!" It was Ringo's voice, sounding lively and refreshed.

Jay jumped up. "What happened?" he asked.

"You dropped off to sleep, the two of you all cozied up together," Ringo laughed.

Kate sat up, rubbing her hands through her hair and looking around groggily. "I feel like I'm burning up," she croaked. "My skin must be purple!"

"Not quite," Ringo smiled, "but you are starting to blister." He turned to the side and said, "This is Abib. He's the chief of this here procession."

"Hello, Abib," Jay held out his hand in greeting, and the well-wrapped Bedouin shook it warmly.

"Your friend has tell us your story," Abib spoke in clear, crisp English with only a hint of an accent, but awful construction. "It is a sad thing they are having done. We hear nothing of it, but we have wondered of the great noises and lights we have seen in the night. We traveling long," he added quickly, seeing Jay's puzzlement. "We have not caught up with much news."

"Has...?" Jay looked at Ringo. "Have you asked...?"

"Why yes," Abib smiled graciously. "You wonder

about to join our caravan. You are greater than welcome, my friends. Losing in the desert is not a fate that I should desire to come upon any man. Yet I also have my trade to be upkeeping. I think that you have no money with you." He lifted his eyebrows questioningly.

The three shook their heads.

"Yes, that thought spoke to me at the start. Very well, I shall giving you passage to the nearest settlement. And in return, you will take work at a friend to whom I shall offer you. He reimburses your travel expenses to myself in return for your labor costs, and thus we are all content. What do you talk?"

Jay and Kate looked at each other. Ringo seemed blissfully happy. "I've already agreed, man. I'm on board! What about you guys?"

"What kind of work would this be?" Jay asked cautiously.

"Nothing illegal, do not fear," Abib smiled. "I am a truthful man. A friend I have who owns a small factory on the outskirts of town. He owes me a favor and I trust he will be glad to help. So, do we have a pact?"

Jay hesitated, looking to Kate for her opinion. She shrugged, too tired to think or do anything aside from devoting her full attention to the water canteen she had just been introduced to.

Jay lowered his head for a moment, propelling his questioning thoughts upward for a confirmation. *What should we do?* he begged silently.

*Go with these ones,* came the reply. *They are the answer to your prayer, and I will keep you on your journey and the mission whereunto I shall bring you afterwards.*

Satisfied for the time being with that intriguing answer, Jay looked back up to Abib with a smile. "We'll be glad to come along," he said. "Thank you so much for having us."

Abib nodded. He turned around and shouted out

a string of commands in Arabic. Then he looked back to Jay. “We will camp here shortly. The man with purple turban will show you food and drink, and will provide you with some...”—he looked up and down their attire with a smile—“some more suitable vestures. The camel you will ride also he will show you.” Abib nodded and left abruptly, apparently anxious to disengage himself before the stream of thanks broke out again. He was a bashful man.

Ringo came over and slapped Jay vigorously on the back. “He did it, man!” he said exultantly. “Your God did it again. I tell you what, man, I never believed in God more than I believed in the tooth fairy or Colonel Sanders, but, man, you’ve got me on a double-take.” Ringo shook his head. “Yeah, you’ve really got me on it, man. I owe you one—I owe you a couple. In fact, I’m just gonna hang with you, if you don’t mind.”

Jay looked at him questioningly. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I don’t know, man, but what am I gonna do? I’m a convict, and I haven’t done much else with my life but rob and kill. My gang was my life and I don’t want to say I’m lost without them, but what’m I gonna do out here in the middle of nowhere?” He kicked the ground and grinned. “Nah, truth is, man, if you faced me up with all my old buddies I’d spit in their faces, ’cause they’re scumbags, every one of ’em. You guys got the real stuff, and I’m sticking with you. I wanna do what you do—whatever got you in this whole mess, locked up and shipped off as mine fodder, that’s what I wanna do. I want to...” He threw his head back and laughed out loud, “I want to be a religious fanatic!”

Jay burst out laughing. He threw his arms around Ringo and hugged him. “God bless you, man,” he said. “You’re one in a million.”

“Come on, guys,” Kate grinned. “Let’s go find the guy with the purple turban.”

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## HACKER’S DREAM

Alana tiptoed quietly down the staircase that led to the basement. It was nearly three o’clock in the morning and she didn’t want to risk waking up the others. Politeness had never been high on her priority list, but if there was anything she didn’t want to do it was answer questions about her night at this hour of the morning. She carefully unlatched the door, stepped in, and shut it behind her. She tiptoed through the darkened living room, heading towards the back bedroom which the boys had forced her to stay in.

She had nearly made it to the room when all of a sudden the living room lights went on. Julian and Cal leaped out from behind two armchairs. “SURPRISE!” they yelled. “HAPPY BIRTHDAY!”

“Oh, my God!” Alana shrieked. “You guys are total idiots! What are you trying to do, wake the kids up? There you go, now look what you’ve done!”

The bedroom door opened and Stuart stood there, scratching his head and looking like he’d just rolled out of a sound sleep. “Hey, Alana!” he said. “Thanks for waking me up! I tried to stay up, but Kim...”

“Don’t blame it on me,” Kim appeared wearing the T-shirt that Stuart had had on a few hours before—though it looked remarkably better on her—and

bumped him out of the way. "I didn't know it was your birthday, Alana."

"It's not," Alana said dryly, dropping her handbag on the ground and collapsing into a chair. "These guys are just being morons."

"So," Cal said. "The big question...?"

"Yeah, tell us how it went!"

"Did you, like..." Cal raised his eyebrows knowingly.

"And what difference would that make to you, soldier-buddy?" Alana said haughtily. "But, oh you guys! I have got to tell you. It's really a good thing you were up because I probably wouldn't have been able to sleep. This guy is *totally* our guy. He is like *ripe* for the taking!"

"What do you mean?" Kim asked.

"Okay, let me start from the beginning." Alana kicked off her shoes, pulled the bobby pins from her hair and shook her head vigorously. Her hair cascaded down onto her shoulders like a little black fountain. "So I go in to see this guy, you know, we do the whole small talk thing. He must have been halfway sloshed before I even got there, and from the time I set eyes on him, he hardly took his mouth off the glass. Doing straight whiskey almost the whole time! So he was pretty gone.

"Anyway, he sets out trying to impress me." She laughed, and slapped her leg. "Imagine! Impress *me*? So he takes me up to his *boudoir* and what do I see, cleverly hidden beneath the filth, but his grand machine."

"He took you to his *computer*?" Kim exclaimed in awe.

"You bet!" Alana grinned. She reached out her hand for the glass of water that Stuart passed her. "Thanks, Stu. Oh, that's good. Sheesh, am I sick of whiskey!"

"So what happened?" Julian asked.

"Well, he starts talking about his work. He's a systems analyst, you know, checks out operating systems for big companies, finds all their bugs and holes, sets up their hardware, stuff like that. Oh," she grinned at Kim and Julian, "pardon if I use the wrong lingo, I'm really the babe in the woods when it comes to techno-stuff. But anyway, if we're going by this guy's impression of himself, he is the Messiah in the flesh." She laughed. "But pulling it down just a notch or two, I'd say we have ourselves a pretty top guy."

"He works for—?" Julian asked.

"Trinitech," Alana replied. "And he is top in the company, they save him for the very best and most 'sensitive' jobs. That's the word he used."

"Sensitive, huh?" Cal asked.

Kim brought her hand up to her forehead and brushed the hair back out of her eyes. "He checks out the operating systems for all these guys...?" she said slowly, turning to look at Julian.

"Yeah, and he does most of it straight from his computer."

"Wait a minute, I thought he worked in that office building where Ashton works," Stuart said quickly.

"He does," Alana shrugged. "But I guess he freelances at home too. I don't know, maybe he does his hushy-hushy stuff away from any prying eyes. I mean, I would. Not that I'm any kind of a role model in this situation, but anyway. I don't know, I suppose I could have sucked in more if I was a computer geek like you guys, but anyway, I saw enough to tell me that he's our man."

"I was just thinking," Julian said slowly.

"I think I'm thinking the same thing," Kim grinned, turning towards him.

"Oh no," Stuart said. "You're not thinking of breaking into his computer, are you?"

"And why not?" Kim said quickly. "How else are

we supposed to find out what's going on? He's not going to go spewing total state secrets to Alana, no matter how sloshed he is."

"My guess is"—Julian leaned forward a little—"and I bet you're thinking the same thing, Kimmy-girl, that if he's gone in legit on that machine—we could easily hack into any of those systems. He's not gonna have the iron bars up on his home machine—at least he shouldn't."

"My Lord!" Kim curled herself up in a ball and rolled onto the carpet. "I can't believe this is happening to me! You can't imagine how I've dreamed of a chance like this!"

"This is sounding suspiciously like a couple hundred movies I've seen," Alana said. "I thought things like this don't happen in real life. This isn't Hollywood, you know."

"Alana," Kim said exultantly, "this is *better* than Hollywood. This is the *Tribulation*, for goodness' sake. Hollywood's got nothing on us!"

"So what exactly is it we're talking about doing here?" Cal asked. "Julian and Kim are going to hack into some government system while Alana is downstairs knocking the guy?"

Alana looked spitefully at Cal and didn't answer.

"Are you sure he's done world government stuff, Alana?" Julian asked.

Alana nodded. "That is one thing I *am* sure of. He boasted on it at least four or five times, to make sure I was really impressed."

"Well, there you have it then," Julian smiled. "We're practically in already."

"I guess we'd better just..." Kim said hesitantly.

"Yeah, I was just thinking that," Stuart agreed. "We're gonna have to clear this with headquarters."

"Oh, Lordie!" Kim groaned. "I can't! I just can't bring myself to! I mean, what if He says *no*? We *have* to do this!"

"Don't worry, Kim," Stuart said, reaching over to squeeze her hand. "It's gonna be okay. The only way He'd say no is if there was some big bad reason."

"Yeah, like if maybe we're all gonna get killed, or arrested, or eaten by some fire-breathing dragon," Alana said. "Stuff like that, I don't mind knowing about."

"You're right," Kim sighed. "Okay, let's do it, quick. I don't want to build this thing up too big in my mind if we're gonna end up bombing out on it."

"I wonder if we should do this tomorrow morning?" Julian asked.

"No way!" Kim said. "You can go to bed if you like, we have to do this now."

"Fine," Julian shrugged, not bothering to point out that they were camped out in the middle of his sleeping area so he couldn't have gone to bed even if he'd wanted to.

And so the five closed their eyes, and Stuart brought the collective pool of their thoughts before the Throne. "So please, Jesus," he finished, after outlining the general situation, "please show us what to do. Some of us in particular are all jazzed about this idea, but as Alana said, if we're going to run into a fire-breathing dragon, we'd just as soon skip it. Most of all, we want to do Your will. That's what we're really here for, that's the bottom line. And if this just isn't it, if it's some hair-brained scheme we've dreamed up, then please set us straight. Just show us Your will very clearly, that's all we want. In Your name we ask."

"Amen," the others chorused, some more enthusiastically than others.

Silence settled on the little circle, as the seconds ticked by, gradually growing into minutes. Alana pried one of her eyes open and looked around at the others. Everyone had their eyes screwed shut, and all seemed to be intently listening for those inaudible voices that

were sure to come sooner or later. Alana quickly shut her eyes again.

All of a sudden she heard something deep in the recesses of her mind. *Oh my God!* She thought. *Not me! Don't speak to me—then I'm gonna have to say it in front of everybody! I know how it works.* She repeated the first line over in her mind: *Do not be afraid to go where your heart leads you.* She shook her head vigorously. There was no way she was going to start out with something like that.

She opened her eyes again. Across the room, Stuart opened his and looked at her. He raised his eyebrows questioningly, and she shook her head. Stuart somehow got the subliminal message. He tossed his head almost imperceptibly. *Go for it,* he seemed to be saying. Alana shook her head again.

In the midst of this heated exchange, Kim started sputtering in the corner. She spoke as though the words were being forced out of her, and at the first word, Alana jumped violently.

“Do not be afraid to go where your heart leads you,” Kim said. Then she moaned and dropped her head onto her lap, opening her eyes wide. “Now what if that was just me?” she asked the others mournfully.

“It wasn’t,” Alana said sheepishly. “I was getting the *exact* same thing.”

“You *what?*” Kim echoed.

“Yeah, I know, I chickened out. But I was getting that same exact phrase—down to the same spelling and all.”

“You’re serious?” Kim’s eyes were glowing.

“Yeah, aren’t I always?”

“Okay,” Kim nodded a couple times. “Okay, well in that case there was more. Let me get back into the spirit of it.”

Everyone’s eyes closed again, and silence returned. Then Kim started out again. “Do not be afraid to go where your heart leads you. For this idea is one that

I have ordained, that you may bring to naught the plans of the Enemy. I have carefully chosen the path upon which your feet have trod, to bring you to this very point, and now that you are here, I say unto you: Go with the power of the Almighty!” Kim stopped, and sighed contentedly. Her moment was over.

Stuart took up the anointing. “Only go slowly and seek Me at every turn, every step. For this mission shall not be easy. It shall bring you success only if you keep very close to Me all the way, and if not one of you shall lift his eyes off of Mine. It is My pleasure to keep you and My joy to protect you, but I can only do so if you remain one with Me at all times.” After a few minutes’ silence, Stuart asked, “Did anyone else get anything?”

Cal and Julian shook their heads.

Alana squirmed.

“What?” Stuart asked.

“It wasn’t like I actually *got* something,” she said. “Not like that thing I got at first. But I was just getting this impression like ‘the sooner the better’ type of thing. Like a real let’s-get-to-kicking-butt kind of a feeling, you know?”

Kim nodded. “Yes, I was kind of feeling that as well, though I wouldn’t have put it quite like that.”

“Okay then,” Stuart laughed. “Hackers, we’re on! We can tell Ashton about it tomorrow and take it from there.”

“Oh boy,” Kim said, and then looked over at Julian. “There is no way I’m sleeping any more tonight!”

“Well, we may as well,” Cal said, looking at his watch. “Cause if this thing happens sooner than later we’re going to want to be as fresh as we can.”

“Yeah, and I can think of a couple of short little guys who are gonna be up pretty soon,” Stuart said.

“Don’t remind me,” Kim grinned. “You’re right, we’d better hit the sack. See you tomorrow then.”

Stuart and Kim retreated to their bedroom, and

Alana slowly scuffled herself back into motion. She picked the handbag off the ground and flapped her hand aimlessly in the air as she walked towards the room. “So long, menfolk,” she said.

“Goodnight, Alana,” Julian called.

“Yeah, ditto,” said Cal.

Alana shut the door behind her. She looked around at the tiny, closet-sized room and sighed. All she wanted to do was get out of her stifling outfit and collapse in bed. The night had been much too long already. Just then there was a knock at the door. Pausing with her hands behind her neck as she strained for her zipper, she said, “Yeah?”

The door cracked open and Cal stuck his head in. “Mind if I stop in for a second?” he asked.

“What, come to help me undress?” Alana said, dropping her hands and plopping down on the bed. “Sure, come on in. What’s eating you?”

“Nothing’s eating me. Julian’s got his computer out and he’s going to be up a while so I thought I’d come give you some light conversation.”

“Oh right,” Alana said. “Of course. Should have guessed it right off.”

There was an awkward pause. Then Cal said. “So, did you and that weirdo guy, did you like ... you know?”

“Did we ‘like ... you know?’” Alana considered the question thoughtfully. She was not anxious to help Cal out in the slightest.

“Did you do stuff, you know, like have sex and all?”

“And what exactly is that to you, soldier-guy?”

“It isn’t anything to me,” Cal said, a little too quickly. “I’m just curious.”

“Oh, backing off so quickly, huh?” Alana said teasingly. “Well if you must know, we didn’t do a thing. He never came anywhere near me. I don’t know what the high point of the evening was for him, but he

seems to have a pretty hot thing going with his desktop, so I don’t know what exactly my function for the evening was supposed to be. Maybe he just wanted someone to show off to.”

“That’s weird,” Cal said.

“What, not what you were expecting?”

“No, I wasn’t expecting anything in particular, but he didn’t even make a pass at you or anything?”

Alana ignored the chance to make another dig at Cal for certain past events, and instead looked at him with a wicked grin. “Actually, since you asked, I think it’s something else.”

“What?” Cal asked suspiciously.

“Well, I think the guy Tow’s got some sort of a problem, you know, down there.”

“What, you mean like he’s impotent or something?”

Alana shrugged, but her eyes were twinkling. “Something like that. It’s just a hunch I got from some of the stuff he had lying around, and also the way he acted around me. Just something wasn’t quite right down there.”

Cal laughed. “You’re mighty observant.”

“No way, any girl would have known. It’s just the way things work.”

“So then what’s the whole kinky-sex-with-unregistered-female deal?”

“I don’t know—maybe I’ll ask him next time.”

“You would,” Cal laughed.

“Well,” Alana jumped up, “now that we’ve got that settled, I’m going to bed. You can do what you please but I’m bushed. I’ve had a helluva day.”

“I guess I’d better be off then,” Cal said, without moving an inch.

“Uh huh,” Alana replied. “Here, get my zipper, would you? I can’t reach the infernal thing.” She turned her back to him and flipped her hair out of the way.

Cal slowly pulled the zipper down, following it with



his eyes as it slid down her back and to the top of her briefs. “No boxer shorts today, I see,” he said with a quiet grin.

“Nah, doesn’t really do the trick under these duds,” she laughed, then turned around, still holding her dress in front of her. “So, what’s up? You staying for the whole show or what? I’m trying to make some progress in the general direction of dreamy-land here.”

Cal studied Alana’s face, then suddenly leaned over and kissed her. Alana let him for a few moments, then pulled away with a coy smile. “What did you do that for?” she asked. “I’m too tall for you, remember?”

“Hang that,” Cal said. “I’m ready to revise my doctrines.” He moved closer to her, and leaned over to kiss her again. This time she pulled back, and reached up her silver-tipped finger, which she put across his lips.

“I don’t think so,” she whispered, pouting up her red lips. “I don’t take nicely to rejections, and I certainly don’t hand ’em a get-out-of-jail-free card.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Cal said. “I didn’t know you then. I just don’t like to be jumped by any old girl any old time.”

“Oh, so that’s what you think of me?”

“No,” Cal said in exasperation. “I’m just not the in-and-out-of-bed type, okay. And I thought you were that type, and I just wasn’t going for it.”

“Well, what makes you now think I’m not?”

Cal looked up at her searchingly. “I don’t care now,” he said.

Alana rolled over onto her stomach with a groan. “What am I supposed to do now?” she wailed. “I can’t just like back down on my great resolution. I mean, when I have I ever backed down over some guy throwing himself at my feet?”

Cal saw his moment and leaned over her bare back, moving his lips slowly up and down the length of it, and painting intricate designs with his tongue.

Alana moaned. “Don’t do this to me!” she said, rolling over and throwing up her arms in protest.

Cal grabbed her wrists and pinned her back on the bed. “Tell me to stop,” he said, looking straight into her eyes with a look that pierced her through like a knife. “Just tell me and I’ll be out of here in a second. I swear I’ll never bother you again.”

Alana hesitated. She swept her gaze over his ruddy, smooth complexion; his square, boyish jaw; his clear blue-green eyes. “Come here,” she said, prying her arms loose and pulling down the front of her dress. “Let’s work out the details later. We’ve got some stuff to take care of.”



Ashton didn’t come by till eleven o’clock the next morning, and when he did, he found five bleary-eyed zombies sitting around the couches in various stages of decomposure. Dylan and Maya were jumping in the corner, and the others seemed to have started off reading something together, but now they were mostly dozing. No one seemed to have noticed that the reader had dropped off to sleep.

“What happened to you folks?” Ashton asked in surprise.

“We ... um ... talked together for a while last night,” Stuart said, waking up with a start. The book dropped out of his lap. “The kids were up early this morning.”

“That took care of the rest of us,” Julian yawned. “Apparently they can’t live in peaceful contentment until everyone is in an upright position.”

“And of course these guys had to get me out of bed too,” Alana grumbled. “Because I couldn’t be getting beauty sleep while the rest of the world suffered, now could I?”

“Well,” Ashton said cheerfully, “it’s just as well you’re all up, because I’m anxious to hear what the latest plan is.”

Kim perked up immediately. “Good of you to

mention that, Ashton,” she said. “Because we have a great plan and we want to hear what you think of it.”

“A great plan, eh?” Ashton chuckled. “Well, sounds exciting enough. I guess this was a spin-off on your tale from last night?” he asked Alana.

“Yeah,” Alana said. “They were all excited about the computer thing. They want to *hack in!*”

Ashton opened his eyes wide. “Now there’s an idea I hadn’t thought of. But how would you do it?”

“This is what we were thinking,” Stuart said. “If you can arrange another date for Alana—just as soon as possible, mind you. Then we can all follow close behind you in the car, and get into his computer while she keeps him busy for a while.”

Cal scowled and Alana gave him a hard poke, accompanied with a fierce you’d-better-keep-your-quiet-about-this look.

“Well, I’m assuming you’ve all thought this thing through...,” Ashton said.

The others nodded.

“And you can really do it?”

“Julian and Kim here are apparently some sort of world-class experts,” Alana grinned. “I figure I can give ’em a basic floor plan of the upstairs, and they should be able to take it from there.”

Ashton sighed and shook his head. “This is very dangerous,” he said. “You realize what would happen if you are caught!”

The others looked at each other, and nodded slowly.

“We’ve got to do it, Ashton,” Kim said. “It’s not only the opportunity every hacker dreams of, but we know there’s something foul about to happen to some people, and we don’t know how long we have. We’ve got to do something, and it just looks like this is the door the Lord’s opening for us.”

“Well,” Ashton said, “if you can put your lives on the line for this, I guess I can put mine.”

Kim looked up quickly. “Oh, gosh! I never thought of that! It’s true, that would tie you in with us, wouldn’t it?”

“Would it need to?” Cal asked. “Couldn’t Alana just deny that he knew anything about it?”

“Oh yeah, for sure,” Alana said. “You wouldn’t be at all involved.”

Ashton shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that,” he said. “I brought you to him, and you’re gonna be obviously part of it if you’re trying to keep him downstairs—which hopefully he won’t catch onto, but if he does, it should be fairly obvious. But look, let’s forget about that. I’m in with you folks. If it comes down to it—I have had a full life and I am thankful for what I’ve been able to do.”

“Oh, Ashton!” Kim flung her arms around his neck. “Thank you!”

“Well, let’s get down to business and work out some details then,” Stuart said.

Ashton nodded. “I’d better go call Tow right away. I’ll see how soon we can work it out for.”

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**RASHID AND HIS FRIENDS**

Nearly a full thirty-six hours had passed since Jay, Kate and Ringo had mounted their camels, and they were feeling quite a bit worse for the wear. Their aching joints and creaky extremities, however, were all but obscured by their delight at arriving back in civilization—of sorts. The small townlet where Abib and the camel train had duly dropped them seemed like a mere sputter in the great ocean of commercial metropolises, and as far as comparisons went, nothing that Jay or Kate had known as a town had ever seemed quite this small or remote. The people were friendly enough, though, and they seemed eager to entertain their new guests who, in their new authentic outfits and desert-stained exteriors looked every bit the part of wandering nomads.

Abib had paused the procession of cameleers to rap smartly on the door of a small thatched hut. A wizened old man showed them in, and from there they had been introduced to Rashid junior. The old man's name was also Rashid, but he was quite deaf and never responded to his name anyway.

The business of exchanging labor force for funds was quickly over with, and Abib made a hasty departure. He would have yearned for a longer stay, he assured them, but they had a deadline for bringing

their goods to the warehouse in the city, and they had to be on their way.

As the door was shutting on Abib's heels, the three newcomers looked around—from the bare hut walls, to the old man muttering on his chair in the corner, and back to Rashid, who stood eyeing them with curious anticipation.

"Well, my friends, I must say that you are a blessing from Allah," he smiled, rubbing his hands together. His command of English included what Abib's had lacked.

"We were told that we were to help you in your factory, in exchange for our transport this far," Jay said hesitantly.

"Yes, so Abib informed me." Rashid stood up. "Perhaps I may show you around?"

They all stood up, and followed Rashid out of the door. He held a grubby piece of paper in his hand, which he now consulted studiously. "According to my calculations, the work of one week for you all would prove adequate." Then he hesitated. "Of course, if you also wish a place to stay...?" He looked at them questioningly. "Yes, I thought as much. This coming also from the wages then would require two weeks' work."

Jay looked at the others, and then back at Rashid. "That sounds fine," he said. "What type of work is it?"

"It is simple factory work," he smiled. "We assemble sneakers."

"Sneakers?" Ringo asked.

"Yes," returned Rashid. "For export. The factory is two hours' drive across the plains. There is a larger town nearby, but I have preferred to live out here—so much more peaceful." He turned to look at them. "Have you ever seen the sun rise over the desert?"

The three nodded wearily. They had seen one too many sunrises over the desert.

Rashid had an entirely different perspective on the

experience, however, and he now sighed blissfully and shook his head. "There is nothing like it," he said passionately. "I would not trade my desert sunrise for all the money in the world!"

They had come to another little hut, and as they stepped inside, they could see it was divided into several rooms. "This will do you well, I hope," Rashid said. "My wife will bring some food to you presently. We will depart tomorrow morning at four o'clock. I trust you will be comfortable until then."

"Thank you," Kate said. "We appreciate your kindness."

With a nod and a smile, Rashid stepped back outside, shutting the door behind him.

"Well, that's that then," Ringo sighed, sitting down on the low bench that graced one side of the main sitting area. "But four o'clock! Man, that's an early up!" Suddenly he sat up a little straighter. "Say," he said, narrowing his eyes craftily, "he says the town's two hours away—what's keeping us here? Why don't we just split in the night? He'd never know!"

"We gave our word, Ringo," Kate said disapprovingly. "I thought you were gonna put your criminal life behind you."

"Yeah, I guess so," Ringo shrugged. "We're Christians now, right? I guess that's not a real Christian thing to do."

"Well, all I know is the Lord told us to come here, so He must want us here for some reason," Jay said. "And I figure we'd better sleep while we can—I can sure use it."

"Yeah, sounds good to me too," Kate said, making her way towards the smaller room in the back. You guys mind if I take this one?"

"Sure thing, sweet'art," Ringo laughed.

"Sleep well, Kate," Jay said with a wink. "I'll let you know when dinner comes by."



Four o'clock came around all too early for the weary travelers. Before they were quite psychologically ready, they heard the unrelenting pounding on the front door of their little hut. Jay jumped up and opened the door.

"Hey, Rashid—nice to see you!" he mumbled, yawning.

"You are not used to waking up at this hour, yes?" Rashid laughed. He held out a tray containing a big loaf of warm bread and a steaming teapot. "We will depart in twenty minutes. You can find your way back to the main street?"

Jay nodded. Finding one's way anywhere in this small excuse for a village would not be a problem.

Kate stumbled out of her room. "Morning so soon?" she smiled.

After they finished their breakfast, they stepped out into the dewy, pre-dawn morning. Kate took in a deep breath. "It's beautiful out here," she whispered. "So quiet, so still."

They walked quickly over to the main road—which looked suspiciously like an old dirt trail—where Rashid was waiting with an old beat-up jeep. "Jump in," he called out cheerily. Two thin boys were already in the car.

Rashid drove the roads like he was in a race with the elements. "For most people it is a three-hour drive," he shouted back to them, "but me, I make it in under two."

Kate smiled nervously, and clutched the side of the car as firmly as she could. This model was absent of any and all seatbelts, so she spent most of the next two hours engaged in fervent prayers for protection.

Rashid knew the terrain. Every now and then a mound of dirt or abnormally shaped lump of some sort would appear to burst out of the ground, but Rashid always swerved just in time, or drove up on the side of the road a little to avoid it. He was obviously

well practiced in the art of taming the wilderness with a four-wheel drive.

At last they arrived, just as the morning sun was beginning to peek over the distant horizon. The large concrete building was just on the outskirts of a moderately sized town. Rashid pulled the car up in what appeared to be a crude loading area. "You can come in this way," he said. "I will show you around."

The two boys jumped out and ran ahead, while Rashid showed Jay, Kate and Ringo inside the building. He led them through a quick tour of the property, then showed them to a place where they could park themselves for the day. "I hope you will not find the work too taxing," he said kindly. "My office is at the end of the room—you see? Back there. Please come to me if you have any questions."



Contrary to appearances, the work was exhausting. "I had no idea these things were done by hand," Kate moaned, nursing her aching fingers.

"It's not all," Ringo said, motioning towards the mechanical end of the factory room. "I guess they were short on people to do this side of things—I wonder why?"

Jay laughed. "Yeah, it's not exactly prime job placement I guess. But at least it got us out of the desert—I'll take my chances with sneaker-stitching any day over the big red sun."

"Here comes Rashid," Kate jumped up. "It's closing up time."

"And about time too," Ringo mumbled under his breath. It was almost seven o'clock.

"Come along, my friends," Rashid called. "You look much more tired than when I have seen you last. You must come to my house for the meal tonight. My wife is making a great feast for us."

The offer sounded extremely appealing, and was joyfully accepted by the three apprentices, who spent

most of the roughly two-hour return trip fantasizing about the feast to come. At last Rashid pulled up alongside his hut and they all climbed out.

They were not disappointed. The inside of the hut had been lavishly laid out with a large table heaping with Middle Eastern delights that made the hungry factory workers' mouths water. It was all they could do to mind their manners and politely greet Mrs. Rashid and the ten little Rashidettes who all flocked around them in friendly curiosity.

"Now come along, my friends," Rashid said, as he motioned to them. "Sit down—eat! I see that you are famished."

As they all settled around the table, all members of the Rashid family brought their hands together and folded them dutifully over their plates, and bowed their heads. Ringo stopped in mid-bite and shamefacedly joined in a similar action, as did Jay and Kate.

Moments later, the room returned to lively action as everyone sank into the succulent meal.

Jay looked up curiously. "You pray for your food before you eat?" he asked.

Rashid beamed from ear to ear. "Why yes!" he said. "My family—we believe! All of us, we are converted!"

"What do you mean, converted?" Kate asked, pausing with a lamb chop in her hand.

"We believe in Jesus, Son of the one true God, and the Savior of all mankind," Rashid said proudly.

"You're not Muslims?" Jay asked.

"No," Rashid replied. "Much of this area is a stronghold of the Christian faith. This is why we face so much resistance from the outside world."

"Tell us more about it," Jay asked.

"The big cities, they are all wanting to adopt this new registration system that the one-world government is advocating. Of course, it takes a while for things to travel so far out of the main roads and cities. But it is coming, slowly. Most of the cities around us have

submitted, yet we hold out, for of course, we cannot do such a thing."

"Of course," Jay said. "We know the Lord too."

"Ah, that is wonderful!" Rashid's eyes lit up. "I knew there was something about you from the first time we met. I knew you were honest and trustworthy folks."

Ringo's face fell. Obviously it was not him that Rashid had been looking at.

"And so, there you have it," Rashid said, as he served himself some more cucumbers. "The town where my factory is, we are a Christian town, and there are two other sister towns, one on either side, also Christian. There are also regions that are strongholds of Islam. But we have all banded together to fight against this evil dictator. We will sooner die than take their mark." He paused, and chuckled a little. "Before we have constant problems, our towns together—Muslims, Christians, always squabbling. But now—now we are brothers. We have one common enemy. Together we stand—we will fight to the death.

"You have no doubt heard all the commotion that is taking place across the border. We watch CNN too, you know, and they say we are the center of a vast terrorist army. But most of us are simple, common folk who refuse to bow to any man or government that would deny us the freedom to practice our religion without interference. Yes, there are troops, but not nearly so numerous—and certainly not as dangerous—as they would have you believe. We do not plant those terrorist bombs they keep blaming on the religious extremists, but still they blame it on us and still they come after us.

"It is true that we have mined the area dividing our lands, hoping to keep the one-world-government forces at bay, but it does not seem like it will last long. It is only a matter of time before they make it through and take over this whole region by force. Many towns in this region criticize us for not

embracing the new world system, them and their great technology, but we have our own beliefs concerning this dictator, and our people have chosen not to bow down to him, or accept his registration mark.

“God has miraculously protected us from their infiltrations thus far, and I believe it is partly in an effort to cover up their failures here that they are massing such large amounts of forces against us now. We do not know how much longer we may have, but we will hold out till the end.”

Jay, Kate and Ringo contemplated this information with a few moments of silence.

Rashid shook his head. “A sad shame it is, too. For if we had stayed all together, we in this whole area, maybe we would have had a hope of holding our own, but it was too much for the others. One by one they crumbled—and here we are.” He dipped his bread dismally into the communal sauce bowl, then suddenly looked up at Kate. “But for what am I speaking in such tones of sadness? This is a time of festivity! Let us be merry!—For we have each other, and, as I always say—we have this night! If we have nothing more, we have this night, so let us make it a festive one!”

“You are a very wise man, Rashid,” Kate said softly. “God will not fail you.”

“I hope and pray that that will be the case,” Rashid smiled. “But I do know that whatever will happen will be the product of His perfect plan.” Then he looked up at Jay quizzically. “Tomorrow is our weekly day of rest. Perhaps you all would like to join us at a meeting in town?”

“We would love to,” Jay said, after looking to the others for their confirmation.

“That would be splendid,” Rashid beamed. “We leave tomorrow at ten.”



The drive into town was much more pleasant with

the benefit of a long night’s sleep behind them, and Kate even found it within herself to enjoy the view—something she never thought she would have seen fit to do, her recent desert experiences having somewhat soured her on the whole sand-and-sky motif. But from the benefit of a moving vehicle, with the wind rushing unbridled through her hair and blowing in her face like it was trying to suck out her very soul—it was magnificent. Kate threw her head back, shut her eyes and allowed herself to soak in the warmth of its splendor.

She must have dozed off in that position, because the next thing she knew, the car had stopped and they were in front of an unfamiliar cluster of buildings.

“Come on!” Rashid had stopped the motor and jumped enthusiastically out of the car. “It’s just over here.”

Kate, Jay and Ringo had ridden in the car with Rashid and a handful of his brood, while the rest had sandwiched themselves in various other vehicles that were apparently headed to the same gathering.

Whatever the unsuspecting trio had imagined, there was nothing that could have prepared them for the feast of the eyes that they now stumbled upon. As they rounded the corner, it seemed like the huge market square had been converted into a sort of gathering spot, with wide awnings banding together to form a shady extension, and bright ribbons and banners everywhere. It looked like something out of the *Heaven’s Children* volume.

“Is it some sort of festival?” Kate whispered to Rashid.

“No, not really,” Rashid smiled. “Although every day that we come together to worship our Lord is a time of rejoicing. The women and children love to do this decoration. They see it as a sign of respect and love.”

Rashid was apparently some sort of elder amongst

the people, as evidenced by their reactions to him. Everywhere he went he was surrounded by a little cluster of people, children especially, who would grab ahold of his long robe as he walked by and thus be propelled around through the crowds.

Jay, Kate and Ringo stood off to the side a little; Kate feeling rather overwhelmed by the crowds, and Jay glad for the chance just to sit back and observe. The sight of so much concentrated peace and love of the Lord was like a healing balm to his soul after the horrors of recent days.

After an hour or two of mingling and greeting, during which the trio had soon become increased objects of interest, as word of Rashid's foreign guests swept through the crowds like wildfire, it was time for the gathering to come to order. A small makeshift stage had been cleared at one end of the square, and upon this a cluster of amateur musicians took their positions. They proceeded to launch into the happiest and most lively music that the three listeners had ever heard. Apparently the audience felt the same, for not halfway through the song, nearly a third of them were up dancing, whooping and twirling scarves. It was a tremendously happy group.

At last the musical moment was over, and Rashid took his place upon the stage. He spoke in Arabic and Jay, Kate and Ringo could not understand what he said, but they fed from his spirit, which was rich and vibrant. After a while the crowd muttered in a significantly noticeable way, and some burst out clapping.

Jay looked around suspiciously; even more so when it appeared that people were turning around to look at them. "Oh no!" he whispered, laughing to himself. "Not this—not now!"

"Come along, my friend!" Rashid called from the stage. "I have told the ones who are gathered here how you are a teacher, and now they beg me to hear

you speak. Come up here, and I will translate."

"What makes you think I am a teacher?" Jay asked slowly.

"I can see it in your eyes—I can read it on your face." Rashid smiled, still motioning with his hand.

"You have the appearance of one who has lived with the Master, and you could never hide it."

Not being able to withstand that argument, Jay acquiesced and started towards the stage. He motioned Kate to come with him but she shook her head vigorously. "Not me," she whispered. "This is what you've been training for all your life—I'm not up to this yet."

Jay nodded, and with a deep breath, took his place next to Rashid. As he looked out upon the crowds who all looked at him with expectant gazes and adoring eyes, his eyes started to brim. *Is this why You brought us here, Lord?* he thought. *Is this why You gave us free plane tickets halfway around the world, so that we could come to this place, and teach these needy ones more about You? Is this what You had in mind all along?* Jay smiled. It gave him a wonderful warm feeling to know that he was taking part in a great master plan. A really good gut feeling.

Jay turned his attention to the crowd, and started to speak. There was so much to say!



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**BREAK-IN**

“All right, so we’re all set? Everybody knows the plan?” Stuart ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t know, guys, but I just can’t shake off this nervous feeling I keep getting.”

“We’ve prayed and the Lord’s confirmed it, so there’s not much more we can do but go for it,” Kim said, coming up behind Stuart and rubbing his shoulders softly.

“You know, it’s the funniest thing...” Stuart stopped and laughed a little to himself.

“What?” Alana asked.

“I just keep thinking of this dream I had last night.”

“Oh, by all means, share the know!” Alana grinned. “We have time—Ashton won’t be down for another twenty minutes.”

“Really, it’s not at all interesting. I was walking by a stream, sort of following this little dirt trail. All of a sudden this enormous white goose jumps out in front of me, honking like something out of Hades.”

Cal shook his head. “I don’t know, Stu,” he said. “I can see a lot of bad signals in a dream like that.”

“Let me finish before you all pounce and eat me alive,” Stuart said, waving his hands around reproachfully. “So where was I? Oh yeah, so the goose jumps out, honking and snorting—and then it starts

shaking itself, and these white feathers start flying all over the trail, covering it all up—and then I woke up. Now is that weird or what?”

“Yeah Stu, it’s weird,” Alana said. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you. It’s all this dodging and running—bad for the upstairs health department.”

Cal poked Alana and she laughed out loud, and poked him back. “Back off, soldier-guy,” she grinned.

“You two sure have gotten chummy the past few days,” Stuart said.

“Is that the case?” Alana grinned, catching Cal’s eye with a wink. “Well, I’m glad to know I’ve got a good father figure keeping me under his watchful eye.”

At this auspicious moment Ashton entered the door. His face was long and looked like it had been cast from an ancient Egyptian mold. Even his moustache drooped dismally. The five quickly quieted down their laughter and shook their spirits into the proper mood for the occasion.

“I heard some merriment going on,” Ashton said hesitantly.

“Uh ... yes,” Kim said quickly. “We-we were just nervous, you know how it is—sometimes you try to get as far away from something you’re supposed to do till you really have to do it. We’re all geared up now, though.”

“We’ve prayed and prayed, and everything seems to be set,” Stuart added.

“Well that’s good, because he’s expecting Alana on his doorstep in less than an hour. This plan’s in motion, whether we like it or not.”

“I’m going to stay back with the kids,” Stuart explained. It was obvious from the look on his face that on a scale of one to ten this would have been preferred option minus five—not, he would have hastened to add had he been narrating his own account, for lack of desire to be with his children, but ... when weighed up against a full-blown

commando raid against an elite AC technocrat’s home dwelling—the comparison went without saying. Nevertheless, as a suitable alternative had not seen fit to present itself, Stuart had resolved to make the most of the situation and had planned some wild extravaganza night which the two little rapsCALLIONS were anticipating with great delight.

“Hey, Al,” Julian said suddenly, motioning to her. “Here’s something you can take along.” He handed her a little gray film canister.

“What’s this?” she asked. “Arsenic pills for a quick hari-kari in case I get caught?”

Julian laughed. “No—sleeping stuff. If your charms fizz out, pop one of these in his drink and he’ll be out for a good four hours.”

“Thanks Ju,” Alana said, slipping the canister into her handbag. “I could see that coming in handy.” Then on second thought she popped off the little lid, fished out a couple of tablets and dropped them inside one of her bra cups. “Easy access,” she grinned.

“Okay then,” Ashton said. “If everything is set—I guess you’d best be on your way.” He squinted uncertainly at Alana. “Are you sure you don’t want me along to drop you off?”

Alana shook her head. “Really, I’ll be fine—and these guys’ll be on my tail the whole way.”

“Well, we’ll be back here envying you all—I mean, praying for you,” Stuart grinned. “Really though, you can count on us for some serious backup.”

Kim wrapped her arms around Stuart and squeezed him tightly.

“You take care of yourself, dream girl,” he whispered. “I want you back in my arms before the night is over.”

“You bet,” Kim said, burying her face in his neck. “I have a good feeling about this. It’s all going to work out just fine.”

Stuart nodded and squeezed her behind. “Better

get going then,” he said. “I’ve got to go hunt down my captives. I think they’re hiding under the bed anticipating my arrival.”

“Behave, Stu,” Alana said with a wink.

“And you, hot pants,” Stu called.

With that, the little group quietly followed Ashton up the stairs, out through the back door and into the garage.

“Here,” Ashton tossed Julian a set of keys. “You take the Mercedes. Keep a good distance behind Alana, and park down at the street corner. We don’t want to risk setting off any warning bells in his mind. Let’s keep this really safe. We’re not forgetting anything?”

Julian, Cal and Kim were dressed all in black, and Kim had put her hair up in a black cap to avoid it standing out in the darkness. Kim had her trusty backpack, and Julian had a carry bag of his own.

“I feel like I should be carrying a weapon of some sort—at least an automatic,” Cal sighed. “Too bad I ditched it back at the camp.”

“Maybe it’s better that way,” Kim grinned. “You’ve got trained instincts for doing stuff you shouldn’t be doing anymore.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Cal smiled, as they climbed into the car.

The drive to Tow’s house was brief and uneventful. Julian followed as far behind Ashton’s sleek sports car as he could while still keeping it in sight. Fortunately the traffic was good—just enough cars so that they blended in without arousing suspicion, and not enough that they lost sight of their path altogether.

“So far so good,” Julian said.

“This is the street,” Kim said quickly, as they rounded a corner and saw the sports car turning up into a driveway.

“Just keep going and swing back around,” Cal said.

“There’s a parking place just behind us.”

“So many drivers, so little space at the wheel,” Julian grumbled. “Come on, you guys. I can handle this.”

Coming around and sliding the car quietly into the parking spot, Julian cut the engine. By leaning forward towards the front windshield, they could barely make out Alana’s figure getting out of the car, and ringing the doorbell. The dusky evening lightened up momentarily as the door opened, and Tow welcomed her in. The door shut behind her.

“All right, she’s in,” Julian stated curtly. He fumbled with his watch. “How long are we supposed to give her?”

“Twenty minutes to make sure things are going as planned,” Kim said. “Let’s wait here for fifteen and then get to the back window in time to catch her signal in case she’s delayed.”



Alana took a deep breath as she stepped inside. Tow was beaming from ear to ear. “It really is nice of you to come again,” he said.

Alana smiled genially. “The pleasure is all mine,” she said, with her very best attempt at an Audrey Hepburn imitation; it came off more like a cross between Boy George and Ronald MacDonald.

Tow was flying high and didn’t notice in the slightest. “Come on,” he said. “I’ve got something special prepared for you tonight.”

Alana trailed behind Tow as he bounded enthusiastically towards the den. He stopped just short of the door and turned back towards her. “Now, close your eyes.”

Alana groaned inwardly as she obediently shut her eyes, and he took her hand and led her into the den.

“All right now—open up.”

She opened her eyes, and let out a weak smile. She could not see one thing different. “Wow,” she said.

“It’s great.”

“Isn’t it, though?” he purred, looking even more pleased that Alana would have thought possible. “I did it just for you.”

Then she noticed that all the trellises and vines that decorated the sides of the room had had little red flowers placed in them. It was a nice effect which added a splash of color to the very green room, and now that she had actually realized what he had done—which looked like a frightful amount of work—Alana felt somewhat ashamed at her initial weak response.

“Gee,” she said sheepishly. “That’s real nice of you. You shouldn’t be doing stuff for me though. You don’t know me.”

“I may not know you,” Tow grinned, “but I can tell you’re a good person. I can see it in your eyes.”

Alana gulped and tried not to think about the real purpose of her visit. “Got anything for me to drink?”

“Sure thing,” he said. “Come on in and sit down.”

She sank into the plush couch and curled up her toes. *Darn!* she thought. *What on earth am I feeling nervous about? This is a mission for God, after all, it’s not some fuck-and-run for money or anything.* She sighed.

Tow came back with two glasses and handed her one. He leaned over and switched on the TV. “There’s a concert on tonight. Beethoven’s Ninth. Do you like concerts?”

“Oh!” Alana said. “Oh, it’s absolutely fabulous!” She muttered an inaudible “not” under her breath for the sake of her newly developing truthful conscience. As much as the thought of sitting for any length of time in front of a televised orchestra performance made her insides recoil with horror, anything that could be done to occupy Tow and keep him away from the bedroom was top on her agenda. Therefore she smiled encouragingly and nodded in forced appreciation.

Ten minutes or so later, Alana was reaching saturation point. She stood up hesitantly. “I’ll just drop by your restroom, if you don’t mind...”

“Sure, go right ahead—you know the way.”

Alana walked out of the room and slipped into the bathroom, which was two doors down the hallway, at the foot of the staircase.

Coming inside she moved right over to the window and unlatched it. She looked outside, scanning the yard behind the house for any signs of life. Then she saw a tiny flicker of light a little beneath the window to the left. She hissed softly, and could just make out Kim’s face turning up towards her.

Alana stuck her thumb up, and then moved back from the window, leaving it half-ajar.

Flushing the toilet, she stepped back out into the hall, taking care to also leave the door halfway open.

Once back in the hallway she took a deep breath. *Back to the Ninth Symphony*, she thought with a smile. *Oh, Lord! Please help everything to go as planned!*



“Okay, she gave us the signal—we’re on!” Cal said. “Let’s get moving. I’ll go up first.”

The others were only too happy to let him. The window was not very high off the ground; the house was built strangely, with the first floor somewhat elevated off the ground due to a high-laying basement. Still, it was not much of a climb, and Cal’s commando training had more than fitted him for the task.

Shimmying up the drainpipe, he grabbed ahold of the window ledge and pulled himself up easily, landing noiselessly on the bathroom floor. He turned back to the window and motioned to the others. Kim started up next. For her, it was easier said than done. Carrying her two kids around had given her a certain arm strength, but she was not one to be overly religious in the workout department, and it showed in her climbing skills.

“Step here,” Julian whispered, noticing her plight. He bent down and she stepped on his shoulders. Cal grabbed her by the forearms and dragged her up the rest of the way, as she scrambled to assist the climb with her feet. She bit her lip as her knee banged the window ledge hard, but did not make a sound.

“Okay, Julian,” Cal whispered.

Julian was also amazingly fit, and cleared the climb in less than six seconds.

“Impressive,” Cal whispered admiringly.

“In our group we spend a lot of our time preparing for eventualities,” Julian grinned back.

“Come on,” Kim whispered, nearly as happy to guide the topic of discussion away from physical fitness as she was anxious to be about their business and be gone from the place. “Let’s get a move on.”

Cal led the way. He peered quickly out in the hall—though the Ninth Symphony blared from the nearby den and made it quite clear where Tow was occupied—then nodded to the others. He moved noiselessly up the stairs, then motioned to the others, who quietly followed him.

“Here—this one,” Kim whispered, motioning her hand wildly towards the first room at the top of the stairs.

Cal looked at her questioningly, and Julian nodded. Taking a deep breath, Cal opened the door.

“There it is,” Julian said. “On the far side over there.”

Cal appraised the situation. “Okay, I’ll stay here and keep a lookout down the stairs. If I stand to the side here I can see anyone before they start up the stairs—give us a few seconds to beat it if worse comes to worse.”

“We’d better be quiet, though,” Kim said. “Looks like we’re right smack above the den.”

“It’s okay,” Julian laughed—quietly. “We could never compete with the Ninth Symphony!”

Cal snickered. “I wish I could see Alana’s face right about now.”

Julian and Kim lost no time in getting to work. Julian pulled out his laptop, which was all powered up and ready to go. He grabbed his modem cable and plugged it into the computer’s spare slot. “This new plug-and-play network connector should link us up just fine.”

Kim turned her attention to the desktop. “I’ll go from the inside, you go from there.”

The computer was on, and she quickly started to move around the system. All of a sudden her eyes lit up. “Julian, check this out!” she called.

“What’s up?”

“It looks like he has a password keeper program. Maybe he keeps the login and passwords for his remote access here. Look at this!”

Julian raised an eyebrow. “Interesting. Now that should be a heck of a lot easier to crack than the big godzilla system.” He paused and scratched his head thoughtfully. “I bet I could even decompile it. If it’s a simple enough encryption scheme I might be able to get at the info that way.”

“How long would that take?”

Julian shrugged. “There’s no way of saying. It depends on how the program was written. It could vary from a simple algorithm to heavy-duty encryption, I don’t know, but I’ve popped some corks in the past. And at this point, it’s probably our best shot. We could be here all night trying to guess password combos.”

“You’re right,” Kim agreed. “I’ll give it a go anyway, though, while you’re on that.” She loaded up the program, and smiled as the program provided the default username, *JosephTow*. “And now for the fun part,” she said. “Cal, help me out here. Why don’t you have a look around his room. Maybe he wrote his password down somewhere.”

“Not very likely,” Julian said quickly, looking up from his laptop. “If he’s got a password keeper it’s because they assigned a monster password for entry into the main system. Seems kinda dumb to write down the password to your password keeper. But I guess you never know.”

“Yeah, you never know.” Kim stretched back in her chair and scrunched up her eyes. “It’s probably something really simple, though, easy to remember.”

“Well, just start typing,” Cal said.

“Okay. Why don’t you look around for book titles, anything that would give us ideas.”



Tow looked over at Alana. “Are you enjoying the music?” he asked.

“Immensely,” she smiled, fiercely stifling a yawn that she felt rising into her throat.

“Do you want to watch some more? Perhaps we could find something more interesting to do?”

“Oh, no,” Alana said quickly, “No, I’m mad for orchestra, really. There’s a bit coming up that is just my total favorite.”

“All right then,” Tow smiled, pleased at her unexpected burst of enthusiasm. Then he turned to her again. “Do you like chocolate?”

“Yeah, sure,” she said.

“Well, I brought back a box earlier today, on a hunch of that sort. I’ve got it right upstairs—I’ll just be a second.”

“Oh!” Alana exclaimed, opening her eyes wide dramatically. “Oh, blast—how could I be such an idiot! You know what—I’d better pass on that chocolate after all. I just...” She lowered her voice dramatically, and then lowered her eyes.

“What?” he asked curiously, sitting down again.

“Well, it’s just that I started on this new diet program the other day—that’s one of my no-no’s.”

“Oh, but surely you can make an exception.”

“I’d better not,” she pouted. “You know how it goes with exceptions—and I’m afraid my will power is horrendous when it comes to stopping and starting.”

“All right then.” Tow settled back on the couch. “Let’s give the chocolate a pass.”

“Oh, would you turn up the volume?” Alana asked. “I just love it when you can really *feel* the music.”

“Sure,” Tow said, and reached for the remote.



“Whoa! What are they doing with the music down there?” Cal muttered. “I guess they want to share it with the whole block!”

“Guys, this is getting us nowhere!” Kim moaned. “It’s a lost cause if ever I saw one.”

“Here’s another book,” Cal said, fishing around the bookshelf on the opposite end of the room.

“It’s no use.” She shook her head. “I must have typed in fifty combinations—what are the chances of us hitting on it? We’d better just wait for Julian. How’s it looking, Jule?”

Julian tipped his head from side to side a little. “Not bad. It’s a poorly written piece of software, that’s for sure! I think I’ll need another fifteen minutes though, at least.”

“I just hope we have that long,” Kim muttered. All of a sudden she stopped short.

“What?” Julian said quickly, noting the peculiar expression on her face.

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure?” Julian asked. “Funny expressions are usually an indication of something with you guys.”

Kim grinned. “Well, I just got the weirdest thought—but it’s too weird. It couldn’t be.”

“What is it?” Julian asked. “I’ve seen some pretty weird stuff in my time.”

Kim sighed. “I was just thinking about that dream that Stuart had. I wonder if that is supposed to be a clue of some sort.”

“You mean you think his password is ‘goose me?’” Julian offered.

Kim stifled a giggle. “Of course not, you moose!” Then she rolled her eyes and squeezed them tightly shut. “Oh, Jesus! Please help us! Our technical ability can only go so far, and we desperately need You now. Please show us what to do!”

Julian and Cal looked at her expectantly, curious to see to what limits this strange extraterrestrial connection could be pushed.

“You’ve got that look on your face again,” Julian grinned.

Kim smiled, a little embarrassed. “I know,” she said. “I can hardly believe I’m doing this, but I guess one more password is worth a try, no?”

“Sure thing,” Cal said. “What are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know, ‘goose,’ I guess.”

She typed it in, then shook her head. She let out a short laugh. “No, it’s not. Of course it’s not! What was I thinking?”

“Hey, Kim!” Cal said. “Don’t give up now. Maybe you just got the wrong combination. Try something else. What exactly was his picture of?”

Kim’s eyes lit up. Quickly she typed: *goosefeathers*. Then her eyes barreled open in shock. “Oh my God!” she fairly screamed. “We’re IN!”



The inevitable happened: the concert was over. Alana watched in dismay as the pianist stroked his fingers lovingly for the last time over the little black and white keys; the cellist plucked his last note, and the piccolo sighed with relief that his time of humiliation was over. As the conductor bowed, and the muffled applause of the audience rose up, the credits scrolled across the screen.

Tow looked back at Alana and smiled. “So you liked that, huh?”

“Hmmm,” Alana said, in a noncommittal way

which she hoped Tow would interpret as lavish enthusiasm.

“Well, that’s great. So what do you want to do now?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m feeling kind of in a lazy mood. How about we just sit around here and gab?”

“Sure, if that’s what you want to do,” Tow smiled. He seemed to be more a man of action than of words—as most men tend to be.

Alana wracked her brain for any small-talk conversation opener. Never in her entire life had she wished to be endowed with such a superfluous quality, but now it would have come in decidedly handy. “So, uh, how’s the weather been?” she finally sputtered out.

Tow looked at her, and burst out laughing. “That’s a good one!” he said, slapping his knee. “You really are funny, you know? You have a marvelous sense of humor.” He moved a couple inches closer.

Alana stared blankly back at him. *Strange what some people will class as humor!* she mused. “You got like a card game or something?” she asked, upon a sudden inspiration.

“Sure,” he said. “I’m great at cards. I’ll go get ’em.”

He jumped up, and Alana’s eyes widened with horror as she saw him heading for the door of the den. She jumped up, her heart pounding wildly and her mind feverishly imploring the higher power for a time-out. “Oh, Tow,” she called, wagging her hand at him. “*Joseph!*”

He spun around, curious at the flirtatious tone in her voice.

“How about a drink first?” She was standing at the bar, and turned her back to him with a wink while she poured some whiskey in a glass. Reaching down the front of her dress, she extracted one of the little tablets from her C-cup, and plopped it into the glass. Before it had completely dissolved, she quickly

grabbed another and threw it in too. *If one is good, two must be better*, she reasoned.

She spun around with her most charming smile, and nearly jumped as he was standing just behind her. “Here,” she said, handing him the glass and picking up one of her own. “Let’s toast.”

“All right then,” he smiled, holding out his glass. “To what?”

“To...” Alana paused, glass in midair, “to card games!” she finally said, chinking his glass zealously and downing the entire shot.

Tow did likewise. “Ah,” he said. “That’s good stuff! Give us a bit more.”

Alana obliged. “You want to sit down?” she asked. “You look a bit wobbly.”

“Nah,” he said, “though I do feel a bit seasick...”

“Tell me where the deck is—I’ll go get it for you.”

“No,” he shook his head in determination. “I’ll just be a second. I’m fine.” Without pausing for a confirmation he dashed out the door towards the stairs.

“TOW!” Alana shrieked, running to the door.

Tow was either too drunk or too drugged to notice her, but she hoped that at least her yell would warn the hackers upstairs and give them a chance to dive for cover.



“My God, he’s on his way up!” Cal whispered frantically. “Get in the cupboard or something, you guys! Oh my God, there’s no time. He’s here—he’s...”

Tow burst open the door and came face to face with Cal. “Who are you?” he said angrily.

Without thinking, Cal reached for a heavy briefcase that lay at his feet. In a split second he had picked it up and knocked Tow over the head. Tow crumpled in a heap on the floor.

Alana made it up the steps just at that moment. “What did you do to him?” she shrieked.

“I saved your skin, and you’d darn well better thank me for it,” Cal returned resentfully.

“Cal!” Kim ran over. “You’re not supposed to go beating people up! You’re not in the Delta Force anymore, you know!”

“Of course I know, but what am I supposed to do? For all I know he might have had a gun in his pocket—at any rate we’d all have been arrested if I hadn’t acted. I don’t think he even saw you guys—he’ll just wake up and think that someone broke into his house and knocked him out, then got scared and left.”

“Why didn’t you give him the drug, Alana?” Kim asked.

“I did!” she countered, then shook her head. “It must not have been an instant-effect one, though. He was definitely showing the signs of it but it didn’t stop him from dashing up here.”

“So what do we do now?” Cal shuffled a bit nervously.

Suddenly, an indescribable noise proceeded from Julian, who was still sitting at his laptop. “Oh ...,” he murmured orgasmically.

Alana looked up. “Cybersex going there, Ju?”

“I found it!” he said. “Come here, take a look at this!”

Tow’s unfortunate predicament momentarily forgotten, the others scrambled over and leaned behind Julian’s chair.

“It’s a list of rebels, names and locations,” Kim said in awe.

“It’s a hit-list, that’s what it is,” Cal said grimly.

“Open it up, let’s have a look inside,” Kim scrambled over to the desktop. “Where is it?”

Julian showed her where to go, and meanwhile scrolled through the lists of names. “They have my whole group in here,” he said in disbelief. “They’ve got their position down and everything!”

“And there’s that big cluster of resistance in the



Mideast we've been hearing about—look at this! You know how they keep playing it up as a major stronghold of terrorist activity? According to this there's not much more there than a couple of towns that refuse to accept their agenda.”

“What's that?” Alana pointed. “Click over there.”

Julian clicked next to the report on the Middle East resistance. The group read the memo in silence. “That's what we were looking for,” Kim whispered. “My Lord, their attack is planned for the day after tomorrow! Look—it lists all the authorization codes for the operation and everything.”

“What can we do?” Cal asked.

“I've got an idea,” Julian replied. “I have a special virus that I made myself a couple years back. I call it ‘doomsday.’ But I'm thinking I should have named it ‘Armageddon.’”

“Are you thinking of launching into their system?” Kim grinned.

“What better payback could we dream of? This virus is so sticky their files will be melted wax before they even know what hit them. It'll pulverize all their data and seriously cramp their communications programs. Tomorrow those commanders on the field could be receiving little more than plain gibberish for their orders. And without this data they're going to have to start a lot of their investigations from scratch.”

Kim bowed her head for a moment, seeking for a heavenly confirmation on this rather unorthodox plan. Then she looked up. “Let's go for it!” she said.

Julian needed no further encouragement, but immediately went to work.

“We'll need to get out of here right away once this goes down,” he said. “It's possible that the source machine can be traced.”

“Wouldn't the virus junk that out too?” Kim asked.

“Theoretically it should, but you can never be too careful with Big Brother these days!” he replied grimly.

Alana walked slowly over to where Tow's unconscious form lay sprawled on the floor. “What are we going to do about this guy?” she asked quietly.

“What about him?” Cal asked. “He'll come around with a hangover and a big round lump on his head.”

“I just think it's pretty foul to just knock him out and then leave him all alone. You never know what could go wrong.”

“What, going soft on us now, tough girl?” Cal teased. “Or maybe you've taken a liking to the guy?”

“Shut up, Cal,” Alana said sourly. “Stick your hand in your pants if you need to let off steam.”

“Both of you, give us some oxygen in here, these fumes are gonna kill us!” Kim said. “I think Alana has a good point—I don't know what we can do though.”

“I'll stay here with him till he comes round. I have a car so I'll just drive back when I know he's okay.”

“That's nuts!” Cal said. “He's gonna know that you were part of it.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Wouldn't it look more strange if I was gone? Then I'm obviously part of it, and that points to Ashton being part of it too.”

Julian shut his laptop and came over. “Alana's right,” he said. “I don't like the sound of it—I don't think any of us do—but I think that's our best option.”

Cal scowled. “Fine, whatever,” he said.

“You guys had better get out of here—we have no idea how long he'll be out.”

“You take care, Al,” Kim whispered, squeezing her arm. “We'll be right here with you in our prayers.”

“Thanks, Kim,” Alana smiled.

“See you, tough girl,” Cal grinned.

Alana reached over and pulled his collar close to her face. “Don't worry,” she whispered. “I haven't screwed him up till now and I'm certainly not going to start. Enjoy your moments of freedom, 'cause I'll be back to torment you before long.”

Cal kissed her, until she pushed him away. “Go on,” she said. “There’ll be time for that later.”

Julian smacked her on the behind. “See you, Al,” he said. “Take care.”

Alana shut the bedroom door behind them and sat down with her back to the door. “Joseph Tow,” she whispered, “won’t we have a lot to talk about when you wake up.”

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## VICTORY IS THE MOMENT

Alana dozed fitfully, still sitting by the door where she had plopped herself down when the others had left. As hard as she tried to stay awake, she couldn’t seem to fight the heavy blanket of sleep that kept engulfing her. Slowly the night wore on. She checked Tow’s pulse a couple times, and as far as she could tell all seemed normal. Short of calling a doctor—which was clearly not an option at this point—there was nothing she could do except wait, pray, and of course sleep.

When she finally opened her eyes she knew that she had been sleeping longer than she realized. She looked quickly at her watch. Four o’clock. *I hope the others aren’t too worried about me*, she thought uneasily. She looked over to Tow, and only then did she notice that his eyes were open, though he hadn’t moved an inch.

“You’re awake,” he said, catching her eye and smiling.

“*You’re* awake!” she said, scrambling over to him. “How do you feel?”

Tow struggled to sit up, and Alana reached over to help him out. He leaned his back against the wall and rubbed his head wearily. “I feel okay, actually,” he smiled. “Considering.”

There was an awkward silence. Alana had no idea where to begin—what could she say? As she started to clear her throat, Tow put a hand on her arm.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Don’t explain.”

“What?” she asked.

“You don’t have to explain what happened. I understand. He was your boyfriend, wasn’t he?”

Alana considered that allegation for a second, and finally nodded.

“So why are you really here? Why are you doing this? I know it’s not because of any attraction you have to me in particular. What do you and Ashton have to gain from this?”

“I ... uh...” Alana found herself really and truly speechless. She was not entirely sure what reaction she had expected from Joseph, but this was not it. One thing stood out to her with burning importance. “Ashton didn’t have anything to do with this,” she said quickly. “He was doing me a favor—paying back a favor he owed to my mother from years ago.” *Lord, forgive this deceit, she prayed inwardly. But what else can I do? I can’t risk involving Ashton in this—it’s his whole life!*

Tow didn’t look convinced.

Alana sighed. All of a sudden a clear thought flashed across her mind—so clear in fact that she knew it could not have originated in her own fuzzy brain. *Tell him!* the command came. *He is ready—tell him the truth.* “Okay then,” she muttered, shaking her head.

“Okay what?” Tow said, puzzled.

“Look, my boyfriend and me—his name is Cal—we’re renegades. Of course you knew that, I’m not registered. But we’re true believers, you know, the one true God and all that. We had gotten a tip that you might have a link to some information about other rebels, and so we wanted to come in and see if we could tamper with that.”

Tow appeared to take this revelation in stride. “So

did you?”

Alana bit her lip. “Yes.”

“Will it be traced back to me?”

“I don’t know. There’s a possibility, but I don’t think so. He’s pretty good.”

Tow sighed. “You know what?” he said. “I don’t know what to believe any more. I started out in this job and way of life all starry-eyed, but to tell you the truth, I’ve seen some things recently that have really turned my stomach. You’ve seen how I spend my days—I’m drinking myself to death, and my only regret is that it hasn’t finished me off yet.”

“Oh, don’t say that!” Alana burst out, grabbing his hand impulsively and feeling quite unlike herself. “There’s so much to live for! Jesus could change your life—He changed mine!”

“He did?” Tow said, with a little chuckle.

“Oh, aren’t you wicked still!” Alana said, jabbing him in the ribs. “Yeah well, you think I’m bad now, you should have seen me then! It’s true. What is it someone called it ... ‘a new creature.’ There you go—that’s me.”

“I don’t know,” Tow shrugged. “It sounds good and all, but I think I’m pretty much past that kind of remedial work.”

Alana sighed. “Well, it’s up to you, man. I can’t see how you’re much too far beyond anything, but hey, that’s just me. If you’re not into it, it’s your game so you play it however you like.”

“Look,” Tow said, looking at her in the eyes, “I can see you have a lot of conviction for what you do. I’m not going to pursue either of you for this. If you guys are ready to risk your skins for something—why, I’d die to want anything that badly! So you’re not going to find me fighting you. If they trace it all back to me, well—so be it! Cheaper way to die than whiskey drowning, that’s for sure.”

Alana looked down at the carpet. She didn’t know what to say, but her mind was racing.

“You’d better get out of here—that guy of yours is probably going crazy wondering where you are. How’d you get him to leave anyway?”

“I made him!” Alana laughed.

“All right then—get out of here.”

Alana stood up, somewhat reluctantly. As she turned to go out the door, she suddenly stopped and looked back at him.

“For what it’s worth,” he said. “Thanks for the time—these have been the best hours I’ve had in a long time.”

Alana dropped her handbag on the floor. “Darn it all, man, you do make my life difficult!” She came back over and sat down beside him. “What am I supposed to do, go back and say, ‘The guy was a total Boy Scout and let me go and all, he was desperate to do the prayer thing but he couldn’t bring himself to?’ Do you realize how that’s going to make me look? Do it for me, Tow! It’s this incredibly simple little prayer—you’re gonna laugh when I tell it to you, I promise. I did.”

Tow looked at her. “I do want to,” he said slowly, but still hesitating.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said, grabbing a pad of paper off the side table. “I’ll ... just ... jot it down here...,” she mumbled as she wrote, “like this ... there you go!” She handed him the scrap of paper. “Now I’m off the hook and you’re into the whole underground movement. Welcome to the fun and games, Josie!”

Tow looked at her and laughed out loud. “I’ve never been called that before!”

“And may it never be the last,” Alana grinned. “I’d better scram. I’ve got your number—I’ll give you a call tomorrow—if I can drag myself out of bed, that is!”

“You do that,” Tow smiled. And somehow it seemed that a strange light was already shining in his eyes, as he clutched the paper tightly in his fist.



In the days that followed, all the pieces of the puzzle slowly seemed to come together. Joseph Tow, by all accounts, seemed to have morphed into an entirely new person. He became a close buddy of Ashton’s, who had a free spot in his own follow-up circle and was glad to take him under his wing. It seemed a much more reliable solution than leaving his care and feeding to any of the others, who were in somewhat of a state of flux at that time.

The break-in never showed up much in the public media—for obvious reasons—but Tow assured his new friends that it had caused no small furor amongst those in the know. Apparently through some unspeakable human error, the virus was also passed to most of their backup systems, where it had made no small dinner party of the lot of it. Years of painstaking research, documentation, stakeouts and interrogation sessions had all been flushed down the toilet, and in certain departments the investigative authorities were said to be back to square one.

In particular Tow kept hearing of a certain Middle East strike that had been just on the verge of taking off. With vital strategic maps and data destroyed, the mission had been called off until further notice. The commanders in the field spent several days overhauling their equipment to discover the problem, and those at headquarters did much the same. It took nearly a week before their military communications were back online, and their system operators would continue to find data that had been scrambled and affected by this cyber-attack for months to come.

The break-in never was traced back to Tow, and he himself was thrilled with the personal transformation that had shaken him free from his old life. He was acting like such a completely different man that Ashton had to caution him several times that if he didn’t tone down his new radiant image a little, the authorities would likely be onto them both before

long.

To this, Tow had replied: “If that be the will of God, then let them!—I swear that by God’s grace I will never let those bastards intimidate me again, as long as I live.” Ashton could only shake his head in admiration, and marvel at the change that the power of God can bring about in a person’s life when they choose to accept Him without reservations.



Thousands of miles and a couple of oceans away, Jay, Kate, and their new friends were quite oblivious of all that they had just been spared. They had found a group of people who were so hungry for the truth they possessed that they were practically begging for it on their hands and knees. Ringo, true to his word, stuck to them like glue, and seemed determined to reshape himself into the mold of a flaming evangelist. He started his first Bible study group after just a month—figuring that what he lacked in years of experience he more than made up for in miracles witnessed and resultant faith increase. With the air support mission called off, the troops across the border stood down too, and the entire area seemed to be safe for the time being. Jay and Kate thanked God for having transported them so astoundingly into the heart of a previously unperceived mission field.



“Well, I guess this is it.” The small cluster of people stood squirming uncomfortably in the small downstairs living room of Ashton’s private quarters. Saying goodbye was always uncomfortable, and no less so was it this time.

“We’re sure gonna miss you folks,” Ashton sighed.

“That’s for sure,” Tow agreed. “But after this amazing transformation you’ve brought about in my life, I’d feel selfish keeping you all around here any longer, when you could be sharing the riches around.”

“You guys take care of yourselves,” Kim said

wistfully.

“We don’t need to,” Ashton laughed. “We’ve got a big Bloke up There with a big stick Who seems more than happy to do it for us.”

“You’re right about that,” Stuart laughed.

“Where are you all headed?” Tow asked.

Julian looked at the others. “We’re not sure,” he said. “But we’re going to start by driving south. Apparently there’s another big Refuge hideout there that hasn’t been busted yet.—Stuart wanted to drop by and pay them a visit.”

Everyone burst out laughing.

“Well then ... till we meet again.” Ashton reached his hands out. Dylan and Maya rushed over and jumped into his arms. “Goodbye, Uncle Ashton,” they squealed.

Alana grinned at Tow. “So long, Josie,” she said. “I’d hug you, but everyone here might drop dead in shock, and I wouldn’t want to risk any complications.”

“I know,” Tow smiled. “Thanks for the thought.”

Alana turned away, then suddenly stopped in her tracks. “Aw, what the hell!” she exclaimed. Gustily she turned back and threw her arms around Tow and kissed him on the cheek. “No small thanks, man,” she whispered. Then, satisfied that she continued to move in ways opposite to her true nature, she smiled and turned back towards the others.

With a few more final goodbyes, Julian swung into the driver’s seat and the rest piled into the back of the camper. A final wave, a grinding of the gears, pulling out onto the road ... then they were off ... free to discover whatever adventures were awaiting them—maybe just around the corner. And each of their hearts burned with a searing joy—the thrill of a life worth living, and a love that was stronger than death and danger.

THE END