

HER DAY IN COURT



PARENTS SUE FOR CUSTODY

CHICAGO (*Legal Newswire*) In another backwater case with the potential to turn ugly, Mr. and Mrs. Johnston are suing their widowed daughter, Mrs. Amy Paines, for custody of her three young children. Mrs. Paines is a member of the reclusive sect calling themselves *The Brethren*. Backed by the prestigious law-firm, Jefferson, Peters, and Blanche, the cards look stacked in the plaintiffs' favor. But small-time and independent lawyer Roger Mayworth, representing the defendant, has in his own time pulled some surprises out of his legal hat. It remains to be seen which way the scales of justice will tip.

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Recommended age: 12 years and up.
(May be read by younger children at parents' discretion.)

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THE CHARACTERS

Ayre McNeilson: a young, ambitious lawyer

Rudy McNeilson: Ayre’s father, a Hungarian immigrant

Mr. Blanche: senior partner in Ayre’s law firm

Joy Paris: former member of the Brethren

Amy Johnston Paines: mother of three, member of
the Brethren

Neil Johnston: Amy’s brother

Jasper: Amy’s deceased husband

Mr. And Mrs. Johnston: Amy’s parents

Roger Mayworth: lawyer

Ethel: Roger’s secretary

Mr. Liege: anti-cult coordinator

Garth: young person in the Brethren

Bill: Rudy’s Greek friend and confidant

CHAPTER 1

A certain crispness hung in the Chicago air as Ayre sauntered out of his house. He was rather tired after his late night out socializing, so he appreciated the fresh air that seemed to clear the fuzzy cloud hanging over him.

He remembered the events of the night before. They still puzzled him and he didn't know what to make of them. He reminisced on the events of the day preceding to attempt to give some kind of context to the extraordinary circumstances of that night.

The day had begun like any other day, with Ayre heading off to work rather on the early side. As a young lawyer in a competitive law firm, there was no question that he would be required to produce twice as much as the other, more established lawyers if he wished to gain a permanent position with the firm.

This had been his goal over many a year—or had it been *his* goal? His father, a middle-class, blue-collar worker, had drummed it into his mind from his youth that he had to get ahead at all cost, or he would find himself working in the same type of factory his father worked in, breathing the ugly fumes of the steel mill, and aging quickly from the unhealthy environment and heavy air. His father had ended up at the steel mill almost by chance, it would seem, as

he had been well educated in his native Hungary. Ayre knew his father was disappointed at times that he had spent much of his life inside a steel mill, and felt the responsibility of bettering his lot and that of the rest of his family.

Drawing his thoughts back from the distant past, Ayre once again pondered on the events of such a fateful day as yesterday had been. When he had arrived early at work, as was his custom, he'd been greeted by the seemingly ever-present secretary, a pleasant woman in her mid-fifties—whom Ayre noticed found cheer for every moment of the day. Ayre never ceased to marvel at this quality, for he found little cause for cheer in the constant struggle of law-firm existence. At times he couldn't help but question if his sacrifice was worth the effort, simply to become one more lawyer in one more law firm, assisting one more partner to become richer or more established.

Perhaps purpose could be found in seeking to become a partner himself? Or perhaps he could look at himself as championing the rights of the downtrodden and the needy, those who have been taken advantage of? But no, he knew that he could not deceive himself. This firm was not patterned for that. Granted, some heroic cases had been championed that had made some slight difference in the lives of a handful of people along the way. These cases were mounted on a showcase and touted to the public to cultivate a relationship of trust with the many more dubious clients who came through their doors, uncertain and hesitant. These cases would help the clients to feel at ease, to know that at Jefferson, Peters, and Blanche, integrity and noble cause came first. Yet Ayre knew, even from his limited experience, that one did not have to dig very deep beneath the surface to find that law was mostly about business and making money at all costs, even taking on clients who were bound to lose.

Ayre shook his head purposefully, realizing how hard it was to concentrate with the fuzzy sensation inside his head—the result of too little sleep and too much work. After greeting his secretary, he had gone to his office and ruffled through the customary two feet of cases stacked on his desk. He would need to do research for most of these cases, since at this point, he was not handling cases on his own, but rather served as a research assistant. He would have to work immediately, skip his lunch break and stay on an extra half hour if he had any intention of doing an amount of work that would be considered satisfactory by Blanche, the partner overseeing his desk.

So began what portended to be a normal day. However, the unexpected had come up when he began to research one most unusual case. The case was a very complex one with an extremely thick docket. He had spent hours just attempting to make sense of the case. It involved a lot of religious debate which seemed like Greek to Ayre, who in spite of his Catholic background, in the practical sense had very little knowledge of religion. Words swam on the page as he attempted to understand the relevancy of the religious issue to the legal court case. However, from what he could gather, Blanche wanted to capitalize on this issue to assist a client seeking to gain custody of children in a family dispute. The deal seemed raw from what Ayre could understand, as religion would be the sole issue used as a lever to convince the judge and jury that the mother of the children, because of her unusual religious beliefs, should be considered unfit to raise children.

Ayre's experience with mothers and children was about as limited as his experience with religion, but the case left him with a bad taste in his mouth. He knew he would be called upon to do quite a bit of the "dirty" work involved, such as digging up any kind of nasty reports or background on people, in order

to further the clients' case. He would have to find any and all negative reports on this religious group in order for Blanche to prepare a case for his clients, well-to-do grandparents who were determined to obtain the custody of their grandchildren from their estranged daughter.

Ayre went through the rest of the pile, and was relieved to find that most involved the more usual style of research, such as going through legal journals to dig up needed jurisprudence to support Blanche's position in some cases.

The grandparents in the custody case had included the phone number for a "Cult Information Service," whom, they had assured Blanche, had all the necessary information, including phone numbers of some of the former members of the said religious group. The number was Ayre's first resort. He phoned the Cult Information Service, and was attended immediately by a woman with a nasal voice, who became very cordial when she heard his request. She confirmed that they did, indeed, have a very impressive file on the cult in question, and she would be happy to send it to him immediately.

Ayre couldn't help but be impressed by the swift service, though a nagging question made its way to the back of his mind. *Who pays for such a service, and why does it exist?* However, he brushed the thought away, as after all, his business was law, not religion, much less questioning the legitimacy of information supplied by a client. As long as it would be accepted in court, its accuracy was irrelevant.

Ayre then proceeded to phone some of the estranged members of the group that he was supposed to contact. One was a young woman who seemed very anxious to meet him and ensure that he had all relevant information on the group. He was a little taken aback by her insistence on meeting him, which brought up another nagging question in the back of

his mind. *Why? What does she stand to gain with this?* It seemed to him that everyone had an angle, and surely she must have one too. However, he dismissed the thought from his mind, again reminding himself that he simply had a task to perform, which required fairly simple skills.

So the day had proceeded, until the evening, when he had arranged to meet with the young woman, who had asked to meet him at a bar over a glass of wine, to which he had agreed happily, as this gave him more time at the office to work his way through his stack of cases, before one of the other partners requested his services as well. Blanche was usually very good-natured about taking on or helping with additional cases, which then all ended up in another crate on Ayre's desk for him to research. No use in crying "unfair" or he could find himself unemployed!

After a quick sandwich that would have to do for dinner on such a busy day, Ayre was off to the bar to meet his "informant." This was an unusual assignment for Ayre, as most of the cases he had dealt with had been more commercial in nature, certainly not religious. However, witnesses would be needed, and the young woman in question seemed to be the best bet, considering she was so anxious to meet with him.

He cautiously entered the smoke-filled bar, looking for a young woman sitting by herself. He immediately found her, somehow instinctively knowing that she was the person he sought. She had longish hair, was dressed very simply and had very little makeup on. She didn't belong in a bar, any more than he belonged in a Buddhist shrine, so he concluded she was his contact. He walked up to her a little awkwardly, asking if she was Joy Paris, to which she responded that she was.

She was in her early twenties, he noted, so he comfortably took on an "older brother" role with her,

drawing her out with questions about her experiences. She was anxious to talk and spoke of the many abusive experiences she had undergone while living with her parents in a strict, Christian religious sect that required that she wear long dresses and read and memorize the Bible. She was very angered at her parents for not having made a normal lifestyle available to her, and insisted that the group was to be blamed for hypnotizing her parents, who could no longer think for themselves or rationally care for their children. She had been denied an education, and as such would be at a terrible disadvantage for the rest of her life.

Having just barely escaped from the steel mill into the legal mill, Ayre could see her point, as he had been brought up with daily reminders of how his life would be ruined without higher education.

The hours slipped away, as he furiously took notes, asked questions and attempted to dig up every awful thing he could about the religious sect called the Brethren¹. He questioned Joy over and over to see if she would make a credible witness. She would have to be prepared to be cross-examined and her story would have to be consistent and truthful. He had spotted several inconsistencies throughout, but these could be worked on. Again, the nagging questions arose in the back of his mind. *Why are there inconsistencies?* He had no choice but to brush them off and keep his mind focused on the business at hand.

At one in the morning, he felt he had covered the issues and was exhausted beyond caring. He paid for a taxi to take Joy home, and got ready to do the same for himself. He needed to get home and he needed time to think.

After finally arriving at his apartment, Ayre threw himself on his bed, planning to drop immediately into

an exhausted sleep. But the day had troubled him and he felt somehow soiled, as though he had been doing heavy physical labor all day. So he dragged himself out of bed and headed for the shower, groaning to himself that he was too tired to shower at this hour of the night. He finally fell into a troubled sleep, and dreamt all night of unhappy events, which never seemed to find a resolution.

¹ **The Brethren:** religious sect of German origin, also known as the German Baptists. See "A Brief History of the Brethren Movement" on page 239.

CHAPTER 2

Amy stretched vigorously to relieve the tension she felt building in her lower back. “Dear Lord,” she prayed, “please give me strength and faith to trust in You and not worry, knowing that You will perfect that which concerneth me and my little ones.”

She knew she shouldn’t worry, if she had full faith, so she sighed a little, tempted to get discouraged at how easily she could lapse into worry. Her backache seemed to be a continual reminder that she couldn’t give in to such worrying. It seemed to Amy that it couldn’t please the Lord any, so she would just have to make a greater effort to think about the Lord’s wonderful promises. With that thought, she felt invigorated and refreshed. She smiled at how quickly the Lord answered her prayers, bringing peace to her heart, despite her very real weaknesses.

She finished tucking her baby daughter into her crib, admiring her beautiful, soft skin, peaceful expression, and long eyelashes. What a miracle each child had been, such a tremendous blessing, such a gift from God! She felt nothing but thankfulness for the life God had given her, that had enabled her to have these beautiful children and bring them up in a godly way amongst godly people. Her memory flitted briefly back to her past and her parents, who were

so different from the people she had chosen to live with and break bread with each day. She shivered to think of the prospect of her parents now taking away her precious children and whisking them off to that despised life she had so readily forsaken when she had vowed to give her life to God. All day long she fought a battle of praying, reading the Bible verses she loved and knew so well, and asking God for His peace. And sure to His promises in His holy Word, each difficulty was overcome, and she found respite from her troubles.

The elders had met with her to discuss the possible upcoming court proceedings with her parents, who had threatened to take away her children if she did not leave the Brethren quickly and return to their home. Since her beloved husband, Jasper, had died nearly a year ago—while they joyously awaited the arrival of their little one, baby Eunice—her parents had threatened and railed on her continually.

Jasper's illness and death had been sudden and unexpected, leaving no doubt in her mind that God had called Jasper home to his reward. She couldn't remember this event without weeping. She felt ashamed about missing him so, when God had called him home, yet at the same time felt glad for him and the privilege he now had of meeting the Savior face to face. Precious Jasper! He had been such a wonderful husband and friend, a great blessing from God. Hard as it was to let him go, she had consoled herself with the three little ones she was left to take care of, who were entrusted to her by God Himself.

But in the wake of her mourning and adapting to her life without Jasper, her parents had immediately started threatening and badgering her, insisting that it was time she "grew up" and rejoined respectable society. Now that Jasper was dead, they felt they had more leverage to force Amy out of the Brethren. If not, they insisted, they would take her to court, and surely,

once the facts were made known to the presiding judge, they would be awarded custody of the children.

Amy knew precious little about courts and judges, though her father was a very wealthy and successful businessman, who from time to time had been caught up in court cases during her youth. She had never been very close to her father, who was a busy man, rarely at home, his time divided between his business, his social life, and other women, she suspected. He was handsome, even in his older years, and that, coupled with his success and wealth, made many women available to him. Even as a young teen Amy had calculated that he was not faithful to her mother, as they were not very close, more formal than friendly, and her father was frequently absent for days on end. It seemed they had reached some sort of an agreement to co-exist, nothing more—perhaps only for the sake of her and her brother, Neil.

Neil had grown up to be everything their parents had wanted him to be. He had successfully completed business school, and taken over a large part of the family business. After their father retired, Neil would run the whole business, and Amy imagined that he would inherit whatever wealth her family had to their name, since her parents were so angry and displeased with Amy and the lifestyle she had chosen, that no doubt they had cut her out of their will.

Amy still remembered as if it were yesterday the day she had been approached by a group of young people at her university, who had then invited her to visit the Brethren and find faith in Christ. She was not a happy girl, somewhat lonely and shy, and didn't fit in with the life her parents had mapped out for her—to go to college, acquire some degrees, marry a potential university fellow who would be set up for a good career, and live happily ever after in the suburbs, having exactly two children as her parents did, one girl and one boy.

Coming from a well-to-do family, of course she would have to be choosy about who she married, as it wouldn't do to marry someone her parents would be ashamed of. Amy had rebelled against all this, even spoken to her mother about it, and to her surprise found her mother somewhat sympathetic of her plight. Her mother had suggested that she not worry about it, but just enjoy her youth and her studies and let come what may in her life.

So in this sorry state, she had met a group of young people on campus who had a shine in their eyes, and seemed to have a purpose and a joy about them. She was curious when she met them, as she couldn't recall ever having met anyone with such a light in their eyes, or such an interest in her. It tugged at a yearning deep inside her, which only made her feel more dissatisfied and empty. As she looked deep in the eyes of these young people her own age, she suddenly felt naked and empty, as if her soul were void of any meaning or wisdom.

After agreeing to attend their meeting, she walked through the university gardens, deep in thought. It seemed that in just a few short minutes, this encounter had rocked the very foundations of her life, and she felt a great emptiness and despair, as if she were being forced to face dilemmas that she had refused to face for years.

She had attempted to get by, despite the empty feeling of nothingness, despite the loveless relationship of her parents, despite the empty, superficial relationships with her friends. But now, she had to ask herself, what was it all worth? Was there anything in the life she had lived so far that was worthwhile? She thought hard and analyzed her life up to this point, weighed it on the scale, and found nothing. If she was honest with herself—as she was attempting to be at this point—she was terrified by the prospect of living the life her parents had planned for her. She

envisioned herself living the same loveless relationship her parents had, with children who had nothing in common, with no goal but to impress neighbors with a nice house or car, while meeting with the women of the neighborhood to gossip and talk about empty nothingnesses.

As she analyzed this, she realized that she had to stop fooling herself. She was not meant to have a life like that. She abhorred it and would never ever be happy being one more suburban housewife, or even a career woman for that matter. She was tired of being told who she was and what she would be. She wanted to find herself and what she was meant to be. Reaching this conclusion brought some measure of peace to her heart that day, and the anguish had abated temporarily as Amy continued through her normal day at the university, secure with the newfound knowledge that things would never be the same for her again. She would see to that herself.

CHAPTER 3

“McNeilson,” called another of Blanche’s aides, “you’re wanted immediately in Blanche’s office.”

Ayre tightened up his posture a bit, as he had ended up slouching over his desk, a bit overwhelmed by the ever-growing caseload. It seemed he could never keep on top of it all, no matter how much blood, sweat, and tears he poured into it.

Brushing these thoughts aside, he straightened his tie, put on his jacket, and prepared for doubtless some new assignment from Blanche.

Blanche was waiting in his office, along with a couple in their late fifties who—Ayre noticed in the second he allowed himself to glance at them without appearing rude—seemed a bit stern and dry.

Blanche brought the young man in, heartily introducing him to the couple, whom he presented as Mr. and Mrs. Johnston. Ayre was a bit taken aback in hearing Blanche praise him effusively in front of Mr. and Mrs. Johnston, since Blanche was not usually so generous in his appraisals. He was surprised to hear Blanche recommending him to the clients, insisting that he would be able to capably manage their case, under Blanche’s careful supervision. Mr. and Mrs. Johnston seemed satisfied with that, as long as Blanche continued to be directly involved in the case.

After the Johnstons departed, Blanche proceeded to explain to Ayre that Mr. and Mrs. Johnston were the couple pressing the court to give them custody of their three grandchildren. Blanche announced that he had decided that this could be Ayre's first case with the firm, since Ayre had been managing his research and other duties well.

Ayre hastened to protest that this seemed like much too voluminous and complex a case for him to take on as a first case. However, Blanche insisted that this was precisely why he had decided to pass this case on to Ayre. At the present, all the lawyers were engaged in other cases, and this case would take a great deal of time and effort—resources which were scant for the time being. He felt that Ayre could invest the amount of time needed to win this case.

“And we will win it, you know,” he said encouragingly to Ayre. “I will step in when the time is right and give you a hand at the crucial moment. I am confident that we have a fairly sound case here, and we can certainly give it our best shot. In any case, the Johnstons are determined to litigate, so our job is simply to do everything in our power to ensure that, by any means, they receive custody of their grandchildren.”

Ayre felt overwhelmed and uneasy about the prospect of building a solid case to ensure that the grandchildren would be taken away from their mother and their custody granted to the grandparents. His conscience was not easy about this case, but he found himself in the unhappy position of being forced to comply if he didn't wish to put his career on the line. And so it was, that after receiving detailed instructions of the case for the next few hours, he left Blanche's office with a heavy heart, unhappy with the hand he'd been dealt in the office. He was anxious for this day to end, so that he would have some time to himself in the peace of his apartment to ponder on these events and hopefully straighten them out in his mind.

CHAPTER 4

Amy finished tying on the last bonnet, and kissed the last red cheek as she closed down her schoolroom for the night. She was the happy teacher of over twenty children who belonged to her community. Although she had no formal degree to teach, she had worked hard at learning everything she needed to learn to be a good teacher, and was now considered one of the best in the Brethren's community school. Her pupils ranged from six to nine years old, and much of her teaching was centered around the Bible and helping the little ones to learn God's Word from a young age. She also taught them to read, basic math, and other subjects.

She looked around her schoolroom nostalgically. It seemed that almost every inch of wall space was covered with children's drawings and paintings, picture classes she had taught them on Bible stories, astronomy, and geography, not to mention her own drawings that she did in any spare moments she had. Nowadays spare moments were precious few, since her Jasper had died. She couldn't afford to luxuriate in free time activities any more, with her three little ones depending on her, as well as the many chores that needed to be done each day. Although the elders had been very helpful in pooling funds from the many

families in the neighborhood to help her through her hard times, she had known right away that God expected her to take up her cross and work and do her part to support her little family. She knew that she could always count on her community to help her, but she felt that God wanted her to make the effort to do her part.

Now looking at this classroom was a bit of a wrench, as she didn't know if she would have to leave all this that she loved so dearly, for a time. With her parents threatening to take her children away, she didn't know what the Lord wanted her to do next. The elders had offered to have a prayer meeting with her and others in the community to ask for God's direction in this matter. They had been so concerned, reminding her that this was not just her battle, but everyone's battle, as her parents were attacking her religious beliefs and her life amongst the Brethren.

She remembered how her parents had reacted after the first meeting the Brethren had invited her to. When she arrived at the meeting, she had almost turned around and left, as she had felt overwhelmed when she saw that some older women present wore long dresses and seemed old fashioned. Surely she, as a young person, couldn't be expected to look like that! But she noticed that the young people were dressed casually, and couldn't be differentiated too easily from other young people her age. This gave her courage, and she decided that since she had come all this way, she should go ahead and attend the meeting.

She was pleasantly thrilled with the meeting. They had sung songs, hymns and lively songs where people even got up and danced! It was all so joyous and happy and she felt a freedom she had never felt before. She felt so far removed from the pressures of conformity that had made her feel so squelched and unfulfilled as an individual. She felt she could express her deepest thoughts and yearnings and be understood. Once she

left the meeting, everything else in her daily life had seemed so mundane and meaningless.

So she had continued attending the Brethren meetings every week, and learning about the Bible, brotherly love, and so many other things that she had never heard of before. Those times were a special treasured memory, as they were filled with so much newfound happiness and friendship.

It was then that she had met Jasper, who had actually been born into the Brethren and grown up in it. He was so different from any other young guys she had ever been around. He didn't beat around the bush, or try to put up false fronts or impress her. He just spoke to her soul and she found herself speaking to his. She had never thought that such deep communication could be possible, and she found herself desiring it more and more, until she finally realized that she was deeply in love with him. Shortly thereafter, they had decided to marry, and within a few short years God had blessed them with three little ones, which became their pride and joy.

She knew God had given her and Jasper a precious gift of a loving marriage with so few altercations. Perhaps this was because the Lord knew that their time together would be short. She felt they had enjoyed every moment of it to the full, and she would treasure those memories always, though she tried not to think about them anymore, as she found they were a distraction from forging ahead with her new life, which was different with Jasper gone.

When she had decided to become a part of the Brethren community, as well as marry Jasper, she had received a chilling reception from her parents, who were very vocal in their disapproval of her marriage and her choice of dedicating her life to God and fellow man. This was an entirely opposite course from the one they had chosen for her, and they didn't take kindly to her choice. Although her mother had told her

that she should feel free to live her life as she chose, it didn't seem that religion was part of that choice, as her mother coldly rejected her from that point on.

The rejection had come as a shock to Amy, who had attempted to share her newfound faith with her parents, and her brother Neil. Her brother Neil had been the more sympathetic of the three, attempting to convince their parents that they should leave her be, telling them that she would eventually outgrow this and snap out of it. Her mother wept and disagreed, saying that Amy was not just joining a group, she was also getting married!

There had been many dreadful scenes before Amy left, with her parents threatening to cut her out of their will, threatening to disown her, and practically cursing her for doing this to their family. They accused her of trampling on everything they had given her, of not appreciating all that they had done for her, and many more such accusations. Amy had felt confused, seeing that she was hurting her parents so badly and making them feel so terrible. For a few days she decided to give up and call off the wedding and not join the Brethren. Nothing made sense anymore, and she felt despondent and miserable. She dropped out of college and just sat around the house and moped.

After several days of this, she had wakened in the middle of the night to hear a voice speaking to her. She couldn't tell if the voice was audible or if she alone was hearing it in her heart. All she knew was that the message was loud and clear and couldn't be ignored:

The time is now, My dear. If you don't forsake all that you have and follow Me now, you will lose everything you hold dear. Do not hesitate to forsake all for Me. For everyone that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or mother or father or sister or brother or lands for My sake, shall receive an hundredfold and shall inherit everlasting life.

Amy had a pen in the drawer by her bed, and after the voice faded, she hastened to write down every word as best she could remember it. She had never had such an experience before, though she had heard testimonies of people hearing God's voice at the Brethren meetings she attended. The Brethren had taught her that God is a living God and still spoke to His children today. Although she had listened and taken this in, she had never understood it until this special moment when she had received personal direction from the Lord Himself for her life.

From that moment on she had proceeded undaunted to do what she knew she must do. She had once again told her parents of her renewed determination to join the Brethren and dedicate her life to God, as well as to marry Jasper. Her parents became predictably angry, and told her that she should leave immediately, which she did—with tears streaming down her face. Her heart felt as if it had broken into a thousand pieces. This was a great test for her! She knew God had told her to turn her back on her family and go and serve Him, but she would have liked for them to have been happy with her decision, to support her new life.

As she waited at the doorstep for Jasper to drive by and pick her up, she felt this was the most difficult decision she had ever made in her life. She could only cling to the words the Lord had given her, which she clutched in her hand as if she were holding on to a lifesaver. When the car finally drove up, after what seemed like hours, but was only really a half hour, she finally felt peace begin to calm her tired spirit. She felt the conviction of having made the right decision, though it had been so difficult, and she knew that from now on she could trust in the Lord for whatever He brought her way.

CHAPTER 5

After a long, hard week of grueling hours, difficult research assignments, and most importantly his new assignment, Ayre was so exhausted he could hardly force himself to get up on Sunday morning. He had, as usual, found it necessary to work most of Saturday to get a better grasp on his workload. As he got up, he felt a dull pounding in his head and an ache in his chest. He went straight to the coffee maker to brew up some powerful coffee that would hopefully provide him with the pep he needed to make it through another day.

As he drank his coffee quietly, he thought about his past week, and then the week before and the week before. They all seemed to melt together into one, each hardly distinguishable from the other. However, he reminded himself that this week had been a key one in his career, as he had been assigned his first case. He should have felt elated about this. He should have called his father to celebrate, but his joy had been tarnished. Something about this case evoked uneasy feelings in the pit of his stomach that he preferred to ignore. He had known from the moment he set foot in his firm after graduating that he would have to put aside many of those uneasy feelings if he was going to make it and reach the goal set for him. And now was the time to set these feelings aside and successfully

represent his clients. Ayre knew this was an important step in his career, and no matter what it cost, he planned to prove himself through this venture.

Having successfully pulled himself out of his state of exhaustion, Ayre drove out to visit his father and brothers at their crowded little home, a little over an hour away from his apartment. Much as he loved his father and brothers, he didn't relish these visits, as they, too, evoked uneasy feelings, pricking at his conscience. Although his father never reproached him and openly supported, encouraged and applauded him, he couldn't help but feel he was a disappointment in some way, or failing his father and brothers somehow.

As he entered the house, his father unashamedly hugged Ayre and thumped on his shoulder. His eyes lit up in the way that only his father's could. The deep creases in his face all but disappeared in the light of those tender eyes. His father, Rudy, was a special man, who had fought tooth and nail to bring up four boys on his own, after their mother had passed on after a lingering battle with cancer.

As the oldest brother, Ayre had carried a great deal of responsibility throughout his mother's illness and afterwards as well. Rudy worked long shifts at the mill to provide for his family, and Ayre had found himself overseeing his younger brothers throughout their growing years.

Rudy had taken on extra shifts at the mill to provide at least for his eldest son's education, as he was determined that Ayre would not work in the mill, despite Ayre's protests. Rudy had put his foot down, insisting it was fair, since Ayre was not able to get a job and leave his younger brothers. In payment, his father would contribute towards his schooling.

Ayre was glad this was in the past, as Rudy had aged greatly during those years. Ayre intended to help his father once he got on his feet, but at this point,

his earnings were insufficient to be much of a help. He knew his father's struggles were far from over, as though his brothers were grown, they were all going through their difficult teenage years, and he couldn't help but feel that his father sorely missed him to help the younger ones through. He had offered to put off his career and help his father, but his father insisted that Ayre was entitled to start his own life.

After eating a simple dinner, prepared by Rudy, Ayre and Rudy sat down, as they always did, and talked over coffee. Rudy had brought his sons up with manners from the old world from whence he came, and all four boys were respectful, seasoning their conversations with "yes, sir" and hastening to do his bidding.

Rudy looked with concern at his eldest son. Despite his youthful vigor, he could tell that Ayre was battling internally, though he knew it would be difficult and delicate to pull it out of his son. Ayre kept his personal life closed to others. Rudy thought it was a reaction to losing his mother as a young boy. He had tried to bring Ayre to the Church, tried to help him find peace, as he had.

Rudy remembered those difficult years after his wife had departed. She had been a faithful, loving wife and mother, more than he deserved, he knew. He had thanked God for her, and continued to do so, so many years after her death. He hadn't ever found another woman like her, or who would be willing to share his life with that of his numerous sons, so he devoted all his time and energy to bringing up the boys God had entrusted him with.

He knew he was far from adequate for the task, but as a man of faith and prayer, he knew that God was in control of his life and he trusted God to give him the strength to see his four boys become self-supporting and in charge of their own lives. And most of all, he hoped to impart to them the faith that had brought

him through poverty in his own country in the old world and through the struggles to establish himself here—not least of which were the death of his wife and trying to bring up his four boys as a widower.

He couldn't help but feel he had failed to lead his eldest son in the ways of faith—though he was a good boy, and had been his right-hand man from the age of ten onward. Yet he knew that Ayre hadn't embraced any form of faith in God. So Rudy prayed for Ayre daily, sitting quietly on the porch after the boys were in bed, quietly praying with his wife's old rosary beads in his hands. He lit a candle every Sunday at mass for his son, and asked God to help him find faith, for he knew from experience that he would need faith to face life in this world.

"You're looking a little tired, son," Rudy ventured, hoping he wouldn't be interpreted as intruding.

Ayre sighed. "I am working overtime constantly, Saturdays too. But things will change once I achieve partnership. After that, I won't have to put in so many hours and I'll be freer to rest and do other things."

"I can't help but worry about you," Rudy said. "You're made of flesh and bones like us all, and we all have limits. I just hope you won't push yourself beyond yours."

Ayre remained silent. He knew that what his father said was all too true, but he also knew that he had no choice at this point. Either he kept up his stride regardless of difficulties, or he would have to drop out of the race and lose all that he had invested up until this point. No, the stakes were too high.

Ayre's silence spoke to Rudy, who was used to such responses and was able to understand Ayre's feelings. He would just have to continue to pray and trust in the One Who had walked with him throughout his life to take care of his boy. He wished he could do more, but his place was to wait in silence. He hated confrontations and refused to precipitate any

rift between him and his son, though he saw it as somewhat inevitable. Although he had encouraged Ayre to fight for a better career than the mill, he hadn't realized that this would cause their paths to diverge so drastically.

Ayre knew he should go out and play basketball with his brothers, but the tightness in his chest was still making itself known, and he knew he was too exhausted to push it any further. His brothers drifted off to their friends' houses, and he set off for home after giving his father a warm, parting embrace that touched his father's heart deeply.

There was still hope.

CHAPTER 6

A pretty young woman, in her late twenties, stood in the reception room of Roger Mayworth. He had been expecting her, so the receptionist ushered her into Roger's office at the appointed time.

The office was not a showy one. Actually, it was a bit on the tacky side, but Roger was proud of it, as every bit of it was paid with hard-earned, honest money. There was no dishonest money in his business. After he had become a born-again Christian, he had made a decision that whatever business he did as a lawyer, it would be honest. He would not mislead his clients, nor take advantage of the innocent. He didn't feel too proud of himself as a Christian, as he knew he had done little, but he had determined to do what he could, and had done it.

He had represented a few clients from oddball religious outfits, and had made himself somewhat of a name as a religious liberty fighter. And so Amy Johnston Paines and some of the elders of her mission had called upon him to represent Amy in her struggles with her parents. The Brethren did not have much money, much less Amy, who had been widowed, he had been told, and despite the protests of his friends and colleagues that he was killing his career and going to go broke taking in every stray cat and dog that came

his way, he had a feeling about this case. Although he wasn't much of a praying man, and certainly wouldn't say that God had spoken to him personally, he had a gut feeling that he was supposed to help Amy.

When Amy entered his office, he was pleasantly surprised. He had expected a stuffy, drably garbed person with no sense of humor and entirely devoid of any understanding of the world. After meeting Amy, he was a little embarrassed at his mindset, as he realized that he had fallen prey to the typical stereotypes of people belonging to unpopular minority groups. He determined to never judge before knowing the facts and chalked it up in his mind as an important point.

Far from drab and somber and serious, Amy had a light in her eyes and a vibrancy that he had rarely seen in a woman her age. Her eyes seemed to pour forth kindness, compassion, and spark. He immediately knew that he wanted to know more about her and what made her the way she was. As he listened to her story, he continued to marvel even more. Recently widowed, with her wealthy parents about to wrest her children away from her—how could she radiate such peace and joy? How could she show such interest in him, when all that was dearest to her was at stake?

She hadn't spoken but five minutes when he knew that he would take her case for whatever money she and her community were able to produce—or none at all if necessary—and he would fight this case through to the finish, so help him God. He saw an innocence and purity in her that he intended to do everything in his power to protect and preserve.

After Amy told him of her plight, he asked her to tell him how she had met the Brethren, which she explained in great detail. She asked him if he knew Christ, to which he answered that yes, he had been born again once upon a time, but that he had unfortunately not been much of a Christian. After getting saved, he had rarely read his Bible, not found a

church that he liked, and didn't know how to pray.

Amy immediately sympathized with him, and told him that had she not met members of the Brethren, she would not have learned to love the Lord or pray or read and understand God's Word for herself. She smiled so understandingly at him that he felt that just maybe he would learn a few of these things from her.

After taking down all the necessary information, Roger informed Amy that he was honored to take her case and would do everything in his power to represent her. Amy smiled happily, feeling that God had led her to Roger for more reasons than one.

Before leaving, she shyly asked him if he would mind if she said a prayer for him and their joint endeavor. Roger was a bit surprised, as he had never had a client ask to pray with him. He felt a bit awkward, but knew he couldn't deny such a caring gesture. He bowed his head respectfully as Amy prayed.

"Dear Jesus, You certainly are in control of every aspect of our lives. We know that all things work together for good to us, for we love You and are Your children. Thank You for this meeting and for touching Mr. Mayworth's heart to take on this case. Do bless him and help him to find that wonderful friendship and walk with You that will make such a difference in his life. In Jesus' name I pray."

"Amen," echoed Roger, his head still bowed. He was so touched by this personal prayer that he kept his head bowed longer than he should, and then lifted it sheepishly. "Thank you, Mrs. Paines. It has been a great pleasure to meet you, and I trust that God will bless our venture."

And then she was gone. But her presence was etched in Roger's mind for a long time after she left. He knew that something out of the ordinary had happened in his life that day, though he didn't entirely understand it, so he moved on to pursuing the information he needed regarding Amy's case.

He made some calls, found out who was representing the Johnstons and what action had been taken thus far. He groaned when he heard that Jefferson, Peters, and Blanche—one of the top firms in the Chicago area—had taken on the Johnston’s case. What was he next to these giants in the law industry? He would certainly have to be empowered as David of old to knock down these legal Goliaths. The truth is, he was feeling concerned for Amy and her children. He hadn’t realized how well-to-do her parents were and how obviously determined they were by the caliber of legal representation they had sought out. They were in this battle for the long haul; there was no doubt about that. The task ahead was looking pretty formidable at this point. Tomorrow he would go and present himself officially as Amy’s lawyer and find out all he needed to know about the case to plan his strategy.

After returning to her community, Amy spoke excitedly with the elders about Roger Mayworth and how she had felt sure that God was leading them to the right lawyer to defend her and her children. When she had met him, she had felt immediately that this was God’s choice. She and the elders had held hands afterwards and prayed, and one of them had received a short prophecy which consisted of encouraging Bible verses, urging them to trust and proceed through the doors God had opened. Amy was elated that the Lord had answered their prayers so speedily and led them directly to the person of His choice. Surely He was going to lead her through this fire, so that she would come out without the smell of smoke, even as the three Hebrew children of the old Book.

CHAPTER 7

In the camp of Amy’s enemies, preparations were proceeding fast and furiously. This would go beyond a simple court case for the custody of three small children! Amy’s opponents grew confident of their success, armed with many tools, such as funding from Amy’s wealthy and respectable parents, the backing of anti-religious organizations, and even the naiveté of Amy and her religious companions.

The Johnston’s law firm, with Ayre leading the way, had come up with a massive plan. Through contacts of the Johnstons, Ayre arranged for some of the anti-cult literature given to him by the Cult Information Service to hit the newspapers, along with personal accounts from the young person he had spoken with, and a few others she had recommended. In this way, the Brethren would be smeared before the case even formally hit the courts. They hoped to predispose the judge negatively, and create concern about the well-being of the children, should Amy not come to her senses and agree to renounce this group and return to her parents’ house.

Ayre had been busy for several weeks now, meeting with former members of the group, compiling affidavits and sworn testimonies from them to be presented to the court, if needed, as proof that the group was

pernicious and harmful. Ayre's career depended on this case, and he did his homework well, under Blanche's careful tutelage. The traps were all set for the unsuspecting Amy and her beloved Brethren.

Amy's parents were not content with just securing the custody of their grandchildren. They wanted the group that wrenched their child from them forever quashed and defunct. Such a step required very thorough and discreet investigative efforts from the law firm, which examined every detail of the Brethren's financial stance, tax payments, income and doctrine to find a vulnerable spot to attack them from.

Unbeknownst to Ayre, behind the scenes of all these things, the Evil One who fights for the souls of man was gleeful to see Ayre carrying out his plans to such perfection. He had not been sure of conquering Ayre, due to the pious prayers of his father, but he was pleased with how well Ayre was playing the part. Of course, Ayre did not know who was keeping his nose to this grindstone, leading him to fight tooth and nail against people he didn't know, while keeping him confused and empty and dissatisfied with his life. Ayre couldn't understand why he felt he was living in a moment of crisis, a critical moment in his life, other than that this case would define his career and all that he had worked so hard to earn for so many years. He had no idea how high the stakes really were.

CHAPTER 8

Roger closed the blinds in his little office, and bade his secretary farewell, who immediately proceeded to ready herself to depart.

She was a youngish girl, in her early twenties, very plain with a pale complexion, further hampered by an air of depression that seemed to have settled in permanently. Ethel was by all appearances a very ordinary girl with a quiet personality that some bolder than she would consider mousy. She had long ceased to care what others thought of her, particularly her peers, with whom she had never felt very comfortable. Although she had taken on this job with Roger Mayworth, she was still uncertain as to what life held for her. She had a fault of seeing negative possibilities in her circumstances, probably due to difficulties she had faced in her teenage years, coupled with her own nature. As such, she had little optimism about the future.

She did, however, decidedly invest all her energies in being of assistance to her boss, for this was an obvious task at hand that she knew she could do. And Roger was very pleased with her. He considered her his comrade in arms, and saw her through different eyes than other people did. Often, colleagues had asked him why he didn't procure a secretary with

more life to her, saying that Ethel was a total deadpan who would be no credit to his business. But when he looked at her, he saw something vibrant hidden inside, waiting to be found and coaxed to life. If only he knew how to make it happen. As he pondered on this, he immediately associated the thought with his new client, Amy Paines, and he somehow knew that she would know how to draw the real Ethel out. Perhaps one day he would be bold enough to ask Amy for her help.

As Roger turned the corner to his favorite bar, ready to take on a nightly drink (if the truth's to be told, many times he indulged in more than he should), he hesitated at the door. His conscience told him that he was wasting his time here, that he never spent time in deeper, more consequential activities that could improve his life. He knew it was true, and he knew he should listen and find a better way to employ his idle moments, but he didn't have the strength to dominate the urge. Sighing and feeling defeated, he walked into the bar and sat on the stool that may as well have been his, since he occupied it nightly, and prepared to idle away another evening with the drinking buddies that were bound to appear.

Unbeknownst to Roger, Amy Paines had been very touched by her encounter with Roger—so touched that she was moved to pray for him, that God's hands would reach out and touch his life. She knew that, although he had found salvation, he hardly knew the Man who had given all for him. He lacked the joy and purpose that she knew could be his, and so she resolved to pray for him nightly while putting her little ones to sleep. Little did she know the power that her prayers would unleash in Roger's life, for Roger was precious and beloved in the Lord's sight. The Lord saw him wandering about, alone and lost in life, so in need of direction, and Amy's prayers and presence in his life would be the catalyst to bring this direction about.

As Roger sat in the bar, numbing his emptiness with yet another drink, a slovenly old man walked into the bar. Roger couldn't help but notice his disheveled appearance, and reached absentmindedly into his pocket to pull out his spare change or even a dollar or two. Roger was kindhearted to a fault. He couldn't bear to see an injustice or to see a fellow man suffer without doing whatever little he could, though he felt incapable of much. The man wove his way through tables and clouds of cigarette smoke to walk directly up to Roger, as if there were no one else in the bar but the two of them.

Roger smiled sadly and handed the old man the few quarters and the dollar bill he had scrounged out of his lean pockets.

The old man broke out into a wide, practically toothless smile. "Thank you, my boy," he said. "But this is not why I've come. I've got a message for you. Life is too short to throw it away. You must take the time to search and find the true meaning. God's got a lot more for you than this!" Then the old man clapped a hand on Roger's shoulder, turned around, and made his way out of the bar.

Roger was dumbfounded for a moment. Had that just really happened? Was the man a crazed loony from the streets? Was he drunk? But the words were not so easily discounted. Roger knew he had to see the man one more time to ask him on what authority he spoke, so he ran to the door of the bar through which the man had just left, and looked to his right and to his left. The old man was nowhere in sight. How could he have disappeared so quickly? He ran down to the end of the block on each side, all in vain.

Intrigued and disturbed by the whole affair, he asked the bartender what he'd thought of the old beggar that had just walked in. The bartender looked at him a little strangely, told him he'd had enough to drink for one night, and suggested that he head on home.

How peculiar, Roger thought. I saw him, clear as day, winding his way around the tables. He spoke to me, yet nobody seemed to pay him the slightest bit of attention. Could it be that only I could see him? Who or what was he?

Somehow Roger knew he had been visited. But why would a toothless, beggar of a man be a “sign” in his life? Roger knew he had to find out, so he paid his bill and left the bar, heading straight for the public library downtown. If there was one thing he had learned as a lawyer, it was how to research, and he was going to use those skills to track this mystery down.

CHAPTER 9

The headlines were shocking and frightening. Malice was packed into every word of the articles that appeared in the two main papers of the city. The elders called Amy in for a meeting. Amy had not yet seen the newspapers, as she had been busy with her class of children.

When the elders presented Amy with the newspapers, she broke down and wept at the burden of guilt that arose in her heart. How had she brought all this upon those who were the dearest on earth to her? What could she do? Should she leave? Should she give in to her parents, as a sort of sacrificial lamb to protect the community? These were very weighty, grave matters, and for the time being she was speechless as the council deliberated over various options. She realized that she had underestimated the malice, spite, and determination of her parents. She felt an ugly feeling welling in her breast and was tempted to hate them. How could they malign so many innocent people, so many children, just to carry out their own designs? She could never forgive them for the wrongs they were perpetrating. *Never!* she rashly determined.

The elders dispersed the meeting after prayer, having determined to hold a prayer meeting with the entire community that evening. Amy was excused from

her duties for the day, so that she could have extra time to pray, for which she was thankful. The future was looming large and foreboding at this point, and she knew that her only hope was to hold firmly on to her faith. It was unclear how this story could possibly have a happy ending—even entirely impossible.

So she mulled over the entire situation, and though she prayed, much of her time was occupied with thoughts of fear, worry, and anger towards her parents. She struggled on throughout the day, and by its end, she felt more tired and empty than before. She felt listless, with no hope. Her parents were implacable; there would be no stopping them. They would stop at nothing to steal her babies from her, and it seemed they were attempting to destroy the Brethren in the process! Where had she gone wrong, to be the cause of such harm being done to the Lord's work and His servants?

At the evening prayer meeting, many beautiful promises and verses were quoted about the Lord's protection for His beloved, and a beautiful unity of heart and spirit pervaded the gathering. Many were touched and wept and implored the Lord to deliver Amy's children. It was a moving moment, which those present would remember for years to come.

The moment was lost on poor Amy, however, who continued to struggle with her load of guilt, anger, fear, and hopelessness. Amy did not realize that she was allowing the Enemy of her soul to penetrate her shield of the Spirit, as she yielded to hopelessness and all but lost courage. Despairing thoughts screamed at her, and her mind told her that it was foolish to hope, that she must face reality.

Several days went by as Amy muddled about in this state of despair. Her unhappiness and hopelessness was plain to those who loved her, and they prayed unceasingly that the Lord would send His help to strengthen her. And so it was, that the Lord once

again sent her a very clear specific message to help her in this time of trouble.

One night, after the children had fallen asleep, Amy sank to her knees in total desperation, weeping, imploring the Lord to guide her path, to help her to understand why these terrible things were happening. Suddenly, she heard the Lord's voice as clearly as she had that first time, when He told her to leave her parents' home and serve Him. This time, the message again was all too clear:

All who will live godly in Me shall suffer persecution! Why do you wonder at these things, as though some strange thing happened unto you? Fear not, stand back and see Me fight, for will I not care for My Own? Every hair of your head is numbered, and I will not let you fall, or your children, any more than I allow one sparrow to fall to the ground without My knowing it. Therefore trust in Me.

Amy wept again after perceiving this message, though she no longer cried tears of hopelessness, but rather tears of love for the One Who loved her in spite of herself and her many weaknesses. She was humbled by her lack of faith in the face of adversity and resolved to spend an extra hour each night studying the Scriptures so that she would be better prepared for whatever God had in mind. She asked God to forgive her for not trusting Him as she ought, for not putting her life and the lives of her little ones in His hands.

With God's help she now felt ready for whatever was ahead. Then she lay down to sleep, and slept soundly and peacefully through the night.

CHAPTER 10

It was Sunday again, and Ayre knew he needed to visit his father and brothers this weekend, though he preferred not to. He felt a bit uncomfortable about seeing his father, though he wasn't sure why. He had a nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach that his father would not be very proud of him at this point. But he was doing his job. His father would have to understand that! Perhaps what he was doing *was* nothing to be proud of, but it came with the job.

He always thought it was amusing how he could get into an argument in his head with his father, who would never argue with him in real life, but would rather just sit with a sad, reproachful look in his eyes that hurt Ayre much more than angry words ever could.

At that, Ayre drove up to his father's house, and it was time to face the music. Ayre hugged his father as always when he arrived, and greeted each of his brothers, attempting to show an interest in the goings-on of their lives. As he sat across from his father, afterwards, he realized that his father didn't look well. His skin looked pale, and his worn face looked anxious. Ayre realized that in the midst of his self-absorbing thoughts of the past several weeks, he had lost sight of the fact that his father seemed to be engrossed in

some concerns of his own. Ayre felt a little pang of remorse, seeing his poor, old father, work worn and tired yet fighting to scratch out a living for his large family on his own. He suddenly realized that his father had his own cares and broken dreams that he put aside each day, as he donned his work clothes and kept on one more day for his children.

Seeing the question in Ayre's eyes, his father responded, "You know, your brothers are getting older and they haven't had the benefit of the same amount of mothering that you had, being that they were much smaller when she passed away. I think that may be the reason why Gary is starting to get in trouble now."

"Starting to get in trouble?" asked Ayre, thoroughly alarmed. "What's happening? Why haven't you told me about this before?"

"I haven't wanted to upset you, what with you having your first case and all. In any case, there's nothing you can do about it now, is there? Not to worry. We'll be all right, with the good Lord's help."

"But what kind of trouble are you talking about here?" Ayre, knowing the carefree nature of his brother Gary, was thoroughly worried. But what concerned him most of all was the effect Gary's behavior would have on the two younger boys that followed him. With Ayre absent, there was little to stop the younger boys from following their next older brother's example? Would pursuing his career mean the spoiling of the lives of his younger brothers, and an added burden of care for his father, unshared by him?

"He's gotten to hanging out with the wrong sort. I know he's been drinking excessively, but I fear there is much more. I know my boys, and Gary is in trouble."

"So what do you want me to do, Dad? Speak with him as an older brother?"

"That would be good, son," his father answered, then sighed. Then, cleaning out his pipe, with his eyes

looking downward, and attempting to sound casual, he asked his son how the case was progressing.

Ayre steeled himself, as he knew this case had already stepped over boundaries that portended to alienate him from his father, and as little as he wanted to do this, he had already taken on the case, and his pride prevented him from backing out of it now. He would have to see it through to the bitter end. And bitter it would be.

"Father, I know you don't agree with the methods being used in this case, or the principles behind it. I know it may seem sensitive to you, being that you were widowed yourself and you have your own religious beliefs. But I have no choice. The game is already played before me, and I'm but a pawn in it.

"Yes, it's true that Blanche gave the case to me, but in actuality, he's running the case, and just sends me to do the scruffy work. I don't like it any more than you do, and I know that the articles in the paper are stooping a bit low and perhaps are involving some innocent people, but I have no choice. Either I move forward, or I will be left behind, and everything I fought so hard to accomplish will turn to dust. Do you understand that, Dad?"

Inadvertently, Ayre had raised his voice as he proceeded with his tirade, until the tone was that of a shouting match, though his father was a silent opponent.

Rudy said nothing, but his dark brown eyes mirrored the disappointment in his heart, the reproach and the sadness. Ayre couldn't face those eyes, and he stomped out of the house without another word. It was done. The end of one life and the beginning of the next. And all he could think about was how hollow he felt.

Meanwhile, after all had been said and done, Ayre's father settled himself in his rocking chair, actually his wife's chair, for his evening prayers. He had never

been able to part with this chair. It brought comfort and made his dear wife seem closer to him.

And his prayer times had been longer of late, for he knew his eldest son was battling and facing a crisis in his life. He felt helpless. He knew he was not much of a combined father/mother for the boys and it had been more than he could do to get them through school, keep some sort of semblance of order in the house, as well as decent food on the table. Only his daily prayers had given him the strength to do so. He was a simple man with a simple faith and though he didn't understand much of the rituals of his church, he simplified it by speaking to God as his friend, and relying on Him throughout his day. And God had never failed to be there for him.

As he prayed for Ayre, a few tears fell down his wrinkled and weathered cheeks. He asked that his wife and the mother of his boys might watch over his sons, for they needed help. He asked that Mary, who had felt grief as a mother, would watch over his Ayre, as well as the saints he had learned to revere throughout the years. He asked God to grant their intervention in the life of his sons, so that their paths would be made clear.

CHAPTER 11

Roger had to admit as he paced back and forth in his tiny, tacky office, that he was worried—very worried. After seeing the newspapers, he knew he was facing ruthless, uncaring, and unprincipled opponents who would stoop at nothing to get their way. He was not so worried about losing the case as a blow to his record—he would put up as good a fight as was possible and give it everything God empowered him to give. No, losing was not his concern. His concern was Amy—sweet, loving, giving, naïve, and tender Amy. What would happen to her if he lost the case and she lost her children? Could he live with that? Decidedly not. What to do? His mind worked frantically trying to reach a decision before Amy arrived at his office. No, he couldn't let her down, and to undertake her defense in this case against such a superior law firm using unscrupulous methods would be an injustice to Amy. What, after all, did he have to offer, besides being a kindhearted fool who couldn't stand to see the weak hurt, much less by such unprincipled curs that her parents and the law firm they had chosen were proving to be?

After his uncanny experience of a few days back, when he was spoken to by what he was finally convinced was some kind of “heavenly messenger”

or “angel,” he had begun praying for the first time in his life. He didn’t know much what to say or how to approach God, but he wanted to. That was a good start. He liked Amy more than just about any other woman he had ever met, so he decided he’d best pray and ask God for His guidance.

So he knelt right there in his office, bowed his head and humbly petitioned the Almighty. “God,” he prayed, “I know You love this woman. I sure do. Please show me what to do, because I just don’t know. I don’t want to let her down, but I don’t want to try to help her and fail. God help me. Amen.” He wasn’t used to kneeling and praying, but it felt good.

He sat up in his chair, ready to tackle his own caseload piled up on his desk, when suddenly he heard a clear, but quiet voice speaking from behind him. It said but four words, which remained etched in his mind afterwards: “As David with Goliath.”

“What?” He whirled around to see who was behind him.

Nobody was there.

As he sat mulling over what had just happened, he heard it again: “As David with Goliath.”

After his spiritual experience of the other night, he was starting to wonder what was happening to him. However, he remembered that one of the books at the library had explained how people throughout the ages had attested to hearing voices of warning or guidance, most attributing them to angels.

At that precise moment, Ethel knocked on his door and informed him that Amy was waiting. He bid her to usher Amy in.

Roger greeted Amy effusively, giving her a fatherly hug. He was obviously pleased to see her, and this warmed Amy considerably. This was not an easy time for her, and any words or gestures of encouragement were certainly welcome.

After preliminary greetings and polite chat, Amy

felt it was time to hit the core of the matter. “How do you see things shaping up at this point?” she asked, gesticulating towards the newspapers that Roger had unwittingly left open on top of his work pile.

Roger hung his head a bit, saddened by the news he knew he had to give her. “Not good, I’m afraid,” he answered honestly. “Amy, you are one of the greatest women I’ve ever met. I admire your courage, your inner strength, and your faith. For that very reason I am compelled to be honest with you. I don’t see any hope whatsoever in this case unless you secure better representation, with the same kind of horsepower your parents have. Frankly, my dear, I don’t have what it takes. I’m a small-time lawyer, and though I’ll scrap it out with the biggest of them anytime without shame, I feel I can’t afford to lose this case and jeopardize your children. Do you understand?”

Amy nodded, not wishing to speak, knowing that the tears were begging to come out, and she would be unable to hold them back if she spoke. Things really were as hopeless as she had thought. However, she opened her purse and searched for the promises the Lord had given her a few days back as she prayed.

Just touching them with her fingertips seemed to infuse power and faith into her very being. She could not let go of those promises from the Lord Himself! He could not go back on His Word, no matter what her parents did. It was a struggle in the spirit for Amy, and the abyss of doubt and fear loomed before her, but once she clutched those promises in her hand, the Evil One no longer had the power to defeat or discourage her.

She smiled a shaky smile at Roger, though she felt like crying, and laid her hand on his. “Roger,” she said softly, “God is our refuge and strength, and a very present help in trouble. Therefore will we not fear, though the earth be removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea. Surely the troubles

of one woman and three small children are not too large for our God to handle. Let us pray together and entrust this into the only hands that can carry it.”

Roger respectfully bowed his head, seeming more like a little child than a man very familiar with the ways of the world. Roger was practically born with street smarts, or so his older brother told him. Life had not seemed to smile upon him too kindly until the day when he had reached the point of desperation and bowed his head and asked Jesus to take his heart and life. From that point on, Roger’s life had had a purpose and he had gone from being a delinquent street kid to becoming a lawyer, one who knew the streets and had a heart for the down and out. Though he had not had the means to learn more about God or His Word, the Lord smiled upon his faith and the formidable changes he had made in his life.

Amy prayed a simple but heartfelt prayer, entrusting her life and that of her children into the Lord’s hands. As she did so, tears fell unbidden from her eyes, and when “amens” were said and Roger opened his eyes, he saw her tears on her cheeks and thought how beautiful and radiant she looked, with hope shining like diamonds in her moist eyes. Roger felt as if he were in the presence of something sacred, something much bigger than himself, and he felt ashamed at how small his faith was next to Amy’s. For the first time he realized that there was so much more to faith and God than he had ever understood. Immediately the words of the old man came to mind: “You must take the time to search and find the true meaning.” Roger felt he was finally on the right track to finding that true meaning.

“Roger,” Amy said gently, disturbing his deep reverie.

Roger, as a true lawyer, had a very quick mind and in short seconds was able to think through difficult issues that others would tend to ponder for long periods of time.

“Yes,” he responded.

“Roger, as we were praying, I saw before my eyes an enactment of the story of David and Goliath. It was so real, I felt that I could almost reach out and touch the people before me. Roger, do you suppose that this is the answer to your question as to whether you are the right person to represent me?”

Roger was stunned by this, considering the voices he had heard immediately before Amy entered the office. He almost felt a little frightened by so many supernatural happenings over the past few days.

I’m a practical man, he had already told himself several times. I’m not suited for spiritual undertakings. Surely there must be other men or women, other lawyers who are more suited, more knowledgeable of religious affairs, who would be better qualified to take on this case. He felt awed and even a little frightened at the task being set before him, which he knew he was not up to.

“Amy,” he stuttered a bit, “I do believe the story of David and Goliath, and I even thought about it myself before you came in.” He was afraid she would think him strange if he mentioned the voices. “But I am *not* that man. I don’t have the qualifications necessary to be a David for you. I would like more than anything in the world to be there for you, but I cannot.”

“Roger”—Amy laid her hand on his once more, a gesture that, coming from this pretty young woman, warmed him—“if there is one thing I have learned, it is that when I am weak, Jesus is strong in me. This battle will not be won by might or by strength but by His Spirit. I am convinced that the Lord wants you to take this case. But you must trust that this is *His* business and *His* work, no matter what the outcome. God knows how many tears I have wept, how many giants I have slain in the night—giants of fear, anger, worry. I know you are deeply concerned for me and my children. I understand your reasoning, but I am

convinced that God wants to use you to help me in this battle—none other. You will have to trust in God for the outcome and the welfare of my children, just as I must. Win or lose, God is in control of our lives and we will have to trust in Him.”

Roger felt tears coming to the surface, which he fought back, for he knew the price that Amy was willing to pay to serve her God, and he wondered if he would ever be able to trust and serve with such passion and abandon.

Amy rose to leave, laying her hand on his arm. “Roger, we will pray for you that God will make you as David with Goliath. You cannot do that of your own strength. It will be a gift from God, and you will know it when it hits you. God keep you.”

With that, she stood to leave, and Roger showed her to the door, and then went for his own hat. It was time to find that story of David and Goliath, which he hadn't ever read straight from the Bible. He needed to search and find that piece of truth.

He emerged from his office to see Ethel sitting dejectedly on her chair. She attempted a smile when she saw him, and he gave a curt nod, and was then out of the building, leaving Ethel to her own thoughts, mostly wondering about Roger. Whenever Amy came to the office, Roger's enthusiasm was easily noticed. His face lit up, and he seemed to be a different man when Amy was there.

Ethel knew she had to face the facts. Why would it bother her how Roger felt about Amy unless she was starting to have feelings for him herself? Anyway, why would Roger even look at her, unattractive as she was, when Amy was so fresh and pretty? She must have been fooling herself to think that he ever noticed her at all.

Of course, he was older, but Ethel had never cared for younger men. They hadn't been able to relate to her innate seriousness, and she always felt self-conscious

around them. She knew she wasn't as pretty as other girls, so what was the point in trying?

But there had been and was something about Roger that she liked and felt attracted to. She couldn't put her finger on it. She couldn't explain it. He certainly wasn't outstandingly attractive, and he definitely didn't know how to put an iron to his clothes. What was it then? Perhaps his unselfish wholehearted concern and interest in his clients? She knew he believed in what he did and that he gave whatever he did his utmost attention and devotion. He didn't seem to know the value of money, and none of his actions ever had that as their motive. And perhaps his interest in this Amy Paines was just part of that same passion to do something worthwhile, something of value. Maybe she was misconstruing the appearances. Perhaps there was still a possibility...

CHAPTER 12

Ayre's headache had been worsening all day, and he knew that he had stretched himself to his breaking point. His head hurt so bad that he was nauseous and disoriented. Mrs. Andrews had looked at him with motherly concern when she brought his coffee and had insisted that he go home on sick leave.

He knew she was right, though he felt a little guilty, as he knew he wasn't physically sick. Everything seemed to be spinning inside of him, and he felt as if a maelstrom was spending its fury inside his head. The more he tried to ignore it and concentrate on his work, the worse it became. Something was seriously wrong with him, he knew.

He drove himself home, though he had a hard time keeping his eyes open in the sunlight, as it seemed to add to the intensity of his headache. When he arrived at his apartment, he savored the quiet, hoping to find the inner peace he so desperately needed. However, he was disappointed to find that shortly after lying down, he began to feel worse. He was so nauseous, he soon found himself on the bathroom floor emptying out the contents of his stomach. He thought to call the doctor, but he knew there was nothing physically wrong with him.

It had all started the day after he left his father's

house, closing the door on that part of his life. He hadn't expected the feelings of emptiness, guilt, and uneasiness that he had felt about that decision. But it was too late to reverse it. The situation was irremediable. His father had a very set way of seeing things, and Ayre had his, and the two were incompatible.

A small thought egged at his conscience: *Could it be that my actions are not right?* But he immediately debated down the thought. After all, how many lawyers worked at his firm and other similar ones, doing even worse deeds than he was being called upon to perform, and yet they were perfectly happy, at peace and content with their lot? Why should he be any different? Why should he be any better than anyone else? Just because his father with his old world ideas expected it of him? Where would that get him in life? He would end up being a two-bit lousy lawyer with hardly a cent to his name. What good would that do anyone? And what of all the training he had received and the opportunity he had been given in this firm. Did his father expect him to throw it all to the four winds?

And so he debated, analyzed, and mostly agonized, for hours it seemed, with no respite, no response, just a dead silence. The more he pondered, the more miserable he felt. If he could have seen with the eyes of the spirit, he would have known that all this misery was the answer to his humble father's earnest prayers, that his wayward son would find his way. And so God had begun the work that only He could do.

Exhausted and numb with pain, Ayre left his house and began to walk, with no idea where he was walking to, but desperate to run away from his thoughts and his conscience, which seemed to be yelling at him. He walked in the direction of the park, and hadn't walked ten blocks when suddenly the spires of the neighborhood Catholic church loomed up before him. He hadn't been inside a church in years, except to

attend Christmas mass with his family. He had discarded that side of his life after his mother had died. He had been so close to her. She was always there for him, and when she died it was as if the light of the church had been turned off for him, and he could no longer attend it without remembering the memorial service held for her. The memories had been painful at first, until eventually he forgot about the church altogether and became indifferent.

Feeling so embattled and strained as he did, he decided to enter the church and see if peace was to be found there. The church was empty at that time of day, so he just sat in a pew midway towards the altar. He did feel a certain measure of relief in being there and thinking of his mother. Without thinking, he whispered, "I wish you were here. Everything would have been different."

After a half hour of peaceful silence, he rose and prepared to go back home. Although the crisis was far from over, he had found a measure of peace to continue. And as he left, he knew what he had to do, and though it seemed a bit crazy and illogical, he would do it anyway.

CHAPTER 13

“This meeting will now begin,” announced Mr. Liege. “Please be seated and we will begin our discussions.”

The seminar held in the Cult Information Service’s conference room was into its third and final day, and discussions were now to commence regarding all the previous lectures. Ayre had sat through several sessions of former members from different religious groups testifying against the churches they had once belonged to. Impassioned and angry young people rose and denounced the faith of their parents, the unfairness of not having received a “normal” education and upbringing.

Ayre stirred a little in his chair, as he attempted to sort through all this. He thought back to his own childhood, as he and his father had struggled endlessly to bring up his brothers while grieving the loss of his mother, to keep above the poverty level and supply their basic needs. Some of those speaking didn’t seem to have been through such tough rigors in comparison. Sure, they had obviously suffered some hard knocks along the way, but it was hard for him to see how their experiences were any less arbitrary or tougher than the knocks he had received from an early age, having out of necessity forfeited his childhood and

the “carefree teen years” these young people seemed to feel deprived of, to become his father’s right-hand man. Yet he had done so without bitterness, having no choice but to understand what survival in this life required of him, and the duties that faced him even at an early age.

His thoughts led him to an even deeper level, though he was unaware of the dotting presence of his mother whispering thoughts into his ear, trying to help him sort through life’s complexities. What was “normal”? Who was to determine that one child should be brought up in one way, and another in an entirely different way? Was it all by chance? Should he also be bitter and angry at the difficulties he had been faced with at a young age? Who would he blame for this? His father? His mother for dying? God?

He became uncomfortable with these thoughts, as he was not used to analyzing or pondering on deep questions for any length of time. From the time his mother had died, he had determined to become a plodder, placing one foot in front of the other, without looking to the side or asking why. As a scared boy this had made it easier for him to overcome his losses.

The discussion was beginning, so his attention faded and refocused into the issues being discussed.

“Action must be taken,” Mr. Liege exhorted, “and we must all play our part in order for this action to be successful. The cults are taking over our good country and government, subtly destroying and corrupting the minds of young people. These are pernicious groups, bent on lasciviousness, crime, and hate. Our moral duty is to lobby our government to put forth legislation to change the laws that allow such criminals to freely operate. In order to do so, we need former members of groups who are willing to unite and lay charges, lawyers who will help us to draw up bills, lobbyists who will approach government officials tirelessly until our voice is heard.

“You have all heard of the many horrors perpetrated upon children by the sects and the cults. Each one present must contribute in order to make our efforts successful. If you cannot contribute your time and professional abilities, you can help with your donations to make this effort possible. Funding is needed for psychiatrists and psychologists, so that they can further their research, which clearly will pinpoint the manipulative, coercive techniques used by these pernicious groups to brainwash their victims, rendering them helpless in their evil clutches.

“These individuals are no longer capable of making judicious decisions. Psychiatrists and psychologists are needed to perform studies that will prove the extreme emotional and mental damage inflicted on the minds and psyches of minors and unsuspecting individuals. Those who are authorities in the field of education are particularly needed, as often these dangerous groups will either homeschool their children or operate their own religious schools. This isolates them from normal society and makes them lose grasp of their responsibility as citizens of their country first and foremost.

“Yes, my friends, the task before us is awesome and there is much to be done. But, fortunately, we can count on the help of many illustrious individuals who have sided with our fight. We now have successfully won the favor of several congressmen, psychologists, and educators. We are well on the way to victory, but we need the help of each person present.”

Mr. Liege commenced to name off different committees they wished to form in order to better achieve their objectives. Hands were raised in response, as people signed up for different committees. Several parents of members in different religious groups raised their hands to offer monetary assistance to make these endeavors possible. Mr. Liege seemed very content with the response.

When the business of the meeting was completed, Mr. Liege gathered everyone's attention once more, saying he had an announcement to make. "I would also like to draw your attention to an industrious young man"—at this, the speaker motioned to Ayre, who looked around, feeling slightly uncomfortable with all eyes suddenly upon him—"who is presently engaged in a high profile case with the Brethren, one of the pernicious groups on our list, and now on our 'most dangerous' section. This young man is the backbone of the legal defense of Mr. and Mrs. Johnston, who are taking their daughter to court for the custody of their three grandchildren, at present in the dangerous grasp of the leaders of the group. The children were taken away from their natural parents at birth, cloistered from society, raised on a low protein diet, and forced to waken several times throughout the night and at early dawn for torturous prayer rituals. The children are brought up by people other than the parents, and denied education and interaction with other children.

"As you can see, this case is most distressful. I would also point out that this serves as a showcase for the issues we wish to highlight. We must support this endeavor arduously, for if this case is rightfully won by the grandparents, jurisprudence will be established that will greatly further our cause of curbing these groups, imprisoning the guilty, and making their horrid crimes of brainwashing illegal. Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot lose this case. Our resources must be placed behind this case, for it will open the doors for you parents, here present, to gain custody of your grandchildren and bring them to their rightful place."

The meeting closed shortly after this fiery speech, with promises of support on every hand.

Ayre got up to leave, with the distinct feeling that the activities of this group and its "moral crusade"

were not to his liking. However, his choices were few, as Blanche insisted that in order to be successful with this case, the firm would have to work very closely with the Cult Information Service. Thus, he had found himself unavoidably attending many of their meetings. The meetings all seemed the same to him, with the same accusations for each group with slight variations and the same rhetoric each time. However, these were powerful allies, as after they joined forces with the Johnston's legal team, they had worked with the media to achieve the present nasty publicity against the Brethren. They were also lobbying Congress for changes in legislation, working carefully to time this with the court case, and hopefully apply some pressure on the judge. They were also amassing an enormous quantity of papers, affidavits, files, and whatnot to present to the judge. They were definitely an active group of people, though somewhat fanatical in his opinion in their never-ending quest.

Open your eyes, dear son, whispered Ayre's mother in his ear. *Open your eyes and see the spiritual forces at work in this place.* Could Ayre have only seen the realities around him, he would have been shocked and horrified. For this meeting room was filled with every kind of evil, spirits of hatred, intolerance, selfishness, and violence. Though some present were surrounded by guardian angels who shielded them from the darkness, yet the evil was allowed to operate according to the decisions of those present. There was not much Light in that room, just a faint ray.

CHAPTER 14

“Amy dear, I think we must get together and pray and discuss what we shall do.” Daniel, one of the elders of the Brethren community, was gentle and kind as he spoke to Amy. He was all too aware that she could easily find such a suggestion somewhat alarming.

Amy nodded, feeling her stomach tighten in a knot, and a nervousness bordering on fear run through her. She had been awaiting this moment for some time, and was surprised the elders had not called such a meeting earlier. It had been God’s grace on her life, for it had given her more time to commune with her Lord and prepare for such a moment.

Together, they entered the simple meeting hall used by the Brethren for prayer meetings. Before beginning, they had a time of singing psalms together, which calmed the fears in Amy’s heart. After prayer, the discussion began.

Amy could hardly concentrate on all the whys and wherefores and nuances of the discussion. She knew that she and her situation were to be at the core of the prayers and discussion, and that she would have to trust in the Lord to lead her through the decision of the elders as to the next step in her life.

After much prayer, debate, and discussion, it seemed best to all that Amy move out of the community

for a time, until she was able to settle the matter of her children's custody. This was a painful decision for all, but Amy's opponents were attacking the group fiercely, placing many children at risk, as well as interrupting their mission and work.

Amy agreed wholeheartedly with this decision, though she found the prospect daunting. The elders would give her their support, and one of the widows would accompany her on her sojourn until all was resolved and she was able to safely return to the community. This would also help free Amy from her many tasks to devote her time, attention, and prayers to the court case. Amy had to admit it was an easier arrangement as far as logistics went, though she was overwhelmed at the thought of being outside the wonderful spiritual security she found within the community. She knew then that the promises the Lord had given for her and her children would be tested and that she would have to hold on to them for dear life.

Five days after the decision to leave was crystalized, Amy found herself with her three little ones and Mrs. Broder heading for an apartment belonging to one of the members of the community. The elders had seen that it was cleaned, furnished, and ready for her by the time she moved in. She was overwhelmed by their kindness and giving spirit, more so considering the difficulties they had fallen upon of late due to the onslaughts of her parents and their cronies.

Shortly after the nasty publicity began, officials were at their door to audit their finances and investigate their tax exemption status. A few days later, they had received a call from the local Social Services office, advising them that they would be by to scrutinize the children. Finally, they had received a call from the local board of education, wanting to inspect their school to see if it met with their educational standards. Amy's head was whirling from all the activity. The elders had

wanted to shield her from all this so that she could devote herself to the task at hand. She would ever be grateful to these sweet people who had taught her to love the Lord, to serve Him and to be His follower. She knew that she would now be tested outside the safety and security of the community. She would need to pray more than ever and seek the face of the Lord Himself for every decision, instead of running to the elders for counsel and prayer.

Unbeknownst to Amy, her husband Jasper had been given the mission of helping her to draw much closer to the Lord and His Heavenly host through this time. And though the circumstances seemed difficult and daunting to Amy, this was precisely the situation the Lord wanted to use to make of her a wonderful woman of God. Little did Amy realize that instead of stepping away from God's presence in leaving the community, as she imagined it within herself, she was stepping into the very presence of God and those He had assigned to care for her even more closely.

CHAPTER 15

Ayre had made a decision and he planned to live up to his word. So it had been that he had carefully planned an outing over the weekend that he had no doubt Blanche, should he learn of it, would not look upon very kindly. He realized that ethically what he was doing was probably wrong. He could lose his job or seriously compromise himself and his career. But he had to do it.

The drive to a more distant community of the Brethren, and removed from the one in which Amy resided, would take him several hours, but if he hurried he would be there in time for their Sunday meetings, which were open to the public. He had availed himself of the Cult Information Service to find out where other communities were located, although, unbeknownst to them, his motives in doing so were entirely different from what they imagined.

As he had sat in the church that day a few weeks ago, he had felt so confused, at odds with himself, his life, his father. Yet, as he sat there trying to understand why it seemed that all Hell had broken loose since he took on this case, he understood less the more he attempted to analyze the situation. His intentions had been good. He had wanted to make his career at law to finally live his own life, and to pay back his father

for the part of his schooling that his father had so generously given him. He knew that his father was struggling day by day and moment by moment, and the money would be a welcome relief to him. With Ayre gone, it was difficult for his father to do overtime, keep on top of his teenage sons, not to mention the physical load of running a household.

Ayre's intentions had sincerely been the best when he first set out to study law. His outstanding grades, the product of much hard work and tedious evenings filled with endless study on his part, had led to his being hired by one of the top law firms in Chicago. Yet, now that he had his first case, it was causing a terrible rift between him and his father that he didn't know how to mend, and that, at this point, seemed irreparable.

And then on the other hand, he felt uneasy about the case itself, though he wouldn't admit that to his father or anyone else. His conscience warned him that something was amiss with his involvement in this. Yet, his career lay on the line if he failed to carry out the work he had been asked to do on this case.

Even though, in the church, he hadn't reached any mental solutions in this difficult matter, he had resolved to visit a Brethren community to see for himself what they were all about. If they were at all like Joy Paris or how the Cult Information Service described them in their files, his conscience would be laid to rest, and he would be a minister of justice. He hadn't wanted to think of the alternative, should he find something different.

After a lengthy drive, and asking directions many times over, he finally found himself at the entrance of a Brethren village. The community was a rural one, and supported itself through the sale of its handcrafted furniture and toys, as well as its homegrown vegetables and grains.

The sight before him was homey and impressive for its neatness. Everything seemed organized, neat,

and part of a united integral plan. There were over twenty homes of different Brethren families, a central meeting hall, and several other buildings, with the farms on the outer skirts of the community. There was much lively interaction between the members, who came and went, greeted and spoke to each other with a great degree of warmth and personable affection. Children ran about neatly dressed, helping their parents and moving in the direction of the meeting hall.

Ayre followed them down the lane on foot, leaving his car at a parking lot for visitors outside the community. As he walked through the little village, he saw colorful flower gardens, houses painted bright, unusual colors. Overall, there was an atmosphere of joy and peace that could not be denied.

At the meeting hall he was warmly greeted by several community members. He wondered how they would greet him if they knew who he was. Many asked him how he had heard about their little community, and he mumbled something halfway intelligible about having heard about them through some friends.

Ayre carefully observed the people during the entire meeting, and thus heard little of the speeches, testimonies, and prayer requests. The meeting was certainly different from any mass he had ever attended at his church—which had always been enveloped in rituals, formality, and traditions that he did not understand.

After the meeting, one friendly young fellow nonchalantly struck up a conversation with Ayre, asking if he'd like a tour of the community, to which Ayre agreed. For over an hour, the young man enthusiastically pointed out spots of interest, giving details of the meaning and significance of every aspect of their communal society. By the time the informal tour was over, Ayre felt that he had heard more stories and verses from the Bible than he had ever heard before.

After an hour, he became overwhelmed and a bit tired as there was so much to take in.

The young fellow, introducing himself as Garth, seemed to catch the swing in Ayre's mood, and immediately stopped, pointing in the direction of a simple coffee shop, offering to buy Ayre a coffee.

After drinking his coffee, and downing several aspirins, he started asking Garth questions, challenging him on every aspect. The switchover was surprising to Garth, since Ayre had seemed friendly and mild, but he took the change in stride.

"Don't you want to get out of this place and have yourself a 'real life' with real people, where you can have fun, or develop your full potential?"

Garth, with a great wisdom for his age, looked deeply into Ayre's eyes, and asked him what kind of fun Ayre had that he, Garth, was missing out on.

The blow was well-placed, and Ayre lowered his eyes momentarily. He knew that his question had been more prompted from what he had heard at the Cult Information Service meetings, than from his own observations of Garth, who actually seemed open, relaxed, and self-confident—and who clearly didn't match the stereotyped profile that the Cult Information Service had presented to him of an "average" member of the Brethren.

"That's all fine and well, but what about your education, and higher aspirations for your life besides such a simple existence as you live here? Do you not consider it cruel to deny the children and yourself an opportunity to partake of the much wider fortunes available outside this community?"

Garth pondered the question, seemingly unhurried by the angry words pouring out of Ayre's mouth. "Certainly not as cruel as I can see that your life has been, where you have been denied much of the basic peace, comfort, and nurturing that I and others here have been blessed with." He looked in Ayre's eyes, one

young man to another, without flinching or averting his gaze, leaving Ayre to be the first to do so.

How had this person seemingly seen right into his soul, when others, older and wiser than he, with whom Ayre consorted daily, never had an inkling of what went on inside Ayre's heart? Or was it that they didn't care?

Ayre left with more questions than he had come with.

CHAPTER 16

Rudy grabbed his hardhat and jumped into his car, his boys following close behind him. Although he had the early morning shift at the steel mill, which meant he had to punch in by 7:00, this was not much earlier than his boys' required time for arriving at high school. He would drop them off first and still be on time for work.

The boys were typically moody and gruff on their way to school, not appreciating being dragged out of bed so early. They said goodbye to their father and made their way to the school gate, greeting their friends as they went. Rudy said a short prayer for them as he watched them enter the building, that seemed to be symbolically taking them away from him and the little he could offer them on his own. He sighed and made his way to the steel mill.

Driving into the mill was like entering another dimension, almost an underworld from a Gothic novel. The mill was lit by artificial light and those inside would not see the light of day for their entire eight-hour shift. At times, Rudy speculated that perhaps Hell would be a little like a steel mill, with the endless noise, unsavory odors, endless, monotonous work, artificially lit atmosphere and ugliness everywhere. There was hardly a sign of the beauty God had made

to be found here. Rudy had found, however, that there were plenty of nice people here, humble people who worked hard to support their families, who made the sacrifice day after day of working in such a place.

Rudy was a foreman, well liked by all, considered to be unerringly fair. Whenever there was a dispute to be settled, Rudy was sought out and listened to with great respect. This was always a source of amazement to Rudy, since his formal education was limited and he knew his own personal lacks all too well. Other foremen had been tried over the years, some straight from college, but these had not been well received by any. The executive department had eventually given the job to Rudy and he had held it for over ten years now. The company was happy with the arrangement, as with his meek and polite ways, Rudy served as a perfect liaison between the executives and the workers, which was a delicate balance to maintain.

Rudy had called a meeting with several of the machine operators and they had discussed some glitches in their operation, so that Rudy could in turn present this to Mr. Parsly, the young, straight-out-of-college fellow who would represent their needs to the company board. Some of the machinists were irate, due to the fact that Mr. Parsly treated them disdainfully, and as far as they knew, their requests never made it past him. Although Mr. Parsly did have a degree in business, which technically made him more knowledgeable, he had never operated a machine before, nor had worked through every aspect of the industry as had the workers who had rotated through most of the tasks in this particular plant.

Rudy attempted to appease them, pointing out that they had to understand Mr. Parsly's perspective, and that he, Rudy, would take the matter directly to the board if necessary. First, however, he wanted to give Parsly another chance, since he was young and new at the business.

He managed to obtain the grudging consent of the machinists, and they left to continue their shift. As he moved towards another area of the mill, Parsly came by, in a bit of a rush. He breathlessly told Rudy, "The board has asked if you would be able to do an extra shift today, since the other foreman is ill, and with some large orders coming in, it is imperative that the mill be operating at peak performance. If not, cheap steel will start flowing in from other countries, and we will be edged right out of the business."

Rudy nodded, not pleased with the request. "Mr. Parsly," he said, "I will remind you and the board that I am a widower with several dependents. I will comply with the request to do an extra shift today, but I cannot be called upon to do so often. Please ask the board to consider that."

He knew he was walking a fine line in putting his foot down with Parsly, as he needed this job and couldn't afford to be laid off. On the other hand, his years of work experience had taught him that he had to put boundaries around him so that bureaucrats such as Parsly didn't take undue advantage of him. It was a cruel world out here, and sometimes he couldn't help but ask the good Lord how it was possible for a man to live according to his faith and survive out here, where selfishness was rampant and few sought the good of others. Yet he kept going forward and God had brought him through every difficult impasse.

Parsly looked at him a little distastefully. "Very well. I will let the board know." Rudy couldn't help but wonder whether the board actually had anything to do with this request in the first place. One always wondered with Parsly.

"Hey, Rudy!" It was Bill, his Greek friend. Bill wasn't his real name, but since his name was so difficult to pronounce, he told everyone to just call him Bill. He and Rudy had known each other since the days when Rudy's dear wife was still alive. As young

couples, the two men and their wives had often shared meals and picnics, enjoying each other's company. Their children had grown up together and Bill was "a friend who is closer than a brother" to Rudy.

"Let's have lunch, Rudy." Bill put an arm on Rudy's shoulder, always concerned for Rudy and how he was holding up.

"Sure, let's do that." So off they went to the mill's buffet-style cafeteria. After pushing their tray through the line and exchanging some small talk about the kids, the weather, problems at the mill, they sat down together at a table for two in a corner of the room.

"You know, Bill," said Rudy, "lately, I've been pretty worried about my boys."

"Now," Bill interrupted, "they're all good boys, they'll turn out just fine. You must stop worrying. You can only do what you can do. You already practically kill yourself as it is with extra shifts, trying to give them the best possible life. Let them seek their own place in life and trust in God for their care."

Rudy nodded. It was so nice to talk about his faith with another likeminded person. Although Bill had grown up in the Greek Orthodox Church and he in the Catholic tradition, somehow they clicked and doctrinal differences didn't mean anything to them. They fed each other's faith, something rare enough that both men valued it greatly.

"You are right, as always, Bill," conceded Rudy. "But lately, I can't shake the feeling that I may not be here much longer for them. I worry, I stay up nights and think and pray, and yet I don't find peace. My son, Ayre, is so distant. He doesn't call anymore, and I don't think I will see him again until he sorts things out."

"Rudy, you are healthy, and although I think you work too many hours for a man your age, you have held up very well. Why are you worried?"

"I don't know, Bill," answered Rudy. "Something inside just seems to tell me that all is not well."

"I have heard tell"—Bill cautiously entered into what he felt would be a delicate topic—"that people who feel this unease are often alleviated by setting their house in order and making preparations for their passing. Maybe you would have peace of mind if you made plans in case anything were to happen to you. You could write up some sort of will or testament."

Rudy rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. "There's an idea, Bill. But you know, I have nothing to leave my children beyond the money I am saving for their schooling and the house, which they'll need to live in for some time. Perhaps it's not so much a will dividing up material goods that I need to prepare for them, but maybe rather a testament of everything I want to leave them in preparation for this world and the next. Maybe that's what I need to do."

"Tell you what," said Bill, "you record on tape what you want to say, and I'll have Carla type it up for you. That way it won't take you so long to do it. And then you can start sleeping nights again. You can even borrow a recorder from the company or use one of their seminar rooms during your break between shifts."

Rudy's eyes lit up for the first time in weeks. Although the plan may have seemed a bit on the morbid side to outsiders listening in on their conversation, to these two men of faith it only seemed natural that death would follow life, yet death would be swallowed up by eternal life. And so, Rudy felt that Bill had helped him to discover what he was supposed to do. He would ask his beloved wife's help to write this legacy up for his children. And then he would feel at peace.

Not a man to put off a thing, once he had set his mind to it, Rudy obtained the necessary authorization to use a seminar room to do his recording. He had already phoned home to let the kids know that he wouldn't be home after work, as he would have to do another shift. The boys were used to this and

the icebox was stocked with plenty of TV dinners for such occasions. He just hoped they would stay out of trouble.

Rudy sat at the table, recorder in hand, with no idea what he would say or how he could say it. He had prayed and asked for divine help, asked that his wife would help him to know what to say to their boys, to say it in such a way that it would have the desired effect. What Rudy had understood as a nagging sense of urgency, had actually been his departed wife's unceasing efforts, along with those of others helping from the other side, imparting this sense of urgency in him, trying to prepare him for events soon to happen, much sooner than Rudy could have ever imagined.

To his surprise, no sooner had he turned the recorder on, than the words started to flow, seemingly of their own accord from his mouth for nearly an hour. Always a man of few words, he knew that this was not of himself. He could only thank the Lord for what he felt was a miracle. God had spoken through him, giving him all the words he needed. He put the tape in the envelope where Bill collected company notices and pay slips, and went off to his next shift with a feeling of peace and fulfillment that he had not felt in many weeks.

CHAPTER 17

Promptness was imperative in his line of work, and so at two o'clock sharp Ayre was standing outside Mr. Blanche's office door, ready to knock. Before his knuckles touched the door, it opened of its own accord, and Blanche's secretary strode out forcefully, leaving the door slightly ajar. Ayre could see that the Johnstons were already seated in the office, waiting to commence the meeting.

Ayre cleared his throat purposefully and rapped the door to call Blanche's attention. Blanche had his glasses halfway down his nose and was studying some papers while carrying on a conversation with the Johnstons. It had always amazed Ayre how Blanche could juggle so many cases at once without losing track of any. He had long taken note of this trait and determined to learn how to do the same.

Blanche nodded curtly at Ayre, who entered, and went over and formally greeted the Johnstons with a handshake before seating himself in the only unoccupied chair. He hadn't been in touch with them personally since their first encounter. Any correspondence or concerns they had, they insisted on directing to Blanche. This was not very encouraging for Ayre, as it meant that he did most of the work and received very little credit for his efforts.

But such is life, he thought to himself. This case had not been what Blanche had made it out to be, as his first big “break.” Rather it had been difficult, controversial, and to top it off, unrewarding, as Blanche’s name ended up heading everything. At times, Ayre felt angry about how things turned out and even pondered ways he could “even things out” or bring the situation to a confrontational point, forcing Blanche to give him more of the recognition for the case. Ayre knew that he needed such recognition as an up-and-coming lawyer if he was to make a name for himself. But for some reason, Blanche was holding the cards close to his chest, and Ayre was starting to get annoyed.

Of course, he thought, *if I’m foolish enough to flare up over this, Blanche could just take me off the case. I’d lose points in the firm and he’d be none the worse off, since I’ve basically done all the legwork for the case. It’s a no-win situation no matter how you cut it.*

Ayre sighed and took his place for the meeting. It was time to build a clear strategy for their court case, since the hearings were due to commence in a few weeks.

There was still much to prepare and coordinate, but technically, Ayre knew, they were pretty much prepared and had a fairly good case put together. There was a fair possibility of the grandparents gaining custody, if the judge reacted in their favor. There would be no jury, since it was a family court and the judge had sole rights to decide on what would constitute the best interests of the children. At this point, the outcome depended mostly on the disposition of the judge. Ayre realized that Blanche had timed the filing of the case, in the hopes that a certain judge whom he knew would be more obliging to their claim would take the bench.

“Very well,” Blanche said with an air of efficiency. “Let’s proceed with reviewing all that we have compiled

for this case and the strategy we have developed thus far. Please, Mr. And Mrs. Johnston, we are counting on your input here. Mr. Johnston, as a very capable and accomplished businessman, you are more than qualified to help. And Mrs. Johnston, perhaps you have further information about your daughter and the cult she belongs to that could also strengthen our case.

“I will review the facts in the order in which I have prepared them ... that is, that Mr. McNeilson has prepared with my assistance. This is the order in which we will build the case. Our strategy, to give you a simple overview, would be to firstly, discredit the cult, in order to prove that it is a dangerous environment for your grandchildren. Second, we would need to cast doubt on your daughter’s ability to raise her children, capitalizing on the negative changes that have occurred since she met the cult, which render her unstable, unreliable, and in need of psychiatric care. Third, we will have the testimonies of ex-members, particularly those who were raised in this cult and similar ones, to tell of the atrocities they underwent and how this damaged their lives and traumatized them. Fourth, we will point out the educational inadequacies of the cult, the lack of socialization skills of the children and the deprivation they suffer. Fifth, we will have experts of the cult phenomenon testify, most of whom will be psychiatrists, who will expound on the dangers of cults, particularly brainwashing, slavish control, and all the emotional and psychological abuse the victims suffer.

“As a final platform, we will need to have you testify about your concern for your daughter, how you have been entirely unsuccessful in breaking through the psychological barriers she has built up, and that as a last resort you must care for her children. This part will be crucial, and I will need you to weep profusely

at this point, particularly Mrs. Johnston. I want you to tell the judge that you are convinced that were your daughter in her right mind, she would want you to take her children and care for them. You could even say that you once talked about this with her, and she said that should she ever become ill, incapacitated, or mentally ill, she wanted you to step in and do what was right for her children. Any questions so far?”

Mr. Johnston rubbed his chin thoughtfully and after a few moments of reflection said, “Yes. I do wonder whether it is a good idea to emphasize so much the mental faculties of our daughter. After all, her lawyers could have her psychoanalyzed, and although we know she’s brainwashed and unbalanced psychologically, Dr. Stevens from the Cult Information Service informed me that the members are often brainwashed to know what is expected of them, and tests performed on them will not necessarily render the true results. I have a feeling this may be the case with my daughter.

“We know she is ‘off her rocker,’ and we know she has been manipulated and coerced into joining this cult and marrying that loser and even having so many kids! Our daughter never wanted to have children! She has undergone a nightmare of a transformation of personality. We as her parents don’t know her at all anymore. She is a stranger—as if we’d never met her before. Of course, we don’t want to sound callous to the judge, as you mentioned to us on the phone that everything could depend on the judge believing that we have our daughter’s best interests at heart and are concerned for her condition.

“Hell, of course, I’m concerned. We’ve spent I can’t tell you how much, pouring it into that Cult Information Service, trying to deprogram her twice. We’ve invested big capital in this endeavor. But I’m getting pretty tired of this business, and I want those children home where they belong soon. If Amy comes with them, so be it, but frankly I don’t care at this

point what she does as long as we have full custody over the kids. I’m tired of trying to reason with her and be Mr. Nice Guy. No more Mr. Nice Guy.”

Ayre looked at the large man, with square, wide shoulders and a well-tailored suit—obviously tailored in an attempt to make those shoulders more elegant—an impossible task, as Ayre observed. This man was obviously a brute in a business suit. Ayre doubted that Mr. Johnston had *ever* been “Mr. Nice Guy” to anyone but himself. Ayre had to compose himself to not allow his disgust for the man to show on his face. He adopted a correct, businesslike expression and busied himself ruffling through some of the papers.

“What exactly do you have in mind, Mr. Johnston? Are you dissatisfied with the case we’ve mounted? I’ve been in the business for thirty years, and to be honest, I think we’ve got a good shot at what normally would be a bit of an obscure sort of case. It’s not going to be a sure winner, unless your daughter were a murderer or something of the sort. But I think if we hit the cue ball at the right angle, we just might get all the right balls in the pocket, if you know what I mean.” Blanche was obviously feeling very confident that Ayre had mounted the best and surest case possible. Ayre wasn’t so sure himself, but then again, he didn’t have some thirty years of experience either.

“Look, your courtroom strategy is great, I don’t have any arguments on that point. I have full trust in your capability in taking this through the courts and fighting it through expeditiously and tenaciously. You’ve got my vote of confidence. But, I want to remind you that we paid a tidy sum for this representation, because we knew that this firm could drum up the other side of things that aren’t part of the simply legal, and I—”

“Mr. Johnston,” interrupted Blanche. Ayre was glad that Blanche was handling *this* end of things, and he didn’t feel any compunction about allowing

Blanche to do so, since he was taking most of the credit anyway. “I assure you that Mr. McNeilson and I devoted a great amount of time to contacting opponents of the cult, fanning the embers of a story in the press, to the point that it was in the headlines of one of the main papers of our city. We have sought out hostile ex-members, cult experts, and even pseudo experts. I believe you’ll agree with me that we have invested a considerable amount of time in this project and have left no stone unturned!”

“Perhaps,” Mr. Johnston said thoughtfully, “but I expected more from you. I didn’t want this to be in just one or two headlines for a day. I want to see this *in the media*. Do you know what I mean by that? I mean talk shows. I mean radio talk shows. I mean tabloid sleaze magazines. Do you get my drift? You’re right. Business *has* taught me some valuable principles, and I can tell you right now, you gotta discredit the competition, and that’s what we’ve gotta do. NOW! And with much more determination than you’ve shown thus far. We have so little time before the hearings and I don’t think we’ve exposed these villains enough. I want them to be the centerpiece of conversation in all of Chicago for all of next week, so that when the judge takes the bench, whether he knows it or not, he’s going to be of the same mindset as we are, that this cult is poisonous and my grandkids need to be rescued.”

Ayre stole a few glances at Mr. Johnston during this diatribe. He recoiled at what he saw in the man’s eyes—a hard, cruel glint. This man, Ayre realized, had no scruples. Granted, he was obviously convinced of his cause, but Ayre couldn’t help but wonder how much he was convinced and how much was that he simply wanted his way, and Amy had thwarted his plans. Ayre shuddered at the thought of having a father like that in his life.

“You are right, of course.” Mr. Blanche took the conciliatory approach. “This is certainly very short

notice, but we will do our best to comply with your wishes.”

“As a matter of fact, I plan to take care of it myself,” said Mr. Johnston. “No offense to you or your boy here, but I can take care of this through my publicity agency. Of course, it will remain entirely unrelated to me or my company. This agency has got more contacts in the media and they’ll know exactly who to contact who likes these kinds of scandals. The time has come for definitive action.”

The secretary came in at this point with coffee, which turned into an unofficial ending point of the meeting. Ayre was glad for this, as this had been anything but comfortable for him. He felt like he was a naïve school kid who hadn’t known that true evil existed. He felt insecure, thrown into a nasty intrigue full of wrong turns. He counted the minutes until he could get out of this meeting room and breathe and think things through.

Suddenly he realized that he had to talk about these things with his father. He didn’t know of anyone else who could help him sort through this. It was a difficult step to make, as he knew how his father thought about this case, but he suddenly felt very strongly that he had to hear him through. He had nowhere else to turn at this point.

The rest of the meeting remained hazy in his mind, as he was only there in body. But the clock kept ticking, and soon enough the normal niceties were being said, hands were being shook, and Mr. Johnston had thumped him on the back and commended him for the “fine” work he had done. He hoped that Blanche would not want to continue discussing the case and was relieved when Blanche dismissed him, telling him he already had another client waiting. They could discuss the case tomorrow.

Good. Ayre didn’t want to talk about the case right now—at least not with Blanche. He called home and

let his brothers know that he would be by later to talk to father. He was, however, disappointed to hear his father would be taking the late shift, so he wouldn't be home until late. No matter, he would wait for him until midnight. He could work on some of his briefs while he waited.

CHAPTER 18

At two o'clock, Amy entered the little reception area at Roger Mayworth's office, warmly greeting Ethel, who hardly acknowledged her greeting, but kept her nose buried in her latest novel. Amy had no time to spare for her appointment, but made a mental note to speak a little with the receptionist on her way out.

Ethel announced Amy's arrival to Roger, who asked that she be ushered in immediately. This was probably the last official meeting they would have before the hearings began, and they were to finalize their strategy and discuss the case. There wasn't a whole lot to discuss, as Roger knew that a positive outcome would take nothing short of a miracle no matter what strategy they decided to adopt.

Amy's entrance was like a breath of fresh air to Roger. She was always so fresh, cheerful, and comforting—*not to mention attractive*, thought Roger. One couldn't help but enjoy her presence, for it brought joy and peace and life all in one shot.

They greeted each other with a warm hug (which did not go unnoticed by Ethel, watching through the partly open door) and after exchanging niceties, Roger pulled out his files and notes, ready to launch into action.

"Roger," Amy interjected softly, "perhaps the most

important thing we could do today would be to pray earnestly and ask the Lord to do the miracle and fight for us. There seems so little we can do on the carnal plane to fight this horrendous attack, so I've been reading through the Bible and reviewing all the miracles God has done for His people through all the ages. Honestly, it's almost hard for me to claim such miracles for me and my children, as I'm certainly not some great man or woman of God like David, Moses, Elijah, or Elisha. But Jesus did say to 'suffer the little children to come unto Him' and that the Kingdom of Heaven is made of such. So I thought that if we just came before the Lord, even as little children with our humble, heartfelt petitions, God will have to hear. He's promised He would throughout His Word! This is our whispering hope."

Roger felt deeply humbled by Amy's expression of faith. He felt so helpless and void of understanding when Amy shared these things with him. He realized once again how little he knew about the life of faith and how much he had to learn. He had started reading his Bible after that night that he had heard the voice pointing him to the story of David and Goliath, and found new worlds of understanding being opened to him, far beyond the day-to-day perspective on "reality" he had once held, that had all but excluded the existence of the supernatural.

So Amy took his hand in both of hers, and they bowed their heads respectfully, their hearts united as one in their desperate prayers. And so they prayed as if everything depended on prayer, which indeed it did! Amy invoked story after story from the Bible, challenging the Lord to do the same for His children of today. She humbly acknowledged her many weaknesses and failings, recognizing that she could come boldly to His throne of grace only because of His mercy and love. She then prayed for Roger, who had become so dear to her in the midst of battle, a true comrade-

in-arms, with a kindred spirit, though he was just discovering this himself.

After praying, they both wiped tears from their eyes and were ready to go over the few points of strategy they had, which were indeed few, since they were technically in an entirely defensive position, with Amy's life and beliefs under siege.

Amy and Roger's prayers, together with the many prayers breathed daily and even hourly by her fellow believers, wafted like endlessly twirling incense upwards further than the eye could ever follow. Each prayer was like a candle lit and left burning, and as the days went by, there were more candles of prayer burning, giving off more and more brilliant light, transforming the entire panorama. Yes, in the eye of the spirit, the world they lived in was being brightened one candle of prayer at a time, even though in the eyes of mortality, the outlook was grim and foreboding, worsening by the moment.

"Oh foolish mortals!" exclaimed the angels. "Be not creatures bound to time and circumstances, but clothe yourselves with the wondrous freedom of Spirit that has been gifted you from the hand of God Himself! Has not humankind called out from all ages for freedom? So has God handed it so graciously to mortals, that they may be free from the ravages of time and circumstances to live in the plane of His mighty Spirit! So turn away from the things of this earth, lay hold on the gift of true freedom, treasure it, hold it to your bosom, and let these things of time be dimmed by His glorious light!"

"Roger," Amy suddenly said as she prepared to leave the office, "I believe the Lord has laid the burden on my heart that your dear secretary, Ethel, is a person who greatly has need of Him and His love. When I first saw her today, she seemed so forlorn, so lost. My heart ached for her, and I felt the Lord was laying her pain on my heart, so I would see how much she

needs Him and His love. I thought maybe I could talk to her for a while. What do you think?”

Roger was once again taken aback at Amy’s discernment. She always seemed to be a step ahead of him. He had thought about Ethel and her need of help, but had never taken the time to reach out to her or to ask Amy to. Although he was learning a lot from Amy and the Bible about his life of faith, he still felt inadequate to share it with Ethel, though had he known how she felt for him, he might have realized that he could easily have done so.

“That’s a splendid idea, and one I wanted to present to you for some time now. As usual, you’ve beat me to it! Ethel is a good girl. She really sacrifices for me and the office, but she seems to live under a cloud of insecurity, depression, and a lack of self-confidence. Anything you could do to help would be greatly appreciated.”

Amy left his office feeling the happiest she had felt since the whole ordeal had begun with her parents. The feeling that someone needed her, someone she would never have met, never have spoken to about the Lord had she not run into her terrible troubles, filled her to overflowing. Suddenly she realized how good her life was, even in the “worst of times.” She still had her never-failing faith, love, and friendship. And she still had, by the grace of God, the strength to reach out to others.

With a heart filled with love and adoration for the One Who filled every spot of her life, she approached the unapproachable Ethel with gestures of love and friendship, praying all the while that she could find the key to her lonely heart.

Ethel, despite her taciturn nature and the wall-like barriers she had built around herself to keep out unpleasantness, had to admit to herself that she was surprised and, yes, touched by the overtures Amy made towards her. At first she felt uncomfortable with

Amy’s obvious interest in her, but as the conversation went on, she knew that Amy genuinely cared. Ethel couldn’t help but feel warmed by such sweetness, which she had not known much of.

Ethel came from what was known as the “other side of town.” Not even her boss, Roger Mayworth, knew about her life or where she came from. She had lied to him to get the job, as she had convinced herself that Roger would never employ her if he knew that she came from the wrong side of town.

She was unaware how excessively self-conscious she was, probably because nobody had ever cared enough to reach out to her. Her past was memories of dark dirty hallways, dresses with missing buttons and shoes that were too small. Neither of her parents had cared much about her schooling and had been indifferent about sending her there regularly, until the truant officer had appeared at the door once and again, finally threatening them with fines and worse. After he had left, they had gotten angry with her, as though she were to blame. It had been a miserable childhood, and the brightest patch in her life so far had been meeting Roger and working for him, feeling that someone cared everyday if she showed up to work, what she did, etc. Roger thanked her all day long, tweaked her on the cheek, encouraged her and asked about her. She couldn’t help her feelings towards him, even if he was probably fifteen years older than she was.

She had been desperate to get a job after leaving her mother (her father had been long gone, disappeared one night many years earlier), and Roger had taken her under his wing. Although she still couldn’t say that she was altogether happy with her life, things had taken a turn for the better. She did worry and fret that one day Roger would find out how she had lied on her application. She had never finished high school, and lied about where she came from. She lived under

a cloud of fear at times that Roger would find out and fire her—not that she minded so much losing the job, but losing that connection with Roger would not be something she would get over very quickly.

Little did she know that Roger had enough experience on the other side of town to know exactly where she came from, and to imagine she had lied on several other points of the application. She didn't realize that when she came to his office, she looked like a stray cat slinking in out of the rain. He had spotted her immediately and had the conviction in his heart that he was supposed to help her. And he hadn't regretted that decision, as he had in turn found a totally loyal employee, willing to work whatever hours necessary, even extra days, just thankful for a place out of the rain.

After Amy had spoken with her, Ethel had found herself disarmed by her love and cheerfulness. She no longer felt alarmed and jealous over Roger, as she realized that Amy's affectionate ways were for everyone, and she realized that Amy didn't have any designs on Roger.

Amy briefly recounted her whole life story—all that she went through right up until that day sitting in the office. At last, she said, "So you see, life isn't necessarily easy for a Christian, but you know where you're going, and you know you're traveling on the right road. I bet you've been through some real tough things yourself." At that, Amy paused, as if encouraging Ethel to speak.

Ethel just blushed, and looked down, feeling her heart being touched in a way she hadn't allowed it to in a long time.

Amy patted her hand understandingly, and asked if they could meet for coffee later on. Ethel agreed, and so it was that, at the end of the day, she found herself en route to meet Amy for a tête-à-tête—which was a very unusual sort of thing for herself. She felt some

pangs of discomfort at spending any amount of time talking personally with someone—something she had only done on very rare occasions. But her little prelude with Amy had soothed her fears to some degree, even if she was still a little nervous.

CHAPTER 19

Ethel was curious to hear all that Amy had to say about God and being a Christian, since these were pretty foreign topics to her. She had had no exposure to religion at home, and even less at the tough school she attended. No, religion had never been a topic in her life, nor had she ever been aware of the need for it. This would certainly be a novel experience, and she tried to prepare herself for it mentally.

Amy waited for Ethel patiently in the coffee house, having sat down to reserve a table, and ordered herself a juice. She prayed silently and was so deeply engrossed in her prayers for her time with Ethel, that she didn't even notice that Ethel had already arrived until she sat down and slid into the seat opposite her, with a shy, hopeful smile on her face.

Amy rose and greeted her warmly, giving her a motherly hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Ethel flushed happily. Although she was in her mid-twenties, Ethel had not yet matured in many areas due to her lack of contact and interaction with others. Her heavy sense of inferiority and not fitting in anywhere had caused her to distance herself from people. Miserable though she was, she wasn't even able to identify the question, much less understand the answer.

Amy surprised her again by immediately grabbing her hand and sweetly asking if she could pray for her and their time together.

Ethel had rarely been inside a church, much less seen someone pray to God outside of rituals. Nor had she ever seen someone talk to God as if He was real and right nearby. Ethel knew she shouldn't, but she couldn't help but stare as Amy prayed, as if she were interacting with a weird sci-fi character. She didn't know what to make of it, but she had to confess that Amy was real. There was no phoniness or craziness about her. She could hardly make out what Amy was praying for, as it was just too much to take in all at once. One thing was certain, though, this prayer was all about her and *for* her, and she was feeling overwhelmed.

A few minutes later, the conversation having started, Ethel found herself letting down the barriers that had existed ever since she could remember. With tears running down her cheeks, she began telling Amy of the many indignations, hurts, bitternesses, and disappointments that had comprised her life up until this point. Once she began telling, she had to tell all, there was no stopping. She told of her parents' excessive drinking, fighting, use of drugs at times, beatings, and her fright as a child when things would spin out of control. She told of how she never fit in anywhere, and how acutely uncomfortable she had always felt with herself, as if there was nothing to like in herself.

As Amy tenderly shared how hopeless she had felt life was before she met the Lord, suddenly Ethel realized that this was exactly what she had always felt, yet never realized or understood. There had been no meaning in her life, little grace and beauty or much to cheer up an unhappy existence. What it meant to find someone who finally understood, someone she could share the deepest feelings in her heart that even

she had never understood since she had never been able to verbalize them!

After nearly an hour had gone by, with Ethel pouring out her entire life to her newfound friend, she was tired and spent and fell silent. At this moment, Amy picked up the conversation again, and holding Ethel's hands in her own, told her, "If only you could know and feel how much Jesus loves you! And the most beautiful part of it is that He loves you just the way you are, with all that you've gone through, everything you are. You are so dear and precious to Him, as if there were no other in the universe. Can you imagine such a love?"

Ethel went home that night filled with the wonder of things she had heard for the first time ever in her life. Amy had introduced her to salvation, but had left it for the next time, as she had seen that Ethel needed some time to digest all that had transpired in that day. They agreed to meet again in a few days time, and both left animated with the experience that had drawn them so close to each other and to their Creator.

When Amy got home, she just had to call Roger to let him know all that had happened. She had an emergency number for him, which she was able to reach him at. Roger was a little alarmed when he heard her voice, and wanted to know right away what had happened. Had some new obstacle come up in her case?

"No, Roger," she explained. "I just had to share with you the most wonderful experience I have had with your dear secretary, Ethel." And so she told him everything, omitting no details of how she had witnessed to Ethel, and all that Ethel had shared and how Ethel had told her that she had never shared any of this with another person before. Tears were welling up in Amy's eyes at the remembrance of such a precious experience.

“Roger,” she said, “I know this will sound crazy, but as I spoke to Ethel of God’s love for her and contended for her soul, I suddenly knew deep in my heart that the Lord has a purpose in this difficulty I am going through now. I don’t know how it’s going to turn out and I don’t know what will become of me and the children, but I know God’s in it and if Ethel comes to know Him through it all, then it will have been worth it.”

After they hung up, Roger spent a sleepless night thinking about all that Amy had told him, realizing that although he had tried to help Ethel, he hadn’t known how to reach inside her and give her a lasting peace. He felt a little dissatisfied with himself and determined to talk to Amy about it.

CHAPTER 20

Ayre rounded the bend and drove up to the old two-story house where he had lived most of his life. The boards of the house were gray and weather-beaten. It had been many years since his father had been able to repaint and fix up the house, though he kept it functional and neat, despite his taxing schedule.

Mrs. Grimes had been their twice-a-week house-keeper since Ayre’s mother had passed away, and she managed to whip things into shape every week on the days she spent at the house. She was a bit of a taciturn, surly woman, but underneath her tough exterior the boys had wormed their way into her affections. Little did they know that she had maintained a tough front all along to keep from getting too emotionally involved with these children, who obviously had so much need of mothering. She had never had children of her own, but she felt that if she gave too much of herself, it might hurt. If she could have only known the greater joy that could have been hers had she given a little more of her heart to these boys. But she had given much, and she was a somewhat stable part of their lives.

Ayre was out of sorts by the time he got inside the house, and his brothers, recognizing his mood, moved on to their own activities and left him be. As

usual, the stack of work he carried with him was much more than he could possibly hope to keep up with, but with a weariness that was more than he could measure, he tackled the job at hand. Although his heart was burdened and uneasy, the minutes ticked by quickly and before he knew it, it was nearly time for his father to arrive.

The hour came and the hour went, and yet no sign of his father. Ayre had all but decided to head out to the mill to find out where he had gone after work, when he was surprised by the arrival of his father's work buddy and friend, Bill. He came in rushing and breathless, obviously pale, and Ayre's heart sank. Something was terribly wrong, and bad news was written all over his face. Ayre felt himself shaking; he felt overwhelmed.

Bill laid his hand on Ayre's arm and motioned for him to sit. Ayre sank into the nearest chair holding his breath. Finally he managed to ask, "What's wrong, Bill? Where's my father?"

"Ayre, son," Bill said, trying to make his voice as gentle as he could, "did you know your father's been working a lot of double shifts again lately?"

"I thought we had agreed he wouldn't do that anymore. He assured me that he would stop. I promised to help with whatever extra money he needed, and we reached an agreement. I didn't know."

"Well, actually, this time was different," said Bill in his slow, methodical way. "It wasn't his choice. They've laid off some folks at the mill, and the management has tried to shift the load off on some of the old-timers like your father and me. Your father was doing his best to put his foot down about this, but at times he felt it was a choice between his job and security for his kids or losing all. Just a few days ago, we had discussed about his need to slow it down a little. I was worried about him and I think he was worried about himself. Not for his own sake, but for the sake

of his kids. Now that you're older I'm sure you realize that your father has carried quite a weight for some years now and he's getting a bit tired."

"Has something come up, Bill? Please tell me everything's all right, I don't think I can stand to hear any more bad news." Ayre pressed his brow with both hands. His temples had started to throb and he could feel a nasty headache underway.

"I'm getting to that, Ayre," Bill said slowly, not willing to have his thought patterns disturbed. "A few days ago your father mentioned to me his concern about what would happen if he should pass on. I suggested he should prepare a testament of sorts for you boys, to ease his concerns, to help him feel that he is ready for whatever is ahead. He did this, and gave the tape to me. I have had my wife type it, and it will be given to you when the time comes."

"Bill, what are you saying? Please, I must know, I'm having a hard time following you. Is he all right?"

"He is not doing so well now. While doing his second shift today he had a stroke. The doctors say he is not looking good and they are not sure he will survive. If he does, he will probably be paralyzed, perhaps lose his ability to talk, etc. I'm very sorry, Ayre. I know what a blow this is to you."

Ayre, not normally one to show his emotions at all, was overwhelmed by the news and just sat looking at his hands, not knowing what to do or say. The pressure in his head continued mounting. The sick feeling in his stomach intensified.

Bill, seeing Ayre's inner struggle, laid a hand on his shoulder, and said, "Your father has a wonderful faith. He has been a greater sample to me than any minister or priest I have ever met. His faith will carry him through, and if not, he looks to a better world."

Ayre's eyes were misty with tears that he hadn't shed in so long. This time the feelings were too intense, and a few tears rolled down his face unhindered.

Bill touched him gently again. “Come, Ayre, let’s go to the hospital and wait for news on your father. My wife will be over to talk to the boys. Are they in bed?”

Ayre nodded.

“Good, then. She can come and spend the night here, and be on hand to talk to them in the morning. And you and I will go be there for your father. Okay?”

Ayre nodded again and pulled himself up with a defeated air, following Bill out to his waiting car.

CHAPTER 21

Amy fastened the last little button on baby Eunice’s dress, and then held her up to smile at her. Eunice certainly was a special baby, a great comfort to her. Eunice had helped her keep going and forging forward when she was tempted to endlessly grieve for Jasper. Eunice, with her sweet constant baby smiles, carried an assurance that all was well no matter what the perspective around her. Once Amy was satisfied that every hair was in place, and Eunice looked her Sunday best, she sat her in a stroller with some toys and turned her attention to her two little boys, who were not as easy a job to groom.

Little Jasper, just four, was sure he was a grown-up and was very insistent about buttoning his own jacket and tying his own shoes, though he wasn’t up to either task yet. Amy patiently let him do all that he could and then proceeded to comb his unruly hair and assess his appearance. He would do nicely. Certainly not as fancy as the clothes her parents would intend to provide if they lived with them, but she was satisfied.

Two-year-old Emmanuel ran in circles around his mother and siblings the entire time she prepared the others. Now it was time to go, since she had prepared him first.

She grabbed Emmanuel's pudgy little hand in one of hers and Jasper's in the other and called them to prayer. "Dear Lord," she prayed with notable fervency, "we need You and Your presence today more than ever. Do make us a blessing and help us through this time with my parents. It's hard to love and forgive them when they are behaving so unkindly towards us, but we know You have called us to love, so we ask You to help us be a sample of that love today, dear Jesus. Amen."

"Mommy, why do we have to get all dressed up? I miss my friends back home, Mommy. When can we go back home?" Little Jasper's questions were earnest and a little upset.

"Dear little Jasper, I know you can't understand this so well now, but Mommy will try to explain it to you." She knelt down to his level and held his little face in her two hands. He looked so much like his dear father—she couldn't help but reflect on that every time she gazed upon him. "Right now, we need to live in this apartment the Lord has provided for us. I know you're a little lonely and miss your friends, but you need to pray the Lord will bring us back to our home in His perfect time. Meanwhile, we need to be a sweet and loving sample to your grandparents, even if they are a little unkind or rude to Mommy, okay?"

"But Mommy, I don't want to go!" Jasper's lip was puckering and he was about to get really upset. Amy was tempted to feel angry with her parents, and again prayed and asked the Lord to deliver her from these feelings that interfered with her trusting in God for His perfect plan in all this. Thankfully, the storm quickly passed and Jasper assented to going out to the car in a fairly cheerful state of mind.

As the car pulled up outside her parents' swanky house, Amy could see what she believed was Neil's car parked in front, for which she was glad. Although she and Neil had never been too close, he had defended

her and asked her parents to back off from attacking her. It was comforting knowing he would be there for this first visit. She had dreaded this visit, but had no choice but to make it, since the court had immediately stipulated it even before the full proceedings began. It was going to test all her Christian graces to sit in the same room with her parents, knowing all the scheming and ill treatment of her and the Brethren that was undoubtedly their doing, without giving way to bitterness and anger, which she knew she must not do. Otherwise, she would give her parents, and in the long run the Enemy of her soul, the upper hand, and she was praying not to fall into that trap.

The children felt intimidated inside the luxurious house, which was vastly different from the simple surroundings they had grown up with. Though they had perhaps known fewer material benefits, they had enjoyed the company of many children their age who shared their interests and beliefs and upbringing, which had made their childhood rich in ways that Amy's parents would never understand.

Amy squeezed the shoulders of each of her young boys, while clutching tightly to her little baby, and marshaled her forces together to the front door. There was no easy way to skirt this path, but like the good Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, she was to walk the pilgrim road and trust He who made her for wherever the path should lead. She was only to stay on the straight and narrow way.

She rang the doorbell, and was soon attended by the butler, followed by a maid.

Jasper, in a much too audible voice, was insistent upon knowing why these people were dressed in black, and other such details.

Amy did her best to answer his questions, while attempting to quiet and distract him. She couldn't help but think that anything she or the children said would someday be used against them.

They were admitted into the central parlor, where sat her mother, and father, with Neil off to a side reading a sports magazine. The first frozen moment was bridged by Amy herself, who went over to greet her parents with a kind kiss.

Her father was the first to respond. "Have you finally come to your senses, foolish child?"

Amy remained silent at this taunt, and simply brought the children one by one to kiss their grandparents and uncle.

The children were somewhat in awe, and when the greetings were over, sat quietly on the couch, except for baby Eunice, who refused to understand that this was a solemn occasion, and cooed and smiled at anyone who would look her way. The boys, however, feeling though not understanding the antagonism in the air, kept whispering in Amy's ear, asking when they could leave. She patted their little knees for encouragement and prayed silently for them in her heart. This did not portend to be an easy visit.

The butler came in with coffee and other niceties, none of which Amy found very tempting, but fortunately managed to soothe the boys, as they sat with a cookie in each hand. Before taking them, they had politely asked, "Mother, may I?"

Amy's parents were rather astonished at the undeniable good manners of such little boys. Neil snickered from across the room, and looked at his parents with a smug expression. "Seems like a lot of children these days could use a similar upbringing," he said, then turned to Amy. "You should write a book about child-rearing. With your results, it'd become an instant best-seller!"

"Anyone can force a child into submission," his mother responded tartly. "It's obvious the children have been subjected to some harsh treatment to bring about such meekness! I am more convinced than ever that these children are being denied a

proper upbringing."

"Mother!" Amy exclaimed. "I won't have you speaking in front of the children in such a way. I believe we've agreed to avoid doing that."

Her mother was silenced, surprised at Amy's pluck, and remained quiet for a moment.

"Come," said Amy's father, motioning to Jasper and Emmanuel. "I want to show you the bedrooms that will be yours when you come to live here."

Jasper looked incredulously at his mother and began weeping disconsolately. "I want to go home with my mommy and be with my friends! I don't want to stay here. You can't make me, you can't!"

Amy held him close to her until the outburst passed, then looked angrily at her father. "Don't you think it's a bit premature to be making such plans? I haven't agreed to the children or myself moving here, and I have no intentions of doing so. Have you no heart for my poor children and their feelings? You may not agree with our lifestyle, but this is their life and their home that you are attacking. For the mercy of God, will you not reconsider and only think for a moment of the damage you could cause my little children?"

After this, angry words began to fly, as Amy's parents spoke of her unreasonableness, of the mistake she had made with her life, of the wretched condition of the children, of the horrendous crimes of the group, and on and on went the tirade, while Amy said nothing.

She looked at her watch, perceiving the court-mandated two hours to be over, and so called the children to get up off the couch and put their coats on. They had scarcely moved off the couch in those two hours, so intimidating and frightening had the harangue been. There was no question in Amy's mind as to the lack of any real concern for the children on the part of her parents. Had they been truly concerned, they would never have exposed the children to such a

tirade of hateful words. Amy had the children dutifully kiss their grandparents and uncle, and they filed out without another word.

As they went to the car, Neil came running out behind her. “Amy, wait! You can’t leave like this! Come on, you know how they are. They’ll get over this. Just hang around a while longer. They’ll warm up to you and the kids.”

Amy smiled and put her hand on his cheek. “Thank you, Neil, for coming after us. Please know that we love and care for you and always will. But I am no longer a young, naïve schoolgirl. I have a responsibility to my children and to God. Our parents must learn to respect that, as I have respected them and their house. Hopefully they will be more civil and less confrontational the next time around.”

“I’m so sorry, Amy,” Neil said. “I don’t know what to do to make this easier for you. Believe me, I would. I’ve tried to talk them out of this foolishness and I’ve argued till I was blue in the face, but they won’t listen.”

They kissed each other goodbye with good-natured affection and the kids waved at their uncle from the car.

Poor Neil, thought Amy. He hasn’t yet found a life of his own, and continues to live the life our parents have mapped for him, without ever finding out what his own destiny in life might be. It made her difficulties look much more worth the while when considering the alternative.

CHAPTER 22

Ethel kept looking behind her anxiously, not feeling very safe on the darkened street alone. She was in “her” side of town, and knew it was way too late for her to be out there alone. Her heart was beating quickly and she walked as quickly as she could without outright running.

A week had gone by since she had met with Amy, a week of much introspection, thought, and struggle within herself. She didn’t understand what that meeting had unleashed in her, but she had left the meeting with Amy so relieved, feeling full and satisfied. The next morning, though, she had woken up with a pounding headache and a general feeling of malaise. The day had only gotten worse as it went along, darker and more difficult until she felt she could hardly stand it any more.

While talking with Amy, she had an inkling of a new and better life ahead. It was so real and palpable, she could almost taste it in her mouth like a delicious, long desired dessert. She had been so sure that she could partake of it, and had gone home in the happiest state she could remember. She was convinced that there was something real to all that Amy had spoken to her about, and was starting to agree with Amy that she needed to give Jesus a chance in her life,

to remake it and give her a whole new one. She had even started to yearn for her next meeting with Amy so that she could find out more about how she could attain this new life.

Everything had looked so promising and hopeful until the day after. She had suddenly been besieged by a feeling of fear, worry, insecurity, and that ever-present deep feeling of inadequacy and isolation. How could she fit in anywhere? She had no personality, looks, or other qualities to recommend her. She felt entirely hopeless. She thought of Amy, how graceful, cheerful, and bright she was, and she was sure she could never attain to what Amy was offering her. She was suddenly reminded that Amy came from a wealthy family, and her own feelings of inadequacy deepened. The more she mulled it over in her mind, the more hopeless it all seemed. Finally, she decided not to meet with Amy again, as the emotional upheavals seemed too much to handle.

After she made that decision, the days had fallen into a monotonous, lifeless routine again, made even more deadening by the experience she had gone through with Amy, which had made her aware of a dimension she had never dared dream of before. Ethel didn't blame Amy, but she determined not to allow herself to open up to such experiences again, as it seemed too painful. Even Roger had noticed that something was amiss with Ethel, and try as he would to coax the truth out of her, she was not easily given to sharing her innermost feelings and refused to do so, though she felt flattered that Roger cared that much for her.

And so she found herself going home later than usual that fateful night, alone on an admittedly dangerous street, with someone behind her in seeming pursuit. As Ethel heard the steps closer, breathing became harder and harder. Panicky thoughts went through her mind, such as what to do now that it seemed clear she was being pursued. What if she was

killed? She hadn't even really begun to live yet, and her heart pounded harder and harder within her.

She suddenly felt a sharp pain in the back of her head, and as she blacked out two words came to her mind so strongly and she formed them with her lips. "Oh God!"

Ethel revived several hours later to find herself in a dark alley. She sat up, immediately thankful that she didn't seem to be seriously hurt beyond a terrible ache in her head. Her purse was gone, but good riddance to that! It was old and she hardly ever had any money anyway.

She started to cry in thankfulness and shock and the trauma of the whole experience. She felt disoriented, and didn't know what to do or even where she was. She saw a hotel across the street and decided to go in and ask to borrow the phone. But who would she call? She was pretty much on her own, and didn't have anyone to turn to.

Roger came to her mind, and it seemed a good idea. Little did Ethel know that it was much more than an idea, but rather a very real angelic being, whispering in her heart. Had she known, she probably would have had a hard time believing what was happening!

Roger was very concerned when he heard her on the phone, and asked her not to move, promising to come pick her up immediately. It was unusual that Roger would be at home, since he usually avoided coming home to his empty apartment until it was time to go to bed. But this night, he had felt tired and drained and wanted a little time to himself. He had even pulled out his Bible and was deeply engrossed in reading the story of David and Goliath for at least the twentieth time since he had first met Amy, when the phone rang.

As Ethel sat in the hotel lobby waiting for Roger, she attempted to straighten out her clothes for the umpteenth time, smoothing her skirts, trying to make

everything all right again. She felt unnerved. Nobody paid her any mind in the hotel, which hosted an assortment of low-life people caught up in a miserable existence. Seeing the emptiness, the vulgar ugliness of this life, sickened Ethel on top of the experience she had just undergone. Such a contrast to the peace and grace she saw in Amy, and to a lesser degree in Roger too.

An hour passed by before Roger came, which gave Ethel ample time to worry about what Roger would think, picking her up in this side of town. It didn't seem to matter so much after the shock of her assault, but still she would have to explain it.

"Ethel," Roger said, as he took her in his arms like a little girl, "are you all right? What happened?"

As she opened her mouth to tell Roger about her assault, she suddenly couldn't say a word, and tears fell from her eyes, as she began to weep loudly. Roger was more alarmed than before, since Ethel was not one to wear her emotions on her sleeve. She was so shy, introverted, and awkward. This behavior was certainly out of character.

Without a word, he led her to the car and got her settled in. He took the driver's seat, but instead of driving away, he just held her hands in his. Ethel didn't pull them away, but still sobbed uncontrollably.

Roger put his arm around her, comforting her, and assuring her that everything was all right now that he was there. He brought a great measure of peace to her, and she began to calm down after a time.

"Let's go home to my place, and I'll put you to bed in my guest room. You'll have some nice hot tea and a good warm bath, and then we'll talk about what happened. How does that sound?"

Ethel nodded her head, deeply thankful for Roger's understanding nature. How much like Roger not to try to analyze her and everything, but to just transmit such acceptance.

They drove silently to Roger's apartment, and in short order, Ethel had bathed and was sitting in a robe in the dining room with her long damp hair down. Roger had taken her clothes and thrown them in the washer.

She sat at his little dining room table, and he joined her, bringing two cups of steaming tea. Ethel sipped hers, and Roger observed her closely, careful not to let on that he was watching her. She seemed so different sitting casually in his robe, sipping tea in his house. He found her attractive, something he hadn't really thought of before. When he had heard her frightened voice on the phone, it had prompted a desire to protect her and shelter her, but he was surprised at the change now, when he suddenly felt feelings of desire for her welling up. This was quite unexpected, since he hadn't noticed her in that way before and he couldn't put his finger on what had triggered this.

Both Roger and Ethel would have been equally taken aback if they had been able to peer beyond the veil and see the busy happenings around them on the other side. What seemed like only chance encounters and emotions were in reality the fruit of the efforts of those watching over both Roger and Ethel. The One Who loved them both knew their hearts' desires even better than they, and understood the yearnings they were unable to put words to. He longed to show Ethel His love in a tangible way that could help her overcome her insecurities and feelings of inadequacy.

At the same time, He longed to show Roger how he could reach out to others, share his heart and his faith, and make a lasting difference in the lives of others. But Roger hadn't allowed himself to believe that God could use even such a one as him, so in His wisdom, God ordained this moment of truth for both Roger and Ethel. What seemed like a casual, chance encounter was part of an intricate plan, being orchestrated and carried out from the other side.

As they sat and chatted about meaningless things, with Roger steering the conversation towards light topics in order to help Ethel feel more at ease, the feelings of love grew stronger and stronger within Roger, until finally he reached out and took hold of Ethel's hand, gently kissing each finger.

Ethel was quite surprised at the unexpected gesture. If the truth were known, she had never had any "close encounters" with the other sex, though she'd been too embarrassed to confess this to anyone. She could have had opportunities, but her own self-depreciation and negativity had always stopped her. She blushed and immediately began to feel inadequate, uncomfortable, and unsure of herself. She looked down at the table and did nothing to respond, even though she had long held feelings for Roger.

There had been foresight for Ethel's upheaval of emotions from the other side, thus the strong feelings Roger was undergoing. This encounter was destined to be, and the Lord had predetermined that the natural attractions He had made of a man for a woman would be such that Roger would persist and make an effort to find the real Ethel and touch her life and heart. The Lord knew the motivation had to be strong to help Roger to believe that despite his as-yet-unrefined knowledge of his faith, he could still be God's instrument in some way.

Roger left his chair and approached Ethel from behind, as she stared intently at the table, miserable in her awkwardness and angry with herself for not being able to respond. He started to massage her shoulders gently. Her back tingled with unknown sensations, pleasurable and exciting. She was at once miserable again, battling between her desires and passion and her awkwardness and the weight of her past that she was convinced would weigh her down until the end of her life.

As she struggled within, Roger kept massaging her

back. He felt her body relaxing and responding to his caresses, and continued, his attraction growing. He could no longer remember what he may have found less than attractive in her before, and now concentrated intently on discovering what was drawing him so tangibly.

Ethel made no outward response, but inwardly fought with the question of how she should react. She sat quietly, her mind racing. Roger sat down beside her, and took her face in his hands and gently began kissing it. Ethel could not withstand the confusion of feelings any longer and the tears fell down her cheeks as he kissed and stroked her face gently. Finally their lips met in a long kiss that touched them both deeply.

Roger was suddenly hit with the rapidity with which this whole encounter had come to pass. He had certainly not planned it or ever considered it, and it was unusual for him to reach out in such a way to someone he was working with, as it broke the typical ethics of leaving personal relationships and feelings out of the workplace. In the awkward silence that followed the kiss, Roger suddenly felt a strong urge to tell Ethel his life story. The urgency of it was strong and he knew he was to act on it.

It was Ethel, however, who turned towards him and preempted his hesitation with a request of her own. "Tell me about your life."

So Roger began.

CHAPTER 23

“I grew up in a very poor, tough neighborhood. I soon learned as a kid in school that if I didn’t learn to run with the pack, I would be eaten pretty quickly. From as early as I can remember, my goal was to be tough so I wouldn’t get beat up or hurt. This was because I’d been such a chicken. I’d been picked on at school during the first couple of grades. My old man was a tough construction worker himself, and he’d get to me after I’d get beat up at school, hitting me around and telling me he didn’t want no chicken-livered son. I knew I had to learn to be tough.

“The problem was, once I started, it was hard to turn back. As I got accepted by one of the neighborhood gangs, I became more locked into myself, less communicative, and more depressed. Life had no meaning for me. I got arrested for some minor offenses, like stealing car stereos and smoking dope, served a little time in juvenile facilities until my old man threw me out.

“At first I didn’t think I cared, since I spent most of my time on the street anyway. I dropped out of high school, and started to run with the gang all the time. The longer I lived this way, the worse I felt, and somewhere inside, I knew I was miserable, even though I had convinced myself that this was what life was like and there was no expectation of anything better.

“Many times, I wandered the street like a homeless bum, until I would get fed up with being dirty and hungry and I’d try to get a part-time job. These weren’t easy to come by, as my appearance did little to recommend me. I was surly, angry, shifty looking, and just bad news in general. Nobody wanted me around, and I wanted nobody. Just when it seemed things couldn’t get worse, I got pretty sick. Bad living, drinking, drugs, and all had caught up with me and I came down with pneumonia. I ended up in a homeless shelter for a while, where I was nursed back to health.

“The youth counselor that visited the shelter came to spend a lot of time with me. At first, I totally rebuffed him, told him to get lost and let him know that I didn’t need him, I didn’t need anybody. He responded by asking me, ‘Why are you here then?’ Needless to say, I didn’t have a word to say in reply!

“From then on, the man came daily, sat with me, read to me, ate with me, brought me magazines, and chatted with me. After a week, I decided he was a nice guy and I made a conscious decision to stop being so hostile towards him. He took my changeover gracefully, and never made mention of it, to the relief of my ‘tough guy’ image. I had to admit I’d never met anyone like him before.

“As I started getting up and around more, which took several weeks in my weakened condition, he asked me if I wanted to get in touch with my parents, or if there was someone else who could come and get me and take me home. Our friendship had gotten to the point that I finally felt I could be honest with him, so I told him about the loveless home my father had provided, and how he finally just kicked me out. My mother had run away when I was little, since my father was violent with her. I sure didn’t blame her. I just wished she had taken me along. I guess she just didn’t feel capable of providing for me. I never saw her again.

“As I told him the story of my life, I was shocked

beyond measure to see tears fall from his eyes. Nobody had ever cried in front of me before, much less *for* me. I would have thought it wasn’t manly for a guy to do that, but this fellow was manly, so I knew that it was real. He had been genuinely touched by my story, this good man, and I realized that he had a heart that sincerely cared for others.

“That moment was a turning point in my life, as I suddenly realized there was a lot more to life than what I had lived. My life looked dirty and paltry next to the nobility of his feelings. Of course, I was still a very hard character, so I didn’t show this on the outside, but it was all going on inside me.

“He just heard me out that day, gave me some magazines and showed me he cared. He invited me to play basketball the next week with a group of young people he coached. I had no intention of going, as I knew I wouldn’t fit in and I told him that. I said I would have nothing to do with a bunch of do-gooders. Although Max had never explained too much to me about his religious beliefs, there was no question they were there. And in my books, they had never been cool, so I wasn’t an easy one to talk to about this.

“The next week he came dressed for basketball and practically hoisted me out of my bed and carried me off. He later told me that God had told him I was to be at that basketball game, so he was quite the messenger. He just dragged me out of bed and took me. Of course, I didn’t put up a whole lot of resistance, as deep inside I loved this guy. He was like the father I’d never had. I wouldn’t tell him that at that point, but I was starting to realize that I didn’t want to lose his friendship.

“On the way there, he explained to me that these were young people from a Bible study group he taught at the university, and I groaned inside. I *knew* there was going to be religion attached to this, but how would I feel around a bunch of university students? They’d probably think I was some kind of a dimwit, and they’d

be absolutely right. The little time I'd spent in high school, I'd done everything I could to avoid learning and hadn't applied myself much. I had been a good student in my earlier years, but by the time I hit high school, in my crowd it wasn't cool to apply oneself at all, and so I had abandoned all interest in my studies.

"I tried to beg and plead with him not to take me, and he asked me, 'What's wrong, are you chicken? Come on, you were brave enough to break into cars and steal stereos. You were brave enough to try out drugs. Why aren't you brave enough to face a different life and see what it's all about?'" That shut me up pretty quickly.

"Finally I told him that this was different because I would look like an ignoramus next to these kids. He told me not to worry, they wouldn't care about my education, they were just a bunch of nice kids and he thought I'd like them. He asked me for his sake to just give it a try, so I finally decided that my friendship with Max was worth at least that.

"When we got to the court, I was sullen and surly, determined that I was going to feel miserable. From within my miserable self, I peered out and saw a bunch of kids just slightly older than myself with shining, happy faces, making jokes with each other, having fun and being young. But their fun was very different from the self-centered, sarcastic, hurtful and even hateful kind of 'fun' that I had been exposed to most of my life. A few of the girls approached me and took me by the arm and led me off to chat. I'd never been able to turn a pretty girl down, and these girls were sweet on top of it. We chatted, and they told me all about their experience meeting with the Jesus of the Bible and how He had changed their life, how happy they were and all. I'd never heard much about religion, much less the kind that they were preaching, which was not about going to a church on Sunday, but was about a real God who was a part of their lives.

"Before playing, they all prayed, one after the other, for different things. The two girls who had been talking to me both prayed for me, very heartfelt, emotional prayers asking Jesus to manifest Himself in my life and for me to find the happiness, peace and joy that they had each found in Him.

"The game was fun and I enjoyed participating, though I felt a bit intimidated around these young people. I felt like I had absolutely nothing to offer next to them. They were smart, outgoing, and most of all they were clean. I could just feel the cleanness in them, and it made me feel all the more dirty. My life looked filthy next to theirs, totally distasteful.

"As we drove back with Max, I thanked him for bringing me and told him how much I had enjoyed myself. Fact is, this had been the happiest day in my life and I knew it. I'd never been with a group of people who acted like they cared about me, just the way I was, a juvenile delinquent living in a homeless shelter. I must have been quite some experiment for them, seeing as they were a university-based group. I had nothing in common with them, yet they were willing to bring me into their circle.

"When we got back, Max said it was time he and I had a serious talk. He was worried about me and what was going to happen to me now that I was better. I couldn't live permanently at the shelter, and he didn't want to see me back on the streets again. What were my plans? What were my hopes? What did I want to do with my future?

"To answer those questions, I had to reach way back into my childhood, when I still had dreams of what I wanted to do with my life. When I was a child, I had watched *Perry Mason*¹ a lot on television and had decided I wanted to be a lawyer, particularly for those

1 Perry Mason: Fictional lawyer created by Erle Stanley Gardner, whose adventures solving mysterious cases quickly became popular through a series of novels, radio broadcasts, and a television series. See "Erle Stanley Gardner" on page 240.

who didn't have the money to have the best lawyers. I wanted to be a good lawyer, but not just to make money. This childhood dream of mine came up before my eyes, so long buried along with my childhood after my mother left.

"I shyly told Max what my dreams had been and he wanted to know what had happened to me along the way, so I told him all that I've just told you now, with greater detail about my teen years. Max was such a good listener; he never made me feel like he judged or disapproved of me. Everything was facts to be sorted through, taken care of, and discarded afterwards. He made me feel like anything was possible and that my past could be taken care of and discarded. I could finally move on to the light of a new day that I had never even known was possible.

"He told me that he could help me to make my dream come true, but that it would require a lot of very hard work and commitment on my part. There would be rules, and stiff ones at that. I would not be allowed to meet with any of my friends from the past. I would have to steer away from cigarettes and alcohol. He would help me get my high school finished and then it would be up to me to work through law school, through scholarships, grants, and plain hard work at jobs. He told me he knew it was a big challenge, but I'd tried so many other things, why not try something worthwhile for a change. He left me to think about all this, and we agreed to discuss it a few days down the line.

"The next day, he came for a visit of a very different nature. He had been patient and kind with me in regards to religion, and though he and many of those at his Bible group had told me about Jesus and what a difference He had made in their lives, he had never pushed me or forced me to a decision. He knew I wasn't ready yet. My heart had been so hardened, it took some time for me to believe, and not yield to skepticism and cynicism.

"But he told me the Lord had told him very clearly in his prayer time that day that now was the time. I protested that I wasn't ready, that I was thinking about it. The truth is, I was afraid to give my heart again and have it hurt. I was very drawn to what I saw and I knew it had worked in the lives of Max and the young people I had met, but I was just plain afraid. Max, understanding as always, helped me sort through these feelings and reasonings, and then discarded them. He was kind but firm. He understood, but the time was now. I had tried so many things, gone down so many paths that would lead to Hell and death. Why wasn't I willing to try one that would lead to life eternal? What would I have to lose?

"So I walked the pilgrim's way that day. I asked Jesus to come into my life and give me a brand-new one. That's the day I was born again. My life was never the same. Gone was the dirt and scum that had stained my life up to that point. In its place, I had faith, hope, and a challenge to make something of the new life I had just been given. I went at it with a vengeance. After I got through high school with top marks, I was able to enter law school, and with much hard work graduated from there with honors. Max was there when I graduated and was proud as any father could be.

"I hadn't seen much of Max all those years, as I had been so busy with my studies and work. I think he was a bit disappointed that I didn't come much to the Bible study meetings and didn't learn as much about my newfound faith as I should have. I regret that now, but meeting Amy has made a significant difference along those lines. I think I'm learning more now and have made a commitment to change in that area.

"After I graduated I wasn't lacking in offers to good firms, since I had graduated at the top of my class. Here I went from being a heap of dirt on the street to being a sought-after young lawyer. I thanked God

endlessly for the change He had wrought in my life, and I also thanked dear Max many times over, as he had done so much for me. He would never accept my thanks, but told me it was his due, it was the least he could do for the One Who had given everything for us both.

“Although I was tempted with some pretty good offers, I decided to remain true to my original dream and not get roped into big law firms that would dictate my code of ethics and what cases I took or didn’t. I figured if I worked independently or with one or two other likeminded lawyers, I could feel free to help those that needed it, whose cause was just. Little by little I built up a practice, and in giving to the needy, defending small persecuted religious minorities and others, although I didn’t gain much financially, I was remunerated in other ways. I became well known in the fray and I have felt satisfied that I have done what God expected of me.

“So here I am today. The rest you know.”

Ethel had listened silently. Now she could feel her heart pounding and a pressure in her head. She knew it was her time to take the opportunity to have a new life herself. And Roger knew it was time she met and received her Savior.

CHAPTER 24

Amy sat up in bed, startled. The voice that had been penetrating her consciousness had finally brought her to a point of awareness and she could no longer shake it off as a dream. As she lay in that peculiar state between wakefulness and sleep, she had heard a voice calling her. She dreamt that she turned her head to the side to see who called her, but saw no one. Each time she would attempt to fall deeply asleep again, she would hear the voice calling her again. She didn’t know what to make of it, until she finally pulled out of her half-awake, half-dormant state.

She wasn’t sure why she had woken so startled, and looked around her to see if anything was amiss. The children slept peacefully, and there was no noise in the apartment. She lay down again, closed her eyes, and attempted to go back to sleep.

Amy, Amy, I have need of you!

She heard the voice again, but this time there was no mistaking that she was being called from Beyond. She sat up in bed again and responded.

“Here I am, dear Lord, Your servant Amy. I am Yours. What would You have me do?”

Amy, are you willing to do whatever I ask of you, even as Abraham of old was willing to give of everything that was dearest to him, and treasured the promise

I gave him above life itself? Can you partake of such sacrifices?

Tears ran down Amy's face, as she didn't know what the Lord was requesting of her. She knew that the treasures she had were many—her children, her life of service for the Lord, and the fellowship of her community. It would be hard to forsake any of these. She didn't know if she had the strength to do it.

She barely managed to whisper, "Lord, all that I have is Yours. I know I have no right to try to hold it all for myself, when You are the One Who gave it all to me. Help my unbelief. I don't see the strength within me, but I look to You for the grace."

Well done, My dear one, the Lord replied with comfort and peace. Amy felt it rush over her heart in strong waves. *You are My Bride, and I am Your Husband, and so would I be worse than an infidel if I didn't care for My own. I will care for our children, My love, only trust in Me without reservation.*

Amy's response went wordlessly from her heart to the One Who loved and understood her better than any. Once again, He washed her heart with peace and the grace she needed.

Now you are ready to carry out what I would have you do. Do not worry for the future. Only do what I would have you do. For I have a wonderful and intricate plan in all that I have brought upon you. But that plan will not be perfected unless you place your loved ones and your very life upon My altar, entrusting them to Me. Whether they are returned or whether I keep them, you can only accomplish the mission I have before you if you will place them fully on My altar and return them to Me for My safekeeping.

If you do not fully give them to Me, you will not be able to fix your eyes upon the mission I have before you, and I will not be able to use you, and thus My greater plan will not be fully accomplished. The choice is yours—you can either take this battle for your little

ones upon your own shoulders and focus your full attention upon it, or you can place them totally on My altar, and turn around and walk away towards the special calling I have for you. The choice is yours, My dear one. You will never be alone as you make this decision.

Amy bowed her head upon her bed, as she felt the Lord's words flow through her spirit and body. She knew the message given her was much more than she could grasp or understand, but she did understand that a great decision was before her.

As she thought of the scope of what the Lord was asking of her, her heart was in turmoil. Her children ... how could she not make them the focus of her attention? How could she literally turn her back on them and place them solely in the Lord's care? It didn't make sense to her. The Lord had given her these children. Surely she was responsible to be the one to protect and shield them from the evil that threatened them. Surely that would be the only mission the Lord could have for her at this time. What more than that could He possibly ask of her? And yet what more could a mother give than her children? She struggled and struggled through the night with these questions and couldn't understand how or why the Lord would require this of her.

Finding no peace or answers within herself, she went to the Bible, seeking comfort. She held it in her hands, unsure of what to read. As she did so, her spirit was filled with an understanding, as her spirit helpers whispered to her very soul, reminding her of the people whose stories were told in the Bible, of the many sacrifices they had made to serve God, forsaking husband, wife, father, mother and children, comfort and land. Her spirit was instructed as all the wisdom in what she had read over the years was brought to her understanding. She understood in a flash what Abraham had felt as he stood over Isaac on the altar,

Moses as he forsook his worldly inheritance, and the apostle Paul as he turned his back on his past and undertook a life of hardship and privation, all to be faithful to their Lord. Amy had often heard that the martyrs were the seed of the church, but hadn't understood that the saints of all ages had not only been martyrs for one moment of time as they gave their lives for their faith, but they had been living martyrs, who had died many deaths of forsaking, sacrificing, and giving their wills over to God.

So real was the gift of understanding that had been given to her in her moment of greatest need, that these truths were like tangible objects that she almost felt she could reach out and touch. The Lord had answered her heartfelt prayers in an unexpected way, and though she felt far from having attained full peace and victory, she had decided to give her will over to the Lord, even if it meant forsaking her children. Her duty was to her Husband first and she understood that she must trust in Him for their children.

Jesus as her Husband was something she had never thought about clearly or understood before. She had never thought much of it, since she had been married most of the time since she received the Lord, but this idea was comforting and attractive now that she was alone. On the other hand, this revelation brought with it another, somewhat unsettling realization. For if her earthly husband had been here, she would not have hesitated to entrust the children fully to him and leave to carry out a mission. But Jesus, her Lord and Savior, was now her Husband—and there was no question of that. Should she not as readily, if not more so, entrust her children to Him?

Having finally found a measure of peace and acceptance of this thought, though she felt that she was only at the very beginning of the road towards true victory and faith, she prayed and gave the Lord the rest of the night and the rest of her life. She felt

that she was starting an adventure nearly as big as the one she had started when she had decided to commit her life to the Lord. She felt as she had then, that she knew and understood so little and she must only trust and follow the leadings of the Spirit.

So began the first day of this new era of her life, and she slept peacefully until the children awoke.

When she woke, she realized that she had had a dream during the night, with clear indications of what she should do. Although the preliminary court hearings were scheduled to commence in just five days, she was commanded to be prepared to go to a funeral, with the willingness to give as much of her time as was needed to help someone. The Lord was asking her to pour out His love and mercy upon this person. She did not understand why this would be a test, but in her dream, obeying this calling had entailed a fierce battle.

She understood better why the Lord had told her that she would have to lay her children upon the altar and walk away to fulfill His mission. For in order to prepare and travel to attend this funeral, whenever and wherever it would be, and to meet someone she didn't know, would mean she would not be able to spend the time preparing for the hearings with Roger. This of course caused her no small concern and was part of the fiery test the Lord had said she would face to carry out His plan and mission. This would not be an easily won victory, but it was one she had to contend for with much prayer, desperate tears, and claiming of God's promises.

She knew it would be easier if she just obeyed quickly, so she determined to call Roger as soon as possible to let him know that she would not be able to get together to prepare for the court hearings. She knew this would come as no small shock to Roger, who was already unnerved at facing the legal giants her father had employed for this case. It would be

so hard for him to understand, and she wasn't able to explain it to herself, as she was just beginning to understand herself. How hard it is to lose our grasp on the things of this earth and reach out for the real things that are invisible to human eyes! She sighed and said a prayer for Roger, that he would have the faith for this court appearance even if he had to do it without her, bizarre though that may seem and probably impossible in Roger's eyes.

CHAPTER 25

Every breath that Rudy took caused his body to shake. He had never realized what a miracle it was to breathe; something so simple that we do so many times in a lifetime without a thought. Rudy felt terribly weak. His body was not his own. He couldn't seem to find the strength to even move a finger.

Ayre leaned over him and smiled, though tears were running down his cheeks. "Hi, Dad. I'm here. Don't worry. I'll be here for you. I won't leave." Ayre felt like weeping loudly like a little child, but restrained himself for his father's sake. As he looked at his father's kind, care-worn face, he struggled with the thought that he might remain permanently paralyzed, even in a vegetative state. The thought was too hard to bear. His father had been so full of life. Ayre sat in the chair and held his father's hand, though he didn't know if his father could even tell that he was holding it. He seemed to spot a glimmer of recognition in his eyes, but he couldn't be sure.

As he sat there studying his father's face, he saw a tear roll down his cheek, and he realized that his father was very aware and was acknowledging his presence. Ayre spoke what few words of comfort he could muster, though these were sparse and contrary to his nature.

One of the hospital counselors came by and called him out of the room. After going over some pertinent details of Rudy's and Ayre's lives, she pointed him to the little chapel in the hospital, suggesting that his father could use his prayers. Ayre determined to go after talking to the doctor.

After several hours, one of the doctors overseeing Rudy came by, and Ayre was able to ask what the chances were of his father attaining a full recovery.

"Not much, I'm afraid," the crisp, efficient doctor responded. "The brain damage occasioned by this stroke is most likely permanent, though stroke patients have been known to surprise us all. We have no way of knowing how much of the damage the brain itself will repair and how much is permanent. I'm sorry I don't have better news for you. All you can do at this point is be there, to speak to him. He is aware of his surroundings despite his physical limitations."

Ayre was overwhelmed by the news and left to sit a while in the chapel by himself. He didn't know what to do in the chapel, as he hadn't had a personal relationship with God in so long—since his childhood, in fact—that he couldn't even remember what to do. So he sat alone in the chapel, moaning *Oh God* within himself and hoping for a miracle, though lacking in the faith to ask.

Yes, his small heartfelt cries were heard, and his dear mother stood close to him, trying to comfort him and help him to reach out more deeply in spirit. And so it was that, despite the turmoil and pain, Ayre felt an inexplicable peace suddenly come over his heart, and was able to compose himself sufficiently to return to his father's side.

On his way back to the room, he called in and left a message with Blanche's secretary, informing him that he would not be able to come to work for

the next three or four days. Being that the Johnston trial was about to start, and he had managed this case practically on his own, he realized that Blanche would not be happy with this turn of events. But the die was cast at this point, and having seen for himself his father's condition, Ayre had already made up his mind to take some bereavement leave so he could stay by his father's side.

Returning to the room, Ayre sat in the chair by his father's bed. Rudy was resting as peacefully as he could, though his breathing remained labored, coming in almost agitated bursts. As Ayre looked at his father, thoughts and memories came to his mind of his father playing with him and his little brothers as children; of his father dressed in a black suit and weeping as their mother was buried; of his father moving forward to pour his life into his sons. He remembered his father's encouraging words, his never-failing understanding, and his presence throughout his life, despite the many burdens and pressures he carried.

He remembered the many lives his father had touched at work, the grateful people who sought him out, valued his counsel, and respected him; the many people he had shared his simple faith with. Many had found faith through his sample, more so than all the sermons they had heard in churches. His father just seemed to breathe kindness.

Tears welled up in Ayre's eyes as he sorted through all these memories and thoughts. The harder part was having to face up to how he had purposely distanced himself from his father and despised his life, looking at him as antiquated, simple, and slow. He knew he had hurt his father on many occasions, especially of late, and he felt a burden of guilt and remorse upon his shoulders that he couldn't shake. He couldn't stand the thought of never being able to talk these things out with his father or tell him he

was sorry. He had chosen the fast track, but quickly discovered that he had run over some of the precious parts of his life to do so. As the day turned into night, Ayre fell asleep in the chair, exhausted.

CHAPTER 26

“Rudy, come with me.”

Rudy heard this over and over and finally sat up in bed.

“Come, Rudy. Follow me.”

He heard the voice again, but couldn’t see whom he was to follow. Without thinking or questioning, he jumped out of bed and walked towards the door. He saw Ayre sleeping on the chair, and realized the toll his illness had taken on Ayre.

A thought flitted through his mind that it was strange how well he felt now. He breathed without difficulty, his body responded, and he was able to move freely. This was a great relief, as the last day had been a painful one, a struggle such as he had never experienced in the physical before. He had always been a busy, energetic man—he had had to be—so it was a shock finding himself entirely incapacitated. He welcomed the relief, though he thought it strange that he should feel so well so quickly.

“Come this way, Rudy,” he heard behind him from the direction of the window.

As he turned around, the window was enveloped in a brilliant light that was brighter than anything he had ever seen before, but yet that didn’t hurt his eyes.

“Walk into the light, Rudy. Don’t worry. You will find joy and comfort there.”

The voice filled Rudy with comforting sensations and he felt at peace. He realized that this was no normal experience, and looked over to the bed, which was beside the window. He saw his body lying on the bed, and it was a bit of a shock to feel separated from it. For a confused moment, he stood by it, not knowing what to do. The voice filled his mind again, telling him to walk into the light, gently and lovingly but firmly.

“Am I dead?” he asked, almost afraid to ask the question, much less hear the answer.

“No, you are not. You are just absent from your body, that you may take a journey to the other side.” The voice was warm, compassionate, and tolerant, seeming to understand Rudy’s weaknesses and his attachment to his body still lying on the hospital bed. “It is time to come, Rudy. You must turn away from one world so that you may enter the other.”

So Rudy took a step towards the light-filled window, and as he walked closer, he felt like he had walked through a looking glass—like the fairy tale of *Alice in Wonderland*. Suddenly, he felt so light and peaceful. His anxieties seemed to have dropped from him by no will of his own. He looked around him in eager anticipation, and found he was in a beautiful place, a homey house surrounded by green and colors of such brilliance as he had never seen before. It was happy and peaceful. The very atmosphere seemed to sing. Any ideas or speculations he had ever had of the afterlife seemed paltry in comparison to what was unfolding before him. He wondered if he was dreaming or hallucinating; it seemed too wonderful to be true.

As he stood in the garden of this sweet, homey house, a figure approached him and called out to him. As Rudy looked at the figure, he knew in his heart that such eyes of love and compassion could

only belong to one Person. He felt confused as to what would be the right protocol for greeting His Lord and Savior, Whom he had loved for as long as he could remember. He thought about kneeling, but the Lord could read his every thought, and before Rudy could even put action to his thoughts, the Lord beamed words of comfort and reassurance, without even speaking to him. Rudy, though he still felt awestruck by being in the presence of the Lord, felt the Lord’s love now coursing through his veins and giving him strength and peace. His spirit simply bowed before the Lord.

Jesus placed His arm lovingly around Rudy’s shoulders and spoke directly to his heart. It was an amazing experience that Rudy could not explain, as it had more dimensions than any earthly experience he had ever had. For not only did he hear Jesus’ words, but these words were accompanied by a bevy of emotions, of love, understanding, encouragement, and many more things than Rudy could describe. His words even seemed to have colors to them. Rudy was in awe at this experience and knew he could never describe it to do it justice when he returned back to his fleshly body.

All he knew was that Jesus’ words reached down to the recesses of his heart and touched him in a magical way that surpassed anything he had ever known in his earthly life. Spoken words suddenly seemed so infantile, so clumsy and inadequate. And to his surprise, he found his own responses flowing from his heart to Jesus’, formed in words, but expressing feelings and needs and heartcries that were deeper than he had ever understood. As he expressed it, he realized it was his deepest innermost heart that he had never fully revealed to anyone and parts of which he himself had never understood before this time. But Jesus took each thing Rudy expressed, and returned the thought with the understanding and wisdom to fathom the deeper meaning of these thoughts. He

realized how much more Jesus understood him than he himself did.

He was humbled by Jesus' words of commendation to him for the life he had lived. Though the Lord pointed out lovingly to him the areas where he had fallen short or where he could have done a better job with his children, the Lord mostly encouraged and thanked him for the love he had shared with others. He let him know that each person who leaves the earthly dimension is judged primarily by how much love he showed to others, and Rudy had done much to love and care for others in his own way. He let Rudy know that he could come Home now if he wished. Jesus even walked with him a little throughout His city, showing Rudy different details of the Home awaiting him. Rudy felt so loved and secure, it was a struggle to contemplate returning to the heavy weight of his earthly body and all the cares he bore there.

He explained to the Lord how he feared that if he was not there for his children, they would not grow up to be men of faith. The Lord sweetly and gently reminded him that despite his more personal loving care and attention, Ayre had still not chosen to follow in faith, and the other boys were now following a similar road. Rudy wept at this point, and the Lord understood his concern that his boys turn out to be good men, and his feeling of responsibility towards them. It seemed to Rudy that it was too soon for him to leave them.

As he debated this with the Lord, the Lord gave him a vision of himself, lying on the hospital bed, unable to move any parts of his body, and communicated to him that should he return, recovery to his former state was not guaranteed. He explained that He could not reveal the future to him at this time, for he must make his own choice, as He had decided to give him the freedom to choose whether to return or not. The Lord at this point returned him to the house he had

first come to on this journey, and suggested he go to bed and rest, that there was no immediate hurry, and that he should take some time to meditate and ponder his decision.

Rudy awoke with a bit of a start, not knowing where he was. Someone was pulling at his sleeve, trying to wake him up. He felt so rested when he awoke, which was a relief after the great weariness he carried when he left the earth.

As Rudy opened his eyes, he saw a tall, shining person before him, with long hair and eyes that shone with a brilliance such as he had never seen before. He felt awestruck before such a presence, and didn't know how he should react. Although he had already been with his Lord, he had felt comfortable and at ease, perhaps because he had known Him for so many years and loved Him nearly all his life.

Rudy was mute and couldn't help but staring in awe at this majestic being. He didn't know exactly what "it" was, as though it had the same form as he, it was obvious that it was a different sort of being. Whatever it was, it inspired awe and respect, and Rudy didn't know what to do or say.

Rudy. The word beamed into his head, without the being making the slightest move. It is time to ponder and make a decision about your future. You have been granted the majesty of choosing what is ahead. I am here to help you through this time of decision. I have been in charge of the guard that has watched over you on earth, and now I have been granted permission to be made manifest to you.

Rudy didn't know what to say. There was so much he didn't understand about this new world. So he waited silently, humbly recognizing his need for guidance and help.

Rudy, the Lord has granted you a rare opportunity to choose between coming to this world to stay, or returning to the other. You are special in His eyes,

because of the sacrifices you have made not only for your children's sake, but for your fellow men that you worked with while on earth. I know you feel that you did and accomplished so little and your life didn't turn out how you would have planned and expected it to. But the Lord looks upon your heart, and you have given of your life daily, unselfishly to others in love, with no thought for yourself or your needs. This is very pleasing in the Lord's eyes and for this reason He has decided to give you the responsibility of choosing what you will do from here on.

“But how can I know how to make such a choice? I am so ignorant. I am a simple man who lived a simple life. I don't understand how things work here. I don't know what I am supposed to do. I do know that I am terribly worried about my children. What will become of them without me? Who will care for them and help them along the way? Who will support them and encourage them to be the best they can be?” At this point, Rudy broke down and wept, for the dilemma was so great and the weight of the responsibility threatened to crush him.

The angelic being reached over a kind hand and dried his tears, placing a loving arm around him. *Fear not. Do not let your heart be troubled, for the Lord loves you and does not want to see you ache or hurt. He has brought you here in His infinite love and mercy, to help you see what is awaiting you here and to experience His love in a way you could not know it before. That same Lord will not leave you nor forsake you, and He has commanded me to watch over you for every day of your life. You must not fret or worry.*

Rudy felt comforted and relieved upon hearing these words. Yet what he should do still eluded him. It was impossible for him to imagine how his boys would manage without him. He felt, at the same time, irresistibly drawn to this new world. The weights and burdens he had left behind seemed so heavy now, it was

difficult to even consider taking them back up again. If it hadn't been for his boys, he would have had no desire whatsoever to return to earth. Yet, the welfare and future of his sons weighed heavily on him. ...

Come, Rudy, the being said, taking Rudy by the hand. Instantly they were in an entirely different location. The being took Rudy to a screen, somewhat like a movie screen or a large computer screen. *Watch and ponder,* the being communicated cryptically.

As Rudy watched the screen, he saw himself on earth, lying in a comatose state. Ayre was by his bed, tears rolling down his cheeks. Rudy could read his thoughts and feel his emotions. It was a very strange sensation, almost like he had jumped inside of Ayre. He could feel the turmoil, and better understood the crossroads his son was being faced with at this time. Rudy's illness was causing him to reach out to a God that he had shut the door on at the time of his mother's funeral. He was also sizing up what he was doing with his life, whether he had chosen the right path. He was considering what new responsibilities he was being called on to carry with his father's illness, and what changes this would bring about in his life.

Rudy felt moved by this interactive look into Ayre's heart and mind. He continued to feel burdened about how Ayre could possibly fare if he didn't return, when the being—following all Rudy's thoughts and feelings—laid his hand over Rudy's heart, looking deeply into his eyes. *This is to help you to understand.* Then, all at once, Rudy could see a great and marvelous plan unfolding in Ayre's life through this moment of desperation. He could see that Ayre's life had been going down the wrong track and was leading to depression, unhappiness, and eventual tragedy. But Rudy's absence was the beginning of a work in Ayre's life, as Ayre was having to make a decision to put the happiness and needs of others above his own. It was the first step down a new road, and there was much

ahead for Ayre if he continued down this new and better path. The only variable in the equation was what would happen to him if Rudy returned and took over again. The being then removed its hand from Rudy's heart, and Rudy was left pondering those questions, and his part in their answer.

Rudy turned to the being, a question on his lips as to the other boys, which the being had already captured and understood before it reached the stage of being fully formulated in Rudy's mind.

The being once again showed him each of his sons, the choices they were making, and what was happening in their lives at this precise time. Rudy came to understand that each had to stand on his own feet and make his own decisions in life, which was hard for Rudy, as he wanted to shelter and protect them from making the wrong decisions.

Rudy turned away with a sigh and a tear in his eye when all this was done. It was so hard to contemplate leaving his sons. He realized how weak his faith was, as he had such a difficult time trusting that the Lord would take care of them better than he could. He struggled with this thought, unsure of how to resolve this dilemma. All his life he had yielded to the circumstances he was in, but he realized that most of the time he hadn't felt that he had much of a choice. His life had been mapped out for him to a great extent by circumstances, by difficult situations, and by the needs of others. Now, the Lord had placed him in a situation where he had to make a choice, and it couldn't have been more difficult for him. He didn't want to make the wrong choice, as the Lord was clearly offering him a place in this wonderful new World, which was so far beyond everything he had ever imagined or experienced. Jesus was even illuminating the future to some degree before him, helping him to understand that despite his worries and cares, his sons would be in God's hands without him.

Not knowing what to do, Rudy bowed his head in prayer, asking the Lord to please help him to make the right choice. Little did Rudy realize that he had just effectively made the right choice in yielding his will to the Lord's and putting aside his own concerns and worries. No sooner had he expressed this heartfelt prayer, but he felt an overwhelming sensation of peace and comfort, that at the same time seemed to be musical in nature. The clouds of confusion cleared away, and it became crystal clear to him that he was meant to stay, that it was his time to let go and let the Lord work in the lives of his loved ones, without his physical presence hovering over them. This sensation of understanding so filled him that all his cares and worries evaporated, and only the musical sounds of peace and trust were left. He sighed with great contentment as the being returned him to his house, recommending that he rest once more.

Rudy lay down contented and full of this strange but exhilarating sensation, unlike any he had experienced in the physical realm. He rested peacefully.

CHAPTER 27

Rudy woke to the sensation of someone pulling on his sleeve and pulling him back into the present. As he awoke, he was surprised to find himself back in the hospital, struggling to breathe, faced with the inertia of his body. The tug on his sleeve had been Ayre, who had been trying to speak to him and wake him out of the coma he had been in for several days.

Rudy did not know how long he had been absent, and began to wonder if it had all been just a dream, as he had understood that it was his time to leave earth, leave his body, and enter the next world.

As he tried to get his bearings, he heard a familiar voice speaking to his heart. *Rudy, your time here is short. Take good advantage of it.* It was the unmistakable voice of the being who had last visited him, and a clear reminder of all he had left behind, and what he needed to do. He suddenly understood that he had come back to finish what remained of the rest of his life. He did not know what he could possibly do here, as he couldn't move or do anything to communicate with Ayre. He felt the frustration of his position, and his inability to do anything about it, until a tear rolled down his cheek.

Ayre, watching his father intently, was excited to see another tear and realized that his father really

was there, even if he was as a prisoner inside his own body.

The nurse came in to adjust the many tubes keeping Rudy alive, and Ayre excitedly told her about the tear.

“That’s wonderful, dear,” the middle-aged nurse said with a motherly tone.

“Isn’t it amazing how even when the body is entirely inert, the spirit continues?” Ayre asked, not expecting an answer. “That seems nearly impossible, doesn’t it?”

“Only God can breathe the spirit into a man,” the nurse responded matter-of-factly.

Ayre sat back down in the chair, thinking how true it was; how the life of his father was not in his fleshly body, which at this point seemed nothing more than a discarded vehicle. It was amazing his body even lived, for he labored so hard to breathe and was just a shadow of what he had been. But the tear had been the key to help Ayre see that the life of the spirit still lived strong in his father.

CHAPTER 28

Although Amy had prepared and was packed and ready to go as the Lord had asked her, nothing had come up or manifested itself to lead her to any particular direction. She had heard of no funeral and nothing out of the ordinary had happened immediately after she had received her mission. She started to wonder if she had misunderstood or if perhaps the words had had some cryptic, symbolic meaning.

In the absence of any further direction for the moment, Amy decided to keep her planned appointment with Roger that day to further discuss details about the upcoming hearings. So Amy made her way to his office, stopping by to greet Ethel on her way in. Since Roger had led Ethel to the Lord, the change in Ethel had been so radical; it was even surprising to Amy—who had herself undergone a change in her life after she was born again. Ethel had gone from being a mousy, insecure woman with few graces to becoming a radiant, confident, and outgoing person. The potential had always been there for her to change and evolve, though it went unseen by most, but the only key that could unlock this was her spiritual rebirth.

Other clients also had marveled at the change in Ethel, and how attractive and full of life she had become. Roger always made sure to speak of the

One Who had performed the miracle in her life, and the more he reached out to share his faith, the more comfortable he felt doing so, until it was becoming an integral part of his life.

Being around Ethel every day after the experience they had shared was a different situation than any he had lived previously. At first he hadn't known how they would react around each other, or what would happen next. He had had no intention of becoming intimate with her, so he didn't know what to expect. On the other hand, he recognized in her a tender heart that had suffered many hurts, so he didn't want to do anything that would hurt her or her newfound faith. As the days had gone by, he had felt closer to her and more drawn to her than he would have imagined possible. Finally, he had to admit to himself that his feelings ran a lot deeper than he had realized.

Roger knew he was getting into this relationship deeper by the day, which was unusual for him, as he had normally shied away from closer relationships, being a loner himself, with set habits and foibles. He had never imagined wanting to share so much of his life and time with another, but he couldn't keep himself away from Ethel. He had his eye on her throughout the day, and if she was late, he missed her and thought about her.

I'm acting like a kid, he thought to himself. *What if this doesn't last and I wake up one day and realize I don't feel the same way anymore, then what?* He would shake his head and determine to close the door on the feelings he had allowed himself to feel for Ethel—for her sake and for his own. But as quickly as he determined to do so, when the end of the day arrived, he felt compelled to be with her and couldn't imagine not seeing her. He had even tried to stay away from her for an evening or two, but had been miserable and done nothing but think of her, so it hadn't helped matters much.

Finally, he came to the realization that it was time to commit his feelings and the future to the Lord, and ask Him to guide it. He had very little experience in long-term emotional relationships, so he felt overwhelmed by the compelling feelings he had for Ethel. He was glad for Amy's visit today, as she was the only person he knew that he could trust to share his innermost person with.

Roger and Amy had a productive meeting, discussing preparations for the case, even though Roger felt uneasy about Amy's possible absence, to say the least. He admired Amy greatly, but at times it was difficult for him to understand the level of dedication she had. It seemed so beyond the scope of what he was capable of. Her life was certainly special, as she had touched his in a deep way and led him down the path to a better understanding of the Lord and his walk with Him. Now, thanks to Amy's prodding and chiding, he was reading the Bible everyday and praying and trying to share his faith with others. He knew that he had a lot more to change, yet his life already seemed so different to the life he was leading when Amy had first come through his door.

Amy asked how Ethel was doing and Roger brought her up to date with Ethel's progress. Amy never ceased to thrill over the change in Ethel's life—and Roger's.

Roger finally got around to telling her that he and Ethel were getting pretty close. He described his struggle of trying to keep his distance, but how he felt himself growing to depend on her more and more.

Amy, after listening for a great while, finally broke into a sunny laugh. "Roger, you've never been married before, have you?"

Roger shook his head. "Why do you ask?"

"I didn't think so, or you would probably have caught on to what's happening. You've been an independent bachelor who has had to fend for himself since

he was little, but it sounds like the Lord is asking you to hang up your saddle and build a family.”

“I thought as much myself, but it has been a struggle for me, as it would involve such a change in my life. I can’t begin to fathom myself with the responsibility and obligations of a family,” Roger said and sighed.

“Oh Roger,” Amy lovingly exclaimed while passing her arm over his shoulders in a reassuring gesture, “you take on the problems and difficulties of so many. Don’t you think the Lord knows in love that you would actually be much happier with a companion, someone to stand by you and love and support you no matter what? Ethel loves you; it’s been plain to me since the day I came here. I think she would be thrilled if you revealed the emotions and desires of your heart for her.”

“You noticed that right from when you started coming to the office?” Roger asked.

“Of course. It’s obvious that you are very important to her. She’s a wonderful girl and she’ll only grow and get better, as will you, if you both continue to love the Lord and others with His love. Believe me, I’ve been there. To love and be loved is one of life’s most beautiful experiences. Of course the secret to a good relationship is having it focused on the Lord. The Bible says He is our Bridegroom, so we must love Him above all others, and all the rest will fall into place afterwards.”

“Pardon my asking this question,” Roger said hesitantly, “but at times, it’s hard for me to follow you. I mean, you’ve lost your husband, and now you stand to lose your children or have to leave the life you’ve chosen if you wish to bring them up, and yet, you speak so positively of it all. Do you not have any regrets for the situations that brought you this far, or wish that things were different?”

Amy thought carefully about her response and shot up a silent prayer to the Lord, asking for His

help in how to respond to this difficult question. “Roger, I have lost little when you think about it. I was miserable before I found the Lord through Jasper. I had no purpose in life, no meaning, no happiness. I enjoyed my years with dear Jasper so much. Of course I suffered when he was taken. I missed him terribly. For a while, my life seemed gray and empty. But finally I realized that I hadn’t lost him, but rather the Lord had taken him for safekeeping, so though I suffered and agonized, I had to understand that he was much better off, much happier.

“And I also had to consider that I was better off, as the Lord wouldn’t give me something that He didn’t think was good for me. I know I’ve learned and changed a lot since Jasper’s passing. I used to rely too much on him and his faith and his relationship with God. After he passed away, I knew I had to undergo a major change, not only for my own sake, but for the sake of my children, who needed a mother who was in touch with God.

“I had been somewhat remiss in growing as much as I should with the Lord, filling my life with my children, my love for Jasper, and my happiness. Yes, it was wonderful. It was like a little piece of Heaven. But I wouldn’t change it for what the Lord has given me since. I have come to know the Lord in a way that I never did before. Not only that, but I moved out of my little bubble of happiness and suddenly began to understand the agony and pain and suffering in the world, that so many suffer because they don’t know the Lord. I began to feel the need to reach out to others and touch them with God’s love, be an instrument of their spiritual healing and rebirth. My entire focus and perspective shifted and I had my eyes opened to a reality that I couldn’t see before in my warm cozy nest of love.

“So as you see, there were many reasons why the Lord allowed these difficulties to come to my life, and

I'm sure I'm not done finding out all the reasons yet. This court case has brought another change to my life, taking me from the community of my loved ones, whom I was used to leaning on for support, prayer, counting on them to give me guidance and direction. Now I must lean on the Lord and stand alone before Him. To say the least, this experience is teaching me more than all my previous years living with the community." Amy paused, giving Roger a time to reflect on all that had been said.

"Have you seriously contemplated the possibility that we may lose this case, not because our cause isn't righteous, but because your parents are loaded and will stoop to any nastiness to gain custody of the children? What will you do if the court awarded them the children?" Roger asked this gently but probingly, as he carried a great weight in his heart with the responsibility of this case and the welfare of Amy's children. He had grown so fond of Amy and admired her more than anyone he had ever known, so her well-being weighed heavily on him.

Once again, Amy paused and asked the Lord for His help and guidance. "I'm so sorry, Roger, that you've had to bear the burden of this case. I know it hasn't been easy for you and it weighs on you heavily. That is because you are such a wonderful, caring man and you throw your whole soul into whatever you do. I know God will bless you greatly for having enough love to do this.

"Of course I've asked myself 'what if?' I've fought many a battle and slain many a giant of fear and doubt and worry particularly during the night, when it all seems to assail me. But each time when it seems that I can't go one step further, the Lord will come through with the truth in His words: 'Fear not.' He wants me and all His children to trust Him implicitly with our lives, our children, our everything. I can't say it's always an easy path, and at times I struggle with

fear and worry, but the Lord brings the deliverance and peace I need each time. So you see, it is nothing of myself, but His strength and might that He has promised to each of His children if they only avail themselves of it.

"You will need that same strength and might to go forth and speak boldly before my father's powerful legal representatives. But God has promised that same power and protection to you, and all His children. All we must do is come before Him and ask Him. He will not fail us, no matter what the outcome. So I cannot look into the future. I must only trust that all will be revealed to me when I need to know." A tear rolled down Amy's cheek at the thought of possibly losing custody of her own children, but she stood resolute, determined to be true to her God.

She purposefully and artfully changed the subject, moving Roger onto lighter topics, and they ended with a time of prayer together, not only for the court case as the pressing matter at hand, but also to ask the Lord that He give Roger a sign if it was His will to become closer to Ethel. Roger was thankful for her kind words and prayers, particularly in the midst of the griefs she had to bear.

After Amy left, he felt touched and warmed and filled, as he always did after his time with Amy. The more he knew her, the more he came to understand, by her simple confessions such as today, that the dynamism that so struck him in Amy was not due to her own personality but rather the degree to which the Lord's Spirit filled her life. She lived and breathed faith and God and the spiritual in a way he had never experienced before. He hoped that he and Ethel could attain to even a small measure of what Amy had, so that their lives could touch others' lives.

CHAPTER 29

Ayre stayed as long as he could by his father's side. His brothers also came after school each day and stood vigil by their father's bed—not to mention the many people who had worked under Rudy at the plant and who came tearfully to show their solidarity, causing some wonder among the nurses, as this man was just a simple factory worker.

As the days went by, Ayre watched his father and pondered on who his father was, what his life had meant, how he had made his mark upon this world through the people he had cared for and fought for. It was very clear what Rudy's legacy was, but the next question that inevitably came up was regarding Ayre's own life. Was what he was doing of worth? Would he be happy with his life the day he died? Ayre felt cold and empty. He had for a long time, he realized, but had thought if he just kept working hard it would eventually go away.

As he dozed and slumbered fitfully late one night at his father's bedside, he woke with a start, hearing his father's voice. He jumped up, elated, to call the nurse, but Rudy detained him, asking him not to.

My time is short, Ayre, I have something I want to tell you before it is too late.

Suddenly Ayre realized that his father wasn't

speaking physically, but he was hearing his voice from inside. It was a strange sensation and Ayre wondered if it was just his mind playing tricks on him. He had never believed much in the supernatural and wasn't sure about starting to at this point. But his father continued speaking, and he couldn't help but listen.

I'm sorry I wasn't all that you needed as a father. God knows I tried my best, but I realize now that my best could never be good enough. But now my time has come. It's your time to pick up where I left off and move forward. I know I'm leaving you a lot of responsibility to carry on your young shoulders, with your brothers not quite grown up yet. It was hard for me to make the choice to leave you. But I have had the reassurance that you are ready to carry this responsibility and do a better job of it than I can now.

At this point, Ayre broke down and cried, begging his father not to go.

Rudy continued, with a sad look in his eye, *I know it's hard, son, but look at me closely. I will be more of a burden to you than a help at this point. I might recover to some degree, but if I don't fully recover, you'd have even more of a weight to carry. As it is, God is going to give you the strength you need and everything to move on with your life and help your brothers move on with theirs. You're a man now, and they're on the threshold.*

I know this is a big responsibility to ask you to carry, and it will require a major change in your lifestyle, your job perhaps, everything. But this is your chance to do right. If you make the right decision here to put others first and the needs of your brothers before your own, you won't go wrong. It's been promised to me that your life will be a wonderful life, so that you can reach the end and be thankful that you gave it your best shot, and lived the best life you could. Are you following me, son?

Rudy was not usually a man of many words, so this was a long speech all in one sitting for Ayre. Usually, Rudy made a policy of not interfering in his sons' lives any more than he had to, but he knew that he had to reach out to Ayre now. Ayre was a pivotal player in the game now, with Rudy pulling out. It was going to require a huge change in Ayre, and if he didn't accept it, his younger brothers would pay the price.

Ayre took his father's hand and squeezed it. "Dad, I promise that, to the best of my ability, I will work to do the right thing."

Relieved, Rudy shut his eyes, incredibly weary, and then spoke his final words. "Thank you, Son."

Ayre felt his father's hand go limp, and knew that it was over.

Rudy's passing brought an immediate flurry of nurses and doctors who shooed Ayre out of the room, and then did all their medical knowledge bade them to resuscitate him.

Ayre listened outside the door, thinking how foolish the attempt was, since he knew his father was meant to go at this time. He felt sad and empty and terribly alone, like he hadn't felt since his mother died so many years ago. He was too hurt to cry. He just walked out the hospital door and started walking aimlessly, without thinking where he was going.

CHAPTER 30

Amy woke with a start, as though there was something urgent she had to tend to. As she opened her eyes, she felt a warmth around her, as though she were surrounded by a warm blanket that radiated a soft glow. It was a comforting sensation, as of a great and encompassing presence—a presence that would allow no harm to come to her. She thrilled to the moment, just enjoying what she couldn't understand. She knew it was the Presence of her Husband, the One Who loved her heart as no other, and He was once again making Himself known. Though she had many times felt lonely since Jasper's passing, she knew that this Presence was now here because of it, and within her heart she knew that she wouldn't trade it for anything at this point, not even for permanent human companionship.

The moment passed and she began to hear the voice of the Lord pouring out His words of love and specific instruction to her.

My dear one, how I love you, and how pleased I am with your willingness to give of yourself and your life! Because of this willingness, I can now lead you down a new path. For I will do a new thing in your life, and through this, I will do a new thing in the lives of many others. So do not despair when you find yourself

in the midst of deep troubles such as you have never experienced, for you will be tested to your very limits. You will be tempted to question and even doubt My love for you in the midst of the terrible test ahead of you, but fear not, My beloved, for as you keep your eyes fixed on Me and Me alone, I will bring you through this Valley of Baca into the green pastures I have ahead for you, where you will be able to minister to others in a new way.

Now is the time for you to step out and reach out to someone who at this point seems to be one of your strongest opponents and adversaries. Do not hold back from ministering to this one with My love and My message, for I am He Who sends you to this one. Do not count the cost. You must forsake your own will to do this. Do not look back, only go forward, trusting in Me. Even if you must forsake all that is dearest to you, you will do no more than those who are remembered in the halls of Heaven for the great sacrifices they made in service to Me. Do not count the cost, only move forward in the direction I send you.

By the end of the message, Amy knew that the time to go out by faith and minister to this someone special had come. She now also realized that this someone was involved in her own court proceedings, on the other side. She had not expected this, and had to pray and cry out to the Lord to deliver her from angry, bitter thoughts towards those who attacked her. The Lord was asking her to offer a hand of love to the very person or people fighting to take away her children.

It took many a tear and prayer as she knelt on the floor, before Amy found the peace in her heart to obey the cryptic messages she had received from the Lord. She still didn't know exactly who the Lord was referring to, but it was not long before she remembered hearing of the young lawyer for her parents whose father was taken with a stroke, and whose absence had delayed the case.

The original mission had been to attend a funeral, so it must be that the father had passed on, or soon would. But how would she be able to locate him, when she didn't have any idea whatsoever where he was or anything about him?

She determined to ask the Lord for more instruction, and when she did, she immediately felt that she could ask Roger to help her locate him and find out where she needed to go to speak with him.

As soon as it was a decent hour she called Roger and explained the situation.

Roger would normally have been dumbfounded by such a request, but he had worked with Amy long enough to realize that, where the Spirit of the Lord moved, anything out of the ordinary could happen. He was actually starting to find it exciting moving out of the realm of the logical into a deeper dimension full of unseen possibilities. Roger liked what he was experiencing more and more as time went on.

As it happened, it was not difficult at all for him to locate the information he needed, simply by calling the firm to ask where the funeral would be held. The secretary answering the phone assumed that if he knew the father had died then he must be a friend, and was very obliging in relaying all the information Amy needed to know.

CHAPTER 31

The day of the funeral had finally come. Ayre had lived through the days preceding it in a state of confusion. Nothing seemed real anymore. He knew he had some hard questions to ask himself and he didn't have much time to do so. He just wished he could get away and rest and think and make sense out of this cataclysm that had hit his life so unexpectedly.

Everything had been going as he had planned for years, the culmination of countless hours of hard work and privation on his part. And now, at last, when everything he had fought for and craved was within his reach, it had been snatched away irretrievably. It seemed a grave injustice, but he was too grief-stricken over the loss of his father and heartsick with worry over how he would carry out his promise to his father, to care.

Things had become very complicated, and he wished he could have some quiet moments to himself to think things through. But at this point he had to attend to a seeming never-ending procession of well-meaning visitors, paying their last respects to his father. It was amazing how full the church was of people who had loved his father. Although he knew his father had special qualities, he didn't realize how deeply he had touched the lives of those around him.

As they had presented themselves to him and his brothers, many had told stories of how their father had spoken a word of comfort when needed, or helped them over a difficult patch, visited them in the hospital, and on and on. When had his father found the time to do all these things, to help others when he seemed to barely have enough time and strength to bring up his own family?

As he pondered all this, Ayre felt his loss more deeply than ever, and felt guilty that he had not shown his father enough love and appreciation. Instead, the last few months of his father's life had been ones of tension between them, as he had turned away from his father and his counsel. Now it was too late to tell him how much he loved and appreciated him and what he stood for. It had never even occurred to him that such a drastic change could happen from one moment to the next. If he had only known...

As he stood deep in thought, ready to move towards the front pews where family and close friends would be seated, an attractive woman about his own age came up and offered her condolences. He smiled and nodded and shook her hand, almost an automatic impulse at this point with the many people he had met that day. He politely asked her where she had met his father.

"I never met your father," Amy replied. "But I have heard much about your family and wanted to be here to help in any way."

"Thank you for your kindness. Please take a seat as the service will begin soon," Ayre responded, moving towards the front.

Amy acquiesced, sitting quietly at the end of a pew, unsure of what she was to do next. It was hard to imagine how she would be able to even get near Ayre today, as the church was full of mourners. Amy looked around and wondered what Ayre's father did, imagining him to be a well-to-do businessman to

have such a large following at his funeral. People were genuinely touched, many weeping openly.

After the priest performed the rituals, a time was given for a eulogy. Many people rose spontaneously to speak of how this simple man had touched their lives, how he had cared and shared his life with them in a way that had made a difference. At one point, as one of the workers spoke, Amy came to understand that Rudy had been a foreman working in a steel mill, and she was ashamed of herself for her prejudices towards Ayre and consequently his family. She had made the assumption that, because he was working in such a well-to-do firm, he himself came from a wealthy family.

As the eulogy continued, Amy's heart was deeply moved by the loss Ayre and his brothers were suffering, with not only their father passing on, but their mother having already done so. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She knew how difficult it had been for her to move on without Jasper, and she had the Lord and His love. She finally understood in part why the Lord had brought her here. She could see that Ayre was just as important to the Lord as her children were to her. She finally felt at peace when she understood this.

To close the eulogy section, which had moved every person present, Bill got up, as Rudy's closest friend and pulled out a sheet of paper.

"A few weeks before the Lord called our dear brother Rudy home, he seemed to have a premonition of sorts that his time was coming. We talked about it, and to ease his mind, I suggested he write up a last testament, so that he would feel prepared and not worry so much about it. Little did I know, that I would be standing here not too long afterwards reading it." Bill paused, composing himself to read through the paper.

"Lately," he read, "I have felt a little weary of living and like maybe my body and spirit are worn out and

it's time to pass over to our real home. At times I feel homesick for home, funny though that may sound, as I've never been there. But lately, I miss my dear wife and I miss our true home. Could it be that my time is approaching? We'll see.

"But I didn't want to go without saying a few things to those I love. My dear sons, I don't leave you much, just a worn-out old house in need of repairs, a bit of money in the bank for emergencies, and that's all. I worked hard all my life, but I didn't accumulate much on this side.

"But still I can will to you the real wealth that I carried with me my whole life, and that is my faith in God. Without this, you wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be here. Your mother and I came here to a strange country with faith. We had you children by faith. We worked by our faith and we labored for you and others by faith. If you can take hold of this inheritance, it will never be taken from you. It will never be lost, devalued, or stolen. Your bank won't go bankrupt, leaving you penniless. You'll always have the riches that your mother and I had here, and that we still carry with us today, on the other side. I leave you the prayer that you will find and embrace that faith.

"Please know that I love you and I thank God for every day He gave me with you, my children, with the friends He gave us, with my co-workers and with every life He brought across our paths. May you know that I will always love you here and from beyond."

Bill paused, and then gave a personal eulogy of how Rudy had helped him to find faith again, how he had befriended him and his wife and the many ways he had been more than a friend, like a father figure in his life. It was a touching moment, and though sad, it was triumphant, celebrating all that a simple man living by simple means had done to help others by simply responding to the need when he saw it, and not missing an opportunity to care for those around him.

After the service was over, Ayre and his brothers stood at the door and thanked everyone for their support and presence. As the last people filed out, once again Amy was before Ayre. Had he not been so bowed down in spirit with the many weights and sorrows he was carrying, she would have certainly attracted his attention with her kind, lively eyes and ready smile. As it was, he barely glanced at her, thanking her again for coming.

"Would it be possible to have a moment with you?" she asked timidly. "I know this is a very difficult time for you and it probably seems a little inopportune on my part, but I have come to speak with you."

Ayre was a bit taken back at Amy's boldness and wasn't sure how to respond. "I'm sorry, this just isn't a good time for me right now. I'm sure you mean well and I appreciate your concern, but things are pretty hectic for me now." As he said his piece, he took a full look into Amy's face for the first time and saw the tender eyes that had recently been crying for him and the sweet heart that made her face radiant. At any other time he would have seized the opportunity to speak with her, but now everything seemed a bit hopeless.

Amy nodded her understanding and was about to turn away, when she felt a strong urge in her heart to not give up.

So, in obedience to the strong compelling burden on her heart, she laid her hand on Ayre's arm and looked deeply into his eyes. "I know how you're feeling right now. I recently lost my husband whom I loved more than anyone in this world. I know how empty and hopeless everything feels right now. But I also know that it doesn't have to be that way. Death is not an end. It's the beginning of new things, for those who leave, but also for those who are left behind."

Ayre felt a spark of hope ignite in his heart at these words. He wasn't sure if it was the words or if it was

the beauty in Amy's eyes or her hand on his arm. The three together combined to make a powerful pull on his heart and he agreed that he would like to meet with her the next day. It was an odd move on his part and he was surprised at it himself, seeing as he was not one to naturally open up much to others, much less at this time, considering the crossroads he was facing. But the thought of a meeting with Amy was not altogether disagreeable.

And so Ayre sat alone in the church, the burial ceremony over, the past over. For days he had felt pressed by the need to take some time alone to ponder all that had happened in such a short period of time. He felt like he had been hit by a freight train and he couldn't figure out how or why he had gotten run over.

It was the first time in his life that he had had to face the fact that life didn't always allow time for dreams and plans of tomorrow. Ayre had hoped to see his father embrace a restful retirement once he advanced further in the firm.

But now everything's messed up, he thought, and the great future I was supposed to have, died before it even got started. How am I supposed to move on without my father, while fulfilling the responsibilities he carried? I've lived for myself and my future for so many years now, how am I going to close the door on all my personal dreams and aspirations and just walk away from them?

It all seemed pointless to Ayre, and he struggled in great measure with his own desires and what he knew was right, as well as what he had promised his father. He felt so pulled and pressured with nowhere to turn to for help, so alone and forlorn. He held his head between his hands, leaning his elbows on his knees, as his head began to pound again. It would be useless mulling over things at this point, as with his head pounding, he couldn't think or reason. Everything

looked grim at this point, and he couldn't see much hope on the horizon. He rose and left the church.

What's the point anyway, he thought, as he kicked a soda can on the street. I'm kidding myself. I've got to look for a job elsewhere and drop out of the firm. I can't survive with the kind of fast-paced rhythm or the long hours needed to keep up in that firm, while commuting a fair amount and fulfilling my promise to my father. I'm just going to have to give notice right away and look for a less demanding position, even if it doesn't promise as "golden" a future.

With that decision made, Ayre felt a little lighter, though his pain and confusion was still abysmal. He knew what he had to do and he started to feel that the quicker he did it, the better. He didn't feel comfortable suspended between two worlds. It was pulling him apart. The sooner he moved into whatever was ahead for him, the better. It was time to go home and set things right, to close up his apartment and move back to his father's house. Tomorrow he would go to see Blanche and let him know his decision. Right now, he felt he needed a long undisturbed sleep.

CHAPTER 32

The gavel pounded on the judge's desk, and the bailiff cried out, "Order in the court!" There was much ado in the courtroom, with people arguing and loud opinions being debated, but once the bailiff shouted his order, all rose and silence was achieved.

Amy was called to the stand, and she moved forward. Everything seemed to be running in slow motion, and each footstep represented an extended period of time. Her surroundings seemed surreal, and she prayed for God's clarity of mind so that she could respond properly to the issues at hand.

She raised her hand as the bailiff indicated, swearing to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help her God, and then was seated.

From her vantage point, she looked towards the Judge for the first time and could only see a brilliant light, so strong and penetrating that she could not see behind it. She couldn't fathom where such strong light was coming from and started wondering if she was dreaming.

She then glanced over to the prosecution's table, where her father and mother sat smugly, with determined faces. But she only caught a quick glimpse of them, and then all went dark in that direction, with a strange blackness that was as heavy and deep as the

light was penetrating and bright in the Judge's seat. Amy shook her head, trying to clear her mind, wondering if her nerves were getting the better of her.

She looked towards Roger's bench, but again could not see him, but only a dimmer version of the same light she had seen in the Judge's seat. As the Judge gave the word to her defense attorney, she waited for Roger to step forward. But instead a being of light stepped forward and kneeled before the Judge's bench.

"My Lord and King," the being, whose appearance reminded Amy of a knight from ancient and more noble times, began in a deep soothing voice, "I am prepared to give defense for Amy. She is a child of Your Kingdom, My Lord, and is worthy of all protection and refuge."

"Objection!" shouted a whiny, nasal voice. Amy was a little startled by this voice and turned to the prosecutor's bench. Out of the darkness sprang a handsome yet ugly and cruel-looking being, dressed in a black cape, with a sardonic smile on his face. He snarled at the kneeling being. "Objection!" he repeated. "We are not dealing with citizenship here. We are dealing with facts and witnesses and testimony and due process. He cannot attempt to sway the jury!" With this, the creature swung his cape around him haughtily and went back to his seat.

Amy felt a little frightened at the powerful adversary she was facing, and wondered where Roger was and what had happened to all the plans and preparation they had made for this trial. Her heart began pounding wildly and her temples ached as she worried and began to feel fear taking a grip on her. Suddenly she heard a voice reminding her of the Scripture:

For ye wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor

of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand (Ephesians 6:12–13).

After this passage was brought to her remembrance, Amy realized that she was under assault by the enemy of her soul and she must launch an immediate attack. She concentrated all her thoughts on and energy into resisting the fear that was threatening to overtake her—the shaking she was starting to feel in her hands, the pounding at her temples, the overwhelming feeling of falling into an abyss. She made a definite decision to reject these sensations, and asked the Lord to give her the strength and courage for this battle. She had never been under such a powerful attack before, where her nerves threatened to get the better of her if she succumbed to the sensation of fear and hopelessness that was coming upon her. She felt as if she would faint at any moment.

At the precise moment she was silently battling within herself, the handsome yet cruel being jumped out of his seat and walked over towards her. He stood close to her, and it was an awesome sensation. He radiated self-confidence and power to such a degree that he gave off an air of invincibility.

He pointed a gloved finger at Amy and said, "I know what you're thinking and how you feel. You are afraid, and you are afraid because you know that your cause is not righteous. You know that you are not capable of bringing up those children and that they would be much better served living with your parents. You know that at the very least you should renounce this ridiculous little religious pilgrimage you've been on and return to the real world. Quaint religious ideas are not going to put bread and butter on the children's table, or give them an adequate education, or prepare them for the life that they have ahead of them. Not to mention that these children need to be exposed to the real world so that they can make an informed choice—an obvious choice to not be deprived of what

every child needs. You know this is true, and it will not be difficult for me to prove.”

“Objection!” yelled out the knight who yet kneeled before the Judge. “He is harassing my client—Your child, My Lord—who seeks asylum. Can a mother be judged and deprived of her children without a fair trial? Not in Your courts, Your Honor.”

A deep voice emitted from the light around the Judge’s bench, a voice that sounded like the flowing of waters, so unique and different from any that Amy had ever heard before. “Objection sustained. Proceed.”

“My Lord,” proceeded the knight, “this child is being attacked for no other reason than that she has renounced the world and all its pleasures for a life of service and sacrifice. That creature of infamy”—at this the knight pointed towards the dark creature— “is displeased that he has not been able to entice her with the comforts and luxuries her parents have offered her in exchange for her love and beliefs. Being as he has control of much on the earth, he is employing every means possible to fight this child.

“For she is not just one mother with her children—she is a servant of the Most High, and she and her children are destined to futures of rescuing others from his evil and carnal kingdom of this world. She must be preserved at all cost, and her children must be preserved.” At this the knight sat down, and the dark being had his turn.

“Your Honor,” he began in a sardonic tone, “perhaps Amy Paines is a servant of God, but is she a good one? She could be serving God in a nice large assembly, while living with her parents and allowing her children to attend a normal school, be exposed to normal people and entertaining pursuits. Does not the Bible command God’s servants to honor their father and mother? Can she be considered a good servant when she has broken this commandment and contravened the laws of God?

“Furthermore, she has no right to deprive her children of all the delights and pleasures they could have, not to mention the fun and all the world has to offer them.” The dark being pulled a glove off and tapped it on the stand where Amy sat, before making his way back to his seat.

Amy was feeling a bit angered by him, as she could now see how he was attempting to bully and intimidate her. She determined that she was going to fight with all that was in her to protect her children. God would have to be her witness. She had no others. She didn’t even know where her lawyer was!

Before the Judge could make a move, the dark stranger jumped up again and said, “Oh, and that’s not all—they’re being deprived of an education, because Mrs. Paines has no intention of sending them to higher educational institutions. She won’t allow them to enjoy the music *all* children like to listen to, or watch television, which is such a delight for children. They are deprived, unsocialized, and totally unprepared to make their mark in the world. It’s a tragedy.” At this, the creature pulled out a handkerchief to wipe away a pretended tear with a flourish.

Amy was getting more riled up by the second, and wondered when her turn would come.

The Judge responded in that peculiar voice that sounded like the flowing of waters, and asked the prosecution to present his evidence once and for all.

“Of course, Your Honor,” the creature responded with a mock bow. “It’s gracious of You to grant me this time, and I shall be brief. This is actually a very simple case. Amy Paines’ parents are affluent, loving, caring parents who never withheld any blessing they could shower upon their only daughter. They loved her, nurtured her and had a wonderful future planned out for her.

“Amy Paines returned their kindnesses by spurning her parents and the church they brought her up

in, and abandoned her true faith for a group of misfits, a 'cult' by any interpretation, and one that is bound to harm its members and others, and most of all the children trapped within it. Of course, to the plain eye, these people seem to absolutely drench their children with love and supposedly good and beneficial Bible studies, but their denial of the many needs of a child that I have already outlined for the court far outweigh their affection for their children. And even primitive tribal peoples are affectionate with their children, so that is no standard of civilization or proof of reasoning to judge them by.

"Now, instead of being a useful, productive citizen, Amy Paines has wasted away her life, living off of others, depending on her husband and others, and causing endless grief to her parents and family, who rarely have seen her. They have been deprived of their grandchildren! This cannot be!"

The prosecutor finished his speech, clearly enunciating each word and placing emphasis where he deemed it necessary. His cool tone of voice implied that what he stated was obvious, factual, and indisputable.

"I ask that Amy Paines either submit to the superior situation of her parents, returning back to their household and allowing them to be active participants in the lives of their grandchildren and their upbringing—by all means a reasonable and logical request—or that, failing to do so, her children be removed from her, so that they can be spared the fate of this distasteful 'group.'" He pronounced these words with great disdain. "If she insists on making this religious quest a priority in her life over her children, well then, that will be her choice, and one that makes it clear and plain that she is unfit to mother her own children."

The voice of the Judge resonated through the courtroom once again. "Have you said your piece? Do you have any further evidence or testimony to present?"

The dark being once again made a mock bow, and asserted that he was done. It seemed to Amy that the Judge's voice had an edge to it, as if he was displeased with the presentation made by the prosecutor. Amy prayed that it would be so.

The Judge then motioned to the knight, indicating that he now had the floor.

The knight rose from his seat, and once again knelt before the Judge.

"Your Honor, I am your most humble servant," he began with his head bowed. "I come before You not because this woman is perfect. No one could ever be perfect or righteous, and this little one is no exception. She has sinned. She has erred many times. She has lacked in different ways. This is all true, and my opponent is true in implying that she is no model of perfection.

"But he takes it too far when he attempts to present her as an unjust person, for she loves her King with all her heart, soul, and mind and has attempted to give her life in service to Him. She knows that she is but a small one before her King, but she is trying to bring up her three little children to be servants of the Most High. My only defense is that I know we can come boldly before the throne of grace to obtain mercy and to find help in the time of need, for it has been so ordained since the beginning of time.

"So, most noble Lord, I come on bended knee, clinging only to the promises of God, humbly begging for the deliverance of this small servant. I rest my case." Then, with his humble and heartfelt presentation having been spoken, the knight got up and returned to the bench of light.

Amy wondered when her turn would come. This all seemed so extraordinary, so surreal, that she wasn't sure what was real anymore, or if her own nervousness was causing her to hallucinate. The drama was so intense, and her nerves were drawn

so taut—knowing that her future and that of her children was here and now being determined—that it was hard for her to keep the tears back. The die had been cast. She had resolved to take her stand of faith, and the entire disposition of the die was in the Lord's hands.

The Judge turned to Amy, though Amy couldn't see more than light, and spoke to her in a calm, kind tone. "What have you to say in your defense?"

A thousand jumbled thoughts coursed through Amy's mind, as she attempted to gather her thoughts and prepare to say what she and Roger had agreed upon. But as she attempted to assemble the speech in her mind, she realized that the trial had been so out of the ordinary that what they had prepared wasn't appropriate anymore. She had a strong image before her eyes of the knight who had acted as her defense attorney, bending down, pleading her case, and she realized what was required of her.

"My Lord," she began humbly, "all that the gentlemen have said about me is true. I have no witnesses, no testimony, no proof of my own goodness and worthiness. I know that in my flesh dwells no good thing, but I also know I carry in me the Eternal, for I have accepted my Lord as my Savior and cling to His cross and His redemption of my sins and lacks and shortcomings. I only petition that I may be allowed to bring up my three children to love and honor my King." Amy was so moved at this time with the anxiety and pressure she had carried for so long, that she burst into tears and wept openly.

"There now, My dear," the Judge said in a kind voice, "you have nothing to fear. Remember, there is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out all fear. For you have not been given a spirit of fear, but of power and love and of a sound mind. So fear must never have dominion over you. You must remember who it is that fights for you, and stands in your defense.

"You have done well in your defense, for you have claimed the blood that was spilled to redeem you. Nothing can stand against that blood. So fear not, trust in Me that all will work out for good, no matter whether you understand it or not."

Amy bowed her head in humble assent, comforted by these words that His decision would be fair and gracious.

"Now come stand before me that you may hear My verdict."

Amy got down from the witness stand and walked around to face the brilliant light emanating from the Judge's bench.

As she did so, it was as though scales dropped from her eyes, and she was able to see into the light. She knew instinctively that she was looking at none other than her Lord and King Himself! Now she understood why her defender had knelt, and she hastened to do so herself, awestricken by His presence.

Jesus came down from the Judge's stand and raised her to her feet, holding her gently and lovingly in His arms, while caressing her hair and drying her tears. With each caress, Amy felt a warmth flow through her body and her previously embattled spirit was filled with peace and comfort. She was amazed at how at ease she felt with her Lord. She had never imagined meeting Him in such a tangible way!

"Now, My precious bride and love"—He spoke softly with a voice that soothed—"the victory has been won, and your children have been released into your hands. But I will allow this to conclude in a bit of a different way than you might have expected, for I have new things ahead for you, very different from the life you have led up until this point.

"Have you not experienced the joy of devoting yourself to carrying the message of My salvation to those in need? Can you see how I have used this situation with your parents to lead you down a new

path, a different one than you had previously foreseen? For you were happy and secure in your little world, teaching children and caring for your own, without too many complications or difficulties in your life.

“Although the community you are living in has witnessed a little and has been used of Me, it has lost much of its fervor and has settled into a rural community where much of its energy is expended internally. Still, I use them as a testimony to those around them to some degree. But have you not tasted and seen how much more you can do to carry My love to others if you fly out of your cozy nest, and live each day depending utterly on Me and My helpers to protect you and guide you to those in need?”

“There is so much more you can do to further My work on the earth! But you must be willing to let go of that which you know in order to reach out and grasp My highest will. I know it has not been easy for you to reach a place of fully yielding soul and body on My altar of service, but now you have reached that point, My beloved.” As He spoke to her, He caressed her hair and had His arm around her waist. Amy felt loved in such a personal, intimate way.

“Are you willing to let go of all that you know, forsake it and leave it all behind, to venture forth into a country and place much more needy of My love? Or would you continue in your community, secluded in your blessings, while many die each day without ever having the opportunity to know Me and the great love I have for them? The choice is yours, My dear.”

“O, my Lord, my Dearest,” Amy cried out from her heart, “I wish only to please You, and I am ready now to lay aside my personal desires, my past life and even my comfort, ease and security, and that of my children, to go forth wherever You will that I go. I am ashamed at how I could have shown myself unwilling before You. I see now how self-absorbed I was, how self-satisfied I had become with what I had, forgetting

that I had been called to serve. O My Lord, my heart yearns for another chance, for Your forgiveness for my many lacks!”

Jesus embraced Amy fully and tightly, and Amy knew that she was forgiven. She didn’t know every detail of how her future would unfold, but she knew it wasn’t the right time to ask, that all would be revealed to her one step at a time, as she obeyed and acted on what she already knew. And at this point, all she knew was that she had never experienced a love such as this, even with Jasper, and that this love was a gift and treasure greater than any on this earth, and that she was to live her life thinking only of this love, and sharing it with any and all she could find.

“And as for you, get you behind Me, Satan!” Jesus cried, pointing a finger at the cowering figure of darkness, his features now invisible to Amy. “Hence from here! Do you not know that you were defeated before the beginning of time? There is no place for you amongst God’s children. Do you not see that though this little one is weak and vulnerable in herself, she is hedged about by My servants and My Spirit and is thus fortified? Trouble her no further. You cannot prevail, so hence from here!”

Satan slinked out of the courtroom, like a shadow across the floor in ignoble defeat. There was a great cheering and shouts of thanks to the Lord for the victory that was won.

Amy turned over in bed and suddenly became aware that she had been sleeping. But it all seemed so real! Was it possible that it was just a dream? But how could it be, when she could still feel the warmth of the Lord’s caresses on her skin, as though they had just happened?

CHAPTER 33

Ayre woke up to the phone ringing over and over. Groggily, he looked at his radio clock to see what time it was and realized that he had been sleeping for about 16 hours, and it was already the next day! He groped sleepily for the phone, and answered it with as much energy as he could muster.

“Hello, Ayre, it’s Amy.”

It took him a few moments to attach the voice to a face, but he finally remembered who it was, and simultaneously realized that he had an appointment to meet her for coffee.

“I’m sorry, Amy. I just don’t think I can make it. I’ve been sleeping for nearly a day, and I don’t have my faculties about me just now.”

“Ayre, I can’t take no for an answer. I’ve come especially to see you. Please meet me. I’ll wait here another hour to give you time. Please, do come.”

There was such persuasive sweetness in Amy’s voice, and such comfort, that Ayre felt he couldn’t let her down. She had after all come on his account and was waiting for him patiently.

“Okay,” he conceded. “I’m getting ready and will be there within the hour.”

“That’s wonderful,” Amy said in her cheery voice as Ayre hung up.

True to his word, within the hour Ayre appeared at the coffee shop where Amy patiently awaited him, and had spent the time reading her Bible and praying for her encounter with this man. She was unsure just how the Lord wanted her to broach the issue of Ayre's need for Him, but she just had to trust that the door would open and the opportunity would present itself.

Amy found Ayre to be a very interesting person, likable under his closed exterior. He seemed so forlorn and lonely, and she realized this could very likely be the one and only time when he was ready to hear about the Lord's love for him, and to receive it.

After polite niceties, Amy started to worry when the conversation flagged. What should she say, how could she reach his heart?

Take his hand in both of yours, look deeply in his eyes and weep with him, weep for him, for he doesn't know how to express his pain. It is locked inside him and will be locked in there forever unless you take My key and free him from it.

It seemed a bit forward to Amy to be so warmly affectionate with someone she didn't know at all, but she knew that the Lord had spoken in answer to her question, and her part was to simply obey. She was discovering that she never went wrong if she just followed the Lord's voice speaking so clearly to her heart and directing her in ways she would never have gone by personal choice. So she reached over, took his hand in hers, and looked deeply and lovingly into his eyes.

Ayre was a bit shocked. It was so rare that anyone touched or hugged him. He was entirely unused to it and didn't know how to react. But on the other hand, Amy's warmth and attractiveness was very appealing, so he relaxed and accepted it.

"Ayre, I know it's hard to tell another person that you understand and feel their pain. I know when my husband died, I thought nobody could possibly

understand how devastated and lost I felt. I had depended so much on him, I was so close to him, I couldn't imagine the rest of my life without him! I wept so many tears, I felt deep sadness threaten to overwhelm me at times."

Tears fell from Amy's eyes as she spoke. It was an electric moment in the spirit, as an unmistakable connection was being made from her heart to his, and ultimately of the Lord's love into this needy man's soul.

If Amy had been able to penetrate the veil between her world and the world of the spirit, she would have been overwhelmed by the many persons and beings participating in this moment of truth. She could feel the spirit world more tangibly than usual, due to the clear undistracted channel she had to have at this moment to contend for Ayre's soul.

For a moment, Ayre felt tears welling up in his eyes, but he made an effort to curtail these, embarrassed to shed them in front of a girl he hardly knew, when he so rarely allowed himself to cry at all.

He straightened up a bit. "I'm sorry to hear about your misfortune," he ventured. "I guess I should be used to this, having lost my mother in earlier years, but this was a tough blow. In part, because I'm now responsible for my younger brothers, which means I will pretty much have to forfeit my own plans and dreams. You've hit me at a low moment."

"But Ayre," Amy continued, "perhaps you could look at those responsibilities as a blessing, an anchor in your life, something real to live for! I know in my case, what pulled me out of my sadness and depression was realizing that I had my three children to care for, and they needed me now more than ever. I couldn't just give up, I had to move on. And so do you. You'll have to move on and move forward." She paused for a moment, as she saw Ayre deep in thought, meditating on her words.

“Have you ever felt like there’s got to be more to life than just the dog-eat-dog, competitive, live-for-yourself trend of the world? I mean, haven’t you felt at times like, when you reach the end of a day, it’s just empty, and you’re empty, and you don’t know what the point of anything is, and that the next day and the next all look the same, like they’re running down a long assembly line of parts at a factory?” Amy felt a passion like she had on few occasions—she felt as if someone else was speaking through her, though she felt the conviction of the words just as strongly in her own heart.

“I know what that feels like, because I used to feel that way everyday. I come from an affluent family. We always had money to buy whatever we needed. But there was no warmth, no love, no kindness, no bond. You have been richly blessed, as your father obviously loved you and your brothers dearly, not to mention all the other people at the funeral whose lives were touched in some way by your father.” At this point, Amy was moved again and the tears poured down her cheeks. The funeral had been so touching, such a simple, sweet lesson on the importance of humble acts of kindness and love, she didn’t think she’d ever forget it.

At this point, Ayre was so moved that tears also freely fell down his cheeks. He tried to suppress them in embarrassment, but they had a will of their own. He was experiencing many strong and new emotions at this time, between the warmth and electricity from his physical contact with Amy, who was still holding his hand, and the loving sympathy pouring out of her eyes and her tears, as well as the heavy charge in the atmosphere around them from the intensity of this moment, and even its significance to the eternal world.

Amy continued. “Finally I met some people who told me about real things, about Someone who walked

the earth and gave His life willingly, so that we could live forever. He freely gave His life up so that my sins could be forgiven, and unworthy though we all are, we can now claim the blood He shed for us to cover our sins. If we receive Him in our hearts, He comes in and becomes our dearest Friend and Guide and Comforter, closer than anyone has ever been in our lives.”

Ayre’s face grew a little skeptical, as he began guessing the direction of this conversation. But Amy continued undeterred.

“When I heard all this, I wasn’t sure it meant anything. I’d never experienced it. It sounded too good to be true. Besides, I knew it would mean a radical change in my life, and I wasn’t sure if I was ready for that. Plus my parents were laying some heavy things on me, with all the expectations they had for me, and none of them had anything to do with religion, or living a life remotely concerned about loving and caring for others.

“But the fellow who was talking to me, who later became my husband, was so understanding and patient. He finally asked me, ‘What have you got to lose? Why not give it a try?’ I knew he was right. I had tried so many other things. Why wouldn’t I be willing to try something that had worked in the lives of so many other people?

“So I repeated a prayer with him, asking Jesus to come into my heart, and that was the beginning of an entirely new life. Things have never been the same since, and have only gotten better from day to day.”

Ayre listened intently and silently pondered as she paused. Finally, he asked, “You told me that you came to speak to me. What brought that about and why did you come?”

Amy took a deep breath, asking the Lord for His guidance and continued help in reaching out to Ayre’s heart. “It might be difficult for you to understand this at this point, but frankly and simply the short answer

is that God told me you had need of me, and that I should come and talk to you. I have determined to give my life to Him, and as such, I receive my instructions from Him. I'm not so experienced at hearing God's voice directly in my heart, but of late, I have found myself in very difficult straits and have had to learn how to do so more and more. But the more I do it, the more I like it—the happier and more secure I am, as I feel God's presence closer in a more tangible way. It's just getting better."

Ayre suddenly started as a realization came to him that had been kept from him up to this point. Details flowed together, as he realized that her name was Amy, she had three children, her husband had died, her parents were affluent. His firm, it now instantly dawned on him, was representing her parents against her—and just as instantly his heart closed up as he cynically began to wonder what her "angle" was.

"I know who you are," he said, letting go of her hands. The contact was broken, and Amy felt an intense battle underway in the spirit. Her heart sank, as she realized Ayre was pulling away and closing himself off to the truth and the Lord's love.

Oh Jesus, she prayed fervently, what have I done? Please dear Lord, help him not to turn away from the truth on my account!

"You are Amy Paines," Ayre continued dryly. "Your parents are suing for custody of your children. I was working full time on your case before my father passed away. What are you doing here? If you're hoping I can help you, you're wasting your time. First of all, I can't help you without being disbarred. Second of all, I am planning on quitting the firm as soon as I can, to find a less competitive firm where I can be more available to fulfill my father's last request that I finish what he began in bringing up my younger brothers. I'm sorry, I'm not able to help you." He finished brusquely, as if preparing for a rapid exit.

"Ayre," Amy said, at a loss as to how to turn this situation around, "I have not come to ask you anything. My children are in the Lord's hands. I know that now. And I know His will will be done in our lives, no matter what the result of this case may be. It was not because of any will or desire or angle of my own that I came to seek you out. I simply came because the Lord told me that I had to find you and speak to you. He told me you were a soul in need of the truth and for some odd reason, the Lord asked me to be the one to share this truth with you. I grant that I'm an unlikely candidate, and I didn't mean to conceal my identity from you, I just didn't think you would be willing to talk to me if I told you who I was right away."

"Well, thanks anyway," Ayre said, pulling out his wallet to pay for the coffee and leave. "I am sorry about the troubles your parents have brought your way. I have not had much peace about this case and as a matter of fact I was a bit troubled by it. But I kept going ahead with it, as it was either that or leave the firm. I had pretty high aspirations for myself and my life and what I wanted to accomplish and achieve. I was set on becoming a partner in the firm and I had the qualifications to do it in pretty short order if I kept up at the pace I was going. So although I had a lot of misgivings about the moral nature of this case, I was being swept forward by my own plans and ambitions. I know my father didn't like it—he never said anything about it, but he had this silent way of letting you know his disapproval. I'm afraid I disappointed him by the choices I made. But all this is history at this point, as now I will be leaving the firm and this case behind, whether I want to or not. It's too bad I didn't leave it for ethical reasons, rather than how I'm leaving now."

"God loves you, Ayre," Amy said, attempting to regain eye contact with Ayre, "and He must have known that you didn't belong in that place. This world and

this life is just a flash in the pan, and when it's over, like your father, what legacy will you leave your family, your loved ones, and those you came into contact with each day? You could be one more successful lawyer who made good money, but is that the kind of legacy you want? I think God has much bigger plans for you. He obviously has a great love for you and is concerned for your happiness, your well-being and your future. If you will just entrust it all to Him, He'll make sure that your life turns out the best possible way it could, better than anything you could have planned. But without him, the best-laid plans can come to naught with just one natural disaster, one accident, one death.

"Don't you see? He is holding out to you an eternal promise, an irrevocable one that will not change no matter who dies, who goes bankrupt, or what war breaks out in the world. You have a chance that many people die without, the chance to connect with the eternal, to be a part of God's spiritual Kingdom by receiving His Son in your heart as your Savior. Won't you give it a try? Won't you give Him the chance to take your life and make of it what He wants it to be?" Amy was exhausted by this point, as she concentrated every fiber of her being and spirit on being a channel of the Lord's love to Ayre, of loving him, persuading him, and wooing him to the Lord as if his very life depended on it, which it did.

Ayre looked at her, and saw an earnestness and a love radiating on her face which he knew was sincere. Her face was so lit up, she was very appealing—her love and conviction had great drawing power. He had never met someone her age who was so sure about where she was going, who she was and what she was about. He sat back down.

Two hours passed, and they were deeply engrossed in conversation when the waiter came by to ask if they were going to order anything else. Ayre and Amy were

now both smiling, and Ayre had just told Amy that he had never felt this way before. This was a heavy experience for him. He had just prayed and asked Jesus into his life, and for forgiveness for his sins, and was overwhelmed by the spiritual connection he had felt immediately.

He and Amy took the waiter's appearance as a natural stopping point, not less for the reason that it was getting late, and they said goodbye, agreeing to meet again. Ayre needed some more time to think about the even newer direction his life was now taking, but he left much more hopeful about the future than he had been in a long time.

The first thing Amy did after leaving Ayre was to run and find a phone to speak with Roger and inform him that the meeting had gone well. She did not go into too many details of the meeting, only to mention that she felt she should see Ayre one more time.

"Amy," Roger said gently, "I understand or at least I *try* to understand the direction the Lord is taking you in, and I certainly don't want to question your judgment, much less your faith. But you do need to return within the next two or three days, as we must get down to serious business about the upcoming hearings, or we may regret it afterwards. I know God's got to do the miracle, but I think He expects us to do our part and prepare." Roger was obviously worried, though he struggled to trust in Amy and the Lord.

"I understand, Roger," Amy said humbly. She realized that she couldn't expect Roger to operate too far outside the boundaries of his personal faith, since he was the one who would have to represent her and he needed her support at this point. "I promise I will come back within the next few days. Thank you for your patience and sympathy. You've been such a wonderful friend to me. I can't imagine how I could have come through this time without you and your help and support!"

“It is you who has been an encouragement to my life, Amy. I feel like a kid, like everything’s starting over. Ethel and I have so many plans, things I never dreamed of. I’m pretty excited about the future at this point! But we’ll wait until this is all over to talk about this. Please come back soon, we need you.”

Amy said a little prayer over the phone for Roger and for the Lord’s perfect timing regarding her return for the hearing. Roger seemed relieved, and Amy thanked the Lord again for raising up such a true-hearted advocate in her defense.

As she thought on this, it suddenly struck her that perhaps the knight in the dream represented Roger, or was his guardian angel or something of that sort. In thinking about it, she realized that Roger had the same quality of humility and simplicity as did the being that had represented her in the dream. She had never been one to dream much or attach much meaning to the dreams she did have, but she couldn’t brush this dream off. It was so awesome and had touched her in such a deep way. She had felt the Lord in such a close and personal way, had felt Him hug and hold her in such a passionate way. She came to the conclusion that on some level it had to be real.

If this were the case, what of the cryptic message that the Lord had given her at the end of the dream, regarding how things would turn out differently than she would have expected, but on the other hand, she would not lose her children? She couldn’t help but wonder what that meant, and whether there was a different way out of this complex situation.

There remained nothing for her to do but wait and see.

CHAPTER 34

Amy had her second visit with Ayre, and it had been a productive one. Ayre had taken much time to think over everything Amy had shared with him, and had decided he needed to follow through with some important changes in his life. He was excited at the prospect of all that was before him and had started reading through the Bible. He had gotten a little lost in the book of Genesis until Amy explained to him that he needed to start in the New Testament, to understand who Jesus was and why He gave His life for mankind. She read a little of it with him and Ayre saw that it was much easier to grasp and apply to his own life.

At the end of their time discussing and reading the Bible, as they prepared to part, Ayre had looked at her forlornly, and asked, “Who will help me to learn about being a true Christian now, if you leave? I’ve been to church with my parents, but nobody ever taught me how to receive the Lord or how to grow in my faith as you have. It won’t be the same without you here. I’ve just met you, but I feel like you’re a closer friend to me than just about everyone I know. We’ve talked about things I never talked about with anyone else before.”

Amy had explained that she would keep in touch with him regularly and had given him her phone

number. A special, unique bond and friendship had been formed between them in the intimate sharing of a life-changing moment, a moment recorded in the annals of Heaven. Amy's efforts to bring Ayre to the Kingdom, and Ayre's decision to accept this free gift caused no small stir amongst the heavenly observers and guardians present, who had been interceding on their behalf.

The saving of a soul from misery and spiritual poverty causes great rejoicing and celebration in the heavenly realms. Power is unleashed on the behalf of the born again and new forces are released in their favor, anointings and gifts are poured out upon them. A flurry of action was undertaken from the moment Ayre uttered the simple words that opened the door to the wonderful and eternal Beyond.

If Amy could have seen the fruits of her labors, her excitement would have been overwhelming! Even so, she felt as though she would burst with the excitement and the liveliness she felt after this experience. She had never felt so deeply how nothing was more important than transmitting God's love and salvation to another. Sharing her love for Jesus with another and seeing that life transformed from an empty, unhappy, meaningless one to a life with a new purpose and direction, gave her more meaning and depth to her faith than ever before. It was a very heady experience, and she knew she was sold on it! She knew what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. Now she just needed to know where and how and with whom the Lord would have her do it. But she wasn't worried about those variables. At this point the giant attempting to steal her children from her had to be overcome first.

CHAPTER 35

Ayre had thought things through very carefully, with a lucid mind, and at last, without a pounding headache. Since his first meeting at the café with Amy, he had no longer had the incapacitating headaches that had practically crippled him before. He felt a peace and clarity that he hadn't felt since his childhood days. The future felt more hopeful, even though no new prospects had presented themselves. He just felt good about the direction his life was taking.

After he had prayed with Amy, it was as though his eyes were opened and he could see her as she truly was. It was a flash of a moment, but he could see her courage, purity, and love, and he knew where it came from. In the same flash, he saw the kind of forces that were opposing her, in whom there was no purity, love, or unselfishness. Her parents, his law firm, and the media that had hounded her community, were all motivated purely by greed and selfishness and pride. Why hadn't he been able to understand this before? It had been so clear and obvious to his father, but he had been blinded to it. He felt the weight of self-accusation and condemnation settling upon him again as he realized how far he had compromised his convictions for his own gain and comfort, to the point of nearly destroying Amy and her children's lives. He

had been so desperately wrong. He had been part of a scheme to fight people of faith. He knew they were not perfect people, but he had seen in Amy and Garth alike a sincerity and deeply held beliefs.

He agonized over the weight of his wrongdoing for a few days after Amy departed, not knowing how to alleviate it. He was sure he could never be forgiven for having been a part of all this, and he felt like giving up on his newfound faith, not because he didn't believe in it, but because he felt he just wasn't up to snuff, not good enough. Finally, he broke down and phoned Amy and poured out his dilemma to her on the phone.

She had been so sweet and understanding, and had pointed him to the story of the apostle Paul in the Bible, telling Ayre how Paul had actively and purposefully persecuted the Early Church, and yet had found a place of forgiveness and service therein after he gave his life to Christ. Ayre was relieved after speaking with Amy and looked up the story of Paul in the Bible.

Yet, after reading it, he was still haunted by the feeling that he was to make amends for his wrongs and all the work he had done to build up the case against Amy and her children. Paul had not only repented of his persecution of the Christians, but he had become one of the greatest advocates ever of the cause. He had not simply said he was sorry and turned away from those he had hurt, but he had made a complete turnaround in his life, and gone in the opposite direction, spreading the truth, love, and hope that had been freely shared with him, with others too.

Ayre did not know what was required of him at this point, but he knew there was something. He finally realized that he could not analyze this in his own mind, and bowed his head in one of his first prayers by himself, and asked the Lord what he should do.

As soon as these words were uttered, power was unleashed from Heaven to change the course

of events from the direction they had been moving. Unbeknownst to himself, Ayre was now ready to become a key chess piece in the Lord's unfolding plan regarding the fate of Amy and her children.

As he opened his eyes, he felt alone with his thoughts. But had he been able to see with eyes of the spirit, he would have seen many a man around him, ready to help him wage and do battle on Amy's behalf. He was being entrusted with a precious mission on behalf of God's servants, and though it would require effort and conviction and a do-or-die spirit on his behalf, he also stood to gain much from it.

An idea quickly formed in his mind of a way out. He had a hard time believing that Blanche or Amy's parents would go for it, but it was worth a try. He hadn't yet announced that he was quitting, as he was still on bereavement leave, so the attempt could still be made.

He called in at work and announced that he was planning on returning to his office the next day. The secretary called him back shortly, with Blanche on the line, expressing his support of Ayre's decision, telling him that there's nothing like work to help you get over a bad turn in life.

Ayre felt a little disgusted when he hung up. "Of course he wants me back at work. They've probably all had to work double time to keep up with everything they had me running around doing." After having worked with the firm for a few years, Ayre couldn't say there was any particular bond of closeness between him and any of the employees, except perhaps for dear Mrs. Andrews, who had such a motherly touch to her. She had even come to his father's funeral, full of her sympathetic good wishes. Now that he had found the answers to his own life, he realized that Mrs. Andrews was probably a woman of faith and that that was what made her different from others. Next time he saw her, he'd make sure to ask her.

So it was that the next day Ayre arrived at work at the customarily early hour, though today he did it more on account of not wanting to raise suspicions of his intention to soon leave the firm. He wanted to sit on that for now until he had at least tried to do what he could for Amy. He would have to conduct himself very carefully if he wanted to, by some miracle, bring this about without getting himself disbarred in the process. He knew that was a risk he had to take, but he felt good about it. He was not going to be a lawyer at the expense of Amy and her children. If his plan failed, he would go down with Amy, but at least he would know he had, for once, done the right thing.

He came in wearing a sharp suit, well groomed, showing that he meant business and would be on top of things today. Mrs. Andrews greeted him kindly, and he stopped and gave her a kiss on the cheek, thanking her for attending the funeral and for her support. She smiled happily back.

“Mrs. Andrews, I’ve been meaning to ask you something personal. I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve always admired how you never seem to be under a cloud and are always so cheerful and helpful. With my father’s passing, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and am making some important changes in my life. It suddenly occurred to me that perhaps this is the source of your goodness. Do you believe in God?”

This was a long piece of conversation for Ayre, who otherwise rarely shared his thoughts with others. The gesture was not lost on Mrs. Andrews.

“Thank you for those kind words,” she replied. “I don’t often hear things like that, and it certainly is a boost. Yes, of course, I believe in God. I read my Bible and I know my Savior. I met Jesus when I was a teenager many many years ago. Life hasn’t always been easy, but He’s always been there for me and my family.” Mrs. Andrews smiled kindly at Ayre.

“Thank you, Mrs. Andrews. You don’t know

how much it means to me to know this. I guess I’m testing new ideas and concepts, and I’m starting to understand a lot of things I never even took the time to think about before.” Ayre patted her shoulder and moved on towards his office.

He was taken aback by the sight that awaited him! There were mounds of files all over his desk, the chair, the floor, and under the window. It seemed that Blanche and partners hadn’t even attempted to keep up with the flow of things, but had just dumped them on his desk to catch up on when he got back.

Why am I surprised? Ayre thought to himself. *This is just another confirmation of how heartless these people are.*

Ayre realized how naïve he had been to think that they would have taken care of all these things in his absence. They hadn’t even attempted to move forward with the Johnston case. They had simply requested and obtained the necessary reprieve until he returned. Blanche had no intention of doing any more work than he absolutely had to. At least this worked to Ayre’s advantage, as otherwise the case might have proceeded to the point of no return.

Ayre sat down and began sorting through the endless piles of work saved up for him. He would have to work day and night for a week or two to catch up with all this. He sighed as he thought about it. If he had just quit, he would have been spared all this, but he knew he had done the right thing in coming back for Amy’s sake. So he dug in and worked steadily through the piles.

To his surprise, he was able to knock things off a lot faster than he would have normally expected, and the work went very well and steadily throughout the morning. He actually felt happier doing it than he ever remembered feeling during his years at the firm. It was then that he realized that he had received a new lease on life and things would never be the same again.

Now, he must do things honorably, and so he would apply himself to doing a good job for as long as he needed to continue in the firm. He obviously wouldn't even be able to look for another job meanwhile, as he would be too busy for the next while just catching up and working on the Johnston case.

Close to noon a buzzer sounded, which startled Ayre out of a concentrated rush on his part to work his way through his backlog.

"Good to have you back," the familiar voice sounded. "How 'bout we get together after lunch to discuss the Johnston case. I'd invite you to lunch, but my guess is you're too busy for lunch today." Blanche practically snorted at that point, and Ayre wondered how he could have worked with such a man for the amount of time he did. Could he have been blind to not see that this man and his partners had no integrity whatsoever? Now it was so painfully obvious, that it was hard to imagine working under this man for any length of time. But he would have to be careful and submissive and bide his time or all could be lost.

"I'll be there," Ayre said in a crisp, business-like voice, and continued on with his work. Of course Blanche was right, he didn't have time for lunch. He was used to this anyway, as during his time at the firm he had rarely had time for lunch or coffee or anything else for that matter—much less a life. He was starting to realize how just like Amy had said, he had been looking at it as a burden and a pitfall that he was having to leave the firm, when he was being set free and given a chance to do something worthwhile with his life, maybe something he even liked doing, rather than making money for a bunch of rich lawyers, with the hope of one day being one of them.

At the appointed time, Ayre rose to go to Blanche's office with the Johnston case files in hand. He also had his steno pad with copious notes he had made of his proposal for Blanche. He knew he was playing a wild

card here, but after thinking and praying and seeking the best solution, he knew this was the only mutually beneficial way out for Amy and her children. If this didn't work, he would have to quit so that he would not be obligated to represent her parents against her. Before entering Blanche's office, he paused a moment for prayer.

Dear Lord, You know I don't know much about this new faith I have undertaken. I don't know very well how to do things, even how to do what I know is the right thing in this case. One thing I do know for sure is that I must do everything in my power to help Amy. This is a last-ditch attempt and it's hard to imagine it can work, but if You can make it work for Amy, please do it, Lord.

It was definitely going to take a miracle. And Ayre was the vehicle through which the miracle would have to occur. The spirit helpers surrounding Ayre rejoiced for his courageous stance and his decision to risk his career for another. Though Ayre felt young and untried in his faith, God was with him, nudging him along and speaking in a still small voice in his heart and mind.

Blanche's secretary showed Ayre in, and he braced himself for the confrontation. As he looked at Blanche, the man he had been in fear and awe of, to whom he had willingly submitted himself for the past several years of his life, he couldn't help but stare for a moment. For now he could see Blanche through different eyes, and he saw a weak, pudgy, self-indulgent man who had been seriously weakened by his own self-serving nature. But then, looking deeper still, he saw in him someone who had once been a young ambitious lawyer, like himself, who had fought and sweat his blood and tears to attain to partnership in the firm. And having attained it, had begun a life of compromise and self-service until he had reached the point he was at where not much mattered anymore.

Ayre could see the sadness, loneliness, and emptiness that filled this man, and an overwhelming feeling of how it felt to be Blanche swept through him. It was an odd experience for Ayre, who had never had much imagination or allowed himself to get very close to other people. He could feel Blanche's fear of growing old and dying, of being abandoned by those he loved, of losing everything he owned.

It was a bit of a shock for Ayre, as he could see more clearly how vain all that he had previously sought for was. He could see and feel the life that Blanche, in the position he had once sought, now had to live, and the price he had paid for what he had attained. It had never been so clear to Ayre before where the road he had been walking down would have taken him.

Dear God, he silently prayed, *may I never walk down that road again*. He was suddenly beginning to grasp that there was a whole different dimension to life than he had previously been aware of. He was starting to understand that his entire way of thinking and evaluating situations and people had been faulty because it missed that important dimension.

After trivialities were dispensed with, Blanche asked for a rundown on the Johnston case. Ayre pulled out his steno pad and dove in, not daring to look up and face Blanche's look of shock and surprise.

"I have given this case a lot of time and thought. I took the liberty of doing some research to see what possibilities we have of winning this case. In spite of all our efforts, I have to be frank and tell you that our chances are in fact rather slim."

At this point, Ayre pulled out a computer printout with a lengthy outline of jurisprudence in cases of child custody involving religion. He had mounted a good case, and took time to carefully go over each judgment, and why the case turned out as it did. Each one upon the other built a strong case supporting Ayre's statement that there was a very real chance of losing.

Blanche listened for a while, puffing on his cigarette, seemingly amused by Ayre's display of passion. He finally interrupted, "Son, don't you think we know that we could lose this case? We're not concerned about that. As you well know, the Johnstons are loaded and have money to burn. So why not let them burn it here? Meanwhile, maybe we'll win the case and they'll be happy. Or maybe they'll lose, and we'll be happy anyhow. Hell, I get my money and go home a happy boy. That's all I'm concerned about, and all you should be concerned about too."

Blanche leaned back, not expecting a return from Ayre, who had normally been flexible and moldable to Blanche's will and whims.

"That's not very ethical, sir. I just don't feel it's right that we undertake this case, when it's just about manipulating religious bigotry to wrest someone's children away from them. In all conscience, I don't feel comfortable—"

Ayre was cut off by an angry Blanche, who cursed and hurled out epithets, but he quietly waited until the tirade passed.

"Sir, I'm not suggesting we drop the case. I realize it's too late for that. What I am suggesting is that we push the Johnstons in the direction of an out-of-court settlement rather than dragging them into full-blown court hearings to sue for the custody of their grandchildren. I believe I could mediate some terms that both parties might consider agreeing to. You still get your money, the Johnstons will be happy, and we don't have to persecute a poor young widow in the process."

Ayre knew he'd gone a little far in defense of Amy, but he decided to take the risk.

Blanche sat silently for a while, and then dismissed Ayre, telling him that he would consider the proposition, but that meanwhile Ayre was to continue preparing the case for submission to the courts just the same.

Ayre left the room, relieved and tired from the confrontation, but at peace with himself for having taken the plunge. Now the situation was out of his hands.

CHAPTER 36

Ayre had put in a long day at the office and didn't get home until the late hours of the evening. Six hours later he was up again, readying himself for another long, grueling day at the office. He knew this would be his fare until he left, so he had resigned himself to it. *Oddly enough*, he thought to himself, *this used to be my regular routine and I don't ever remember minding it, but now I feel totally stifled by it. I really have gone through a life-change!*

He was starting to notice how differently he felt about things and how he was able to look at things through different eyes. Although it was all new and novel and he didn't have anyone to share it with, he was finding the change invigorating. His days had a new dimension and challenge to them. It was like he'd been colorblind his whole life and was only now discovering all the rich colors and blends. He knew he'd never go back to what he had been.

Before leaving, he took a half hour to read his Bible, as he had promised Amy he would, and asked for the Lord's blessing on the day. Prayer was coming easier to him, particularly since his father had prayed regularly and often all his life. Though he had closed himself off to it at the time, suddenly it was coming back and it made it easier for him to speak to the Lord

on close personal terms. Only now was he beginning to understand all that his father had left him. He was anxious to get this business over with so he could move back with his brothers and take on his responsibilities. Bill's wife had been so kind as to stand in that gap until he could return, but he knew he couldn't impose on their hospitality for too long.

He looked forward to one day having close friends as his father did, people who shared his faith and outlook on life. He was starting to grasp the treasures his father had had in his simple life because of the love he invested in people. Ayre didn't feel he had that closeness with anyone in this world, except perhaps with Amy, who he was building a different kind of relationship with than he had before. With Amy, he could be himself and share his inner thoughts and anxieties, and he knew she understood. He would call her once the firm had settled on its strategy. For now, he didn't feel it would be wise.

As he arrived at the office, everything looked the same as every day, with no variation. He was usually one of the first ones to arrive there, as he needed that jump on the day to keep up. Today would be no exception, and it certainly wasn't the time for it, since he had a backlog such as he'd never had before in the firm. He hadn't taken vacations or sick leave at all during his first few years, so this had never happened before.

As he worked his way along, the morning passed relatively quietly with few interruptions or distractions—for which he was happy. At noon Blanche called him into his office. Ayre braced himself, assuming they would discuss the final decision on the Johnston case. His heart beat wildly and he realized how much this mattered to him.

The secretary showed him in, where a slightly heavy, white-haired man with an air of great self-confidence and aplomb sat with Blanche. Ayre was sure

he had never met him before, and sighed, realizing that this had nothing to do with the Johnston case.

"Come over here, Ayre," Blanche said in a deferential voice, obviously put on for the sake of the gentleman, "I want to introduce you to an old friend of mine. I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for him."

Introductions were made, and Ayre was informed that this was a senator, a very close friend of Blanche's. After the usual niceties were dispensed with, Blanche explained that Senator Burke was looking for a brilliant young lawyer to join his team as his legal aide. He had recently lost one, who had gotten married and dropped out of the profession, and now he had a sore need.

"I wouldn't normally ask for one of Blanche's associates," the senator explained, "because I know he needs every one of them, but I'm plain desperate and I know he's got the best. He told me about you, and you sounded like you were cut from the right kind of stone for me." The senator leaned back in his chair, with a relaxed look on his face, though his eyes were eagerly studying Ayre.

Ayre felt a little uneasy, but then, perhaps this was his opportunity to leave the firm without losing his career at the same time. He promised to think the offer over carefully, and Blanche reassured him he should feel free to do so, as though the firm would hurt with his leaving, he owed the senator one.

Ayre left, not knowing what he should do. The offer was good, the pay would be great, the exposure good, and the career opportunities wonderful. Why shouldn't he take the plunge? As he walked down the hall, Blanche came rushing out of his office and told him to come back in the afternoon so they could discuss their strategy on the Johnston case. Blanche was in a good mood, and obviously had had some artificial stimulation. *All the better*, Ayre thought. *All the better.*

By mid-afternoon, Ayre had made a significant dent on his paperwork. Though he felt a little nervous about what the afternoon would hold, he was relieved that the Johnston case would be worked out before his hand would be forced on the senator's offer. He didn't want to leave the firm until a resolution had been made on Amy's situation.

The secretary saw him into Blanche's office yet another time, and this time Ayre was surprised to see the Johnstons seated. This was entirely unexpected, as he had assumed he and Blanche would reach some sort of agreement before contacting the Johnstons again. Obviously, Blanche was set on doing things his way and it didn't matter what Ayre had to say. It was a disheartening moment, and Ayre felt as never before that he did not want to feel shackled to corrupt businessmen any longer. His life had to rise above money-making endeavors.

He attempted to regain his composure, and greeted the Johnstons as though he had known they were coming and expected to find them in the office. They spoke with him a bit, but as usual directed the entire course of their conversation to Blanche, though in actuality the precious little Blanche knew was only what Ayre had outlined for him.

"Let's cut to the chase here, and talk about what we're all here to talk about," Amy's father growled.

Ayre studied both Amy's father and mother as closely as he could without appearing to stare, seeing them with a different interest now that he knew Amy in such a personal way. *Here are the people who are willing to hurt and harm their own daughter and grandchildren, simply out of prejudice and spite. Obviously they have no faith or Christian love in their hearts, and they're determined to see that their daughter and her kids don't have any either.*

Ayre couldn't help but feel disgust for the whole ordeal, and wondered what could have happened in

their lives to make them this way. As he looked around the circle of Amy's parents and Blanche, he could only thank God for his good fortune in being spared such a life. He certainly had been blessed.

CHAPTER 37

It was lunchtime, and Roger and Ethel were taking a break. Amy was due in less than an hour, but other than that, they would be entirely alone. Roger held Ethel and sat her on his lap. She snuggled up against him and they kissed and caressed for a while.

Ethel decided to speak with Roger. She chose her words carefully, as she still felt a little unsure of herself at times and didn't know how to best present things.

"I've been thinking a lot lately, Roger," she said softly.

Roger looked lovingly into her shy, innocent eyes, drawn to her as much, if not more so, as on the night of their first encounter.

"You know," Ethel continued, "if it hadn't been for the Lord, you and I would never have met and would never have found what we've found. I know it's such a special blessing—I mean, to find someone who loves me just the way I am, and accepts and understands me. Amy's been such a help in my life, too, teaching me how to pray and love the Lord and read His Words. I can hardly relate to what my life was; it's changed so much now!

"But at times I feel a little frustrated and empty ... like I'm supposed to be doing something more. I've

prayed about it and I want to talk to Amy about it, too, but I've just got the feeling that I've received so much, it's time to give back. I feel a little uneasy, like I've got so much now, it would be wrong of me to forget where I came from and who I was not too long ago. I mean, if I forget that, then I'll lose touch with who I was and maybe I'm supposed to remember that for a reason." She paused, a little flustered at her clumsiness in expressing herself.

"You're doing great." Roger patted her, seeming as always to know what she was feeling and when she needed reassurance.

"Well," Ethel continued, "what I mean is, maybe the Lord allowed me to have the kind of childhood I had because it gives me a different dimension on people and what they go through, their hurts and pains that nobody seems to understand. It's kind of like when we'd see some of the social workers, some of them were these prissy ladies who didn't have an inkling of what it was like to be in our shoes. They just couldn't relate to us. Do you know what I mean?"

"Hey, don't forget I've been down that same road," Roger replied with a smile. "You're singing to the choir."

Ethel blushed, concerned she'd said the wrong thing or hurt Roger. He saw her closing up and squeezed her hand in encouragement. She mustered up the courage to continue.

"Well, what I'm trying to say is that I feel like maybe the Lord wants me ... or us ... to do something more for others, to put some skin on our faith and do things for others."

Roger thought a while, then asked, "Have you thought about what we could do?"

"Well," Ethel replied, "I had a few ideas, but they might sound a bit wild. On the other hand, I've prayed a lot about this, so maybe they're not too wild. One idea I had was that we could start up a youth center on the

slum side of town, where we could try to bring in young people that are like we used to be, and try to give them a hand and make a difference in their lives.

"Or, we could pray about doing some pro-bono legal work for needy situations. Of course, I know you probably do more of that than you can handle from what I see working here, so that might not be a good idea. We could also help out at homeless shelters, or offer pro-bono legal advice to needy families. I just feel like I'm supposed to be doing something in return for all I've received. I get this strong feeling that this isn't supposed to be the end of the road, but only the beginning of a different sort of life. Do you know what I mean?"

Roger nodded in assent. He knew exactly what she meant. For a long time after the Lord changed his life, he had promised himself that once he was set up, it would be time to invest more of his time to giving of what he had received. But then he got so busy, and though it was true that he had worked at giving people a hand, free legal help and advice where needed, he had planned to do much more. Now the Lord had brought Ethel along, and he had found a rare treasure he had never expected to find in this life. Everyday he thanked God for this newfound love. But Ethel was right: This time he couldn't just be a receiver of God's blessings. He had to turn around and give to others as he had received himself. He didn't want to miss the boat this time.

"You're right. I'm ashamed of myself for how I let years go by after my promise to God that I would devote my time to helping others. I've done it to some degree, but not to the degree that I'd intended. I got busy and caught up with everyday affairs and one emergency after another, and before I knew it, the years were slipping past. Then Amy showed up here one day, and it was as if God was reminding me, 'Here I am, remember Me?' I had gotten so dull and caught

up in life, but I wasn't very satisfied with things either. Amy started to show me why, that I needed to wake up and open my eyes and live as God wanted me to. Then, out of the blue, you become a part of my life, feeling just as I do, and I feel just like you do—so tremendously blessed to find someone who cares for me and accepts me as I am. I know that's a rare gift and I don't want to mess up with that.

“So you're very right in how you've been thinking, and I have no question that God has laid this on your heart. Now we need to pray together, and maybe Amy can also help us to orient ourselves and find a way to do His work, as He would want us to.”

Ethel was so happy with Roger's response. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight until he could hardly breathe. “I knew you'd understand!” she exclaimed happily.

The phone rang and Ethel ran to answer, informing Roger that it was the lawyer handling Amy's parents' case, wanting to speak with Roger. Roger looked up, surprised, and after a pause to collect his thoughts, picked up the phone.

He hung up after about twenty minutes, and Ethel waited expectantly to hear what had happened. At this moment, Amy arrived for her appointment with Roger, and Ethel brought her into the office. Roger began to explain what had transpired.

“I just received a call from Ayre McNeilson, regarding your parents' case. It seems he has presented the idea of an out-of-court settlement, and your parents have indicated that they might be open to that possibility, with some conditions. Now, I know that you might not want to consider that possibility, so I told him I would have to discuss it with you. He was insistent that he felt this was the best way to resolve this situation with your parents. It was curious, though ... it was almost as if he was representing you, instead of them. I don't know what to make of him.” Roger paused.

Amy smiled. She had not told Roger or Ethel of Ayre's conversion, nor would she, as she had promised to keep the nature of their meetings confidential until Ayre no longer worked at the firm. But she knew that if Ayre was pushing for this, it must be that he was convinced this was the best course of action for her.

Roger and Amy discussed over the next hour what the terms of settlement might be, what the possibilities and acceptable boundaries for amendments or adjustments might be, which conditions they could accept immediately, and which they would contest or seek to revise. After an hour, the waters still looked pretty murky.

“I don't know,” Roger said skeptically, scratching his head. “These are pretty steep terms and I don't see how you can meet them without entirely compromising your faith and your freedom. It seems that if you give in too much, your parents will have won and gained what they wanted. I'm just not sure about this.”

“Roger, do you remember the dream I had where Jesus told me that things would not turn out the way I expected them to? Well, I believe this settlement is what the Lord was referring to, in that the case had already been settled in Heaven and the Lord had intervened, but here on earth things would turn out a little differently than how we originally expected. The Lord also told me that He had other plans for my life, so that I can become a full-time witness and missionary for Him, rather than live secluded in a rural community with even less opportunities to serve Him than I have had being in this arena.

“It seems from my dream that Jesus was indicating that I didn't need to make the outcome of this case dependent on whether or not I could remain within the Brethren community. It seems my life there was a stage, but the Lord is leading me to serve Him in a much deeper, more committed way.

“I didn't understand what the Lord was telling

me at the time, I only knew that it would be revealed to me when I needed it. Well, now must be the time, because suddenly I understand that I can be true to my principles and my faith and accept this situation as a gift from the Lord to lead me to greater service to Him, even if I can't return to my life with the Brethren. We need to pray and receive God's guidance as to how far we can push the revision of some of these other points and still have my parents accept them, while leaving me with the most possible freedom to serve the Lord with my children, even if not in the same way that I used to."

Roger was once again astonished by Amy's faith and her unwavering trust in God to bring each situation through to a victorious end. Amy left a short while later, saying she needed some time to pray and consider this further before they presented their counter-proposal.

CHAPTER 38

Ayre walked back into Blanche's office, and it seemed as if he was experiencing a *déjà vu*, as once again, unbeknownst to him, Blanche had invited the Johnstons there. At this point, Ayre had become numb to the situation, and just wanted to end his obligation to Amy so that he could leave the firm. He was eager to move back in with his brothers and become a part of their lives again, as now that he had decided to give this his best shot, he was anxious and excited about starting. He already had ideas of things he could do with his brothers, how he could try to help direct them and be the big brother to them that he hadn't been in the past nearly ten years.

Focusing back on the present, they once again went through the familiar niceties. But this time Mr. Johnston addressed Ayre directly.

"Well, son," he said between puffs on his smelly cigar, "Blanche tells me you have been discussing settlement options with my daughter's lawyer, and that the prospects are looking good. Good work. I hadn't even considered that as a possibility, knowing how headstrong she is, so I'm impressed with your initiative and ability to knock some sense into her mind."

"Thank you, sir," Ayre said politely, smiling within, as he knew that the idea of a settlement had been an

answer to prayer, and not some scheme he had cooked up on his own.

Blanche intervened at this point. “There’s no question that there will be particulars to sort out and agree on, but if you agree, I will contact the appropriate parties tomorrow to officially state our intention to settle out of court. That will get the courts off our back to expedite this case, and we can get on with ironing out the particulars of the settlement over the next few weeks. What do you think?”

His question, of course, was pointed at Mr. Johnston, as Blanche didn’t give Ayre much leeway in public, even though he expected him to do all the work and have most of the ideas. He kept his associate underlings behind the scenes, so he would continue to get the credit for the wins. If things went ugly, he could always blame them. That was the dog-eat-dog world of law, and a reality Ayre had accepted far too long, and was now again reminded of as a reason he was so eager to leave this place.

Mr. Johnston nodded his head in assent, and after another round of discussion he and his ever-silent-in-the-office wife departed. The scheme was in motion, and things were going forward more smoothly than Ayre had hoped for. He was relieved. In a few weeks, if all went according to plan with the mediation, he would be able to announce his departure from the firm, and then possibly consider the senator’s offer.

Ayre left work earlier than usual, not so worried anymore about trying to get on top of everything. Soon he’d be free. He went straight to bed, as the strain and long hours of the past week were starting to take their toll on him. He drifted into a deep sleep.

He had a strange dream that woke him in a sweat. He couldn’t recall it, but he remembered feeling trapped, like a rabbit being pursued by a pack of hounds. His heart beat quickly. He said a prayer, and went back to sleep. The dream repeated itself, but

the second time when he woke up again in a sweat, he could recall the dream very vividly. He sat and thought about it for a while, trying to understand what it meant. There was no doubt that it was meant to have an impact on him, and that it did, but what did it mean?

He went over the details of the dream in his mind, puzzling over the meaning. In the dream, he looked like a puppet on a string, with wooden limbs and painted features, though it was definitely himself. His arms and legs flailed in jerky, spastic motions, while a hearty laugh boomed over him, obviously coming from the puppeteer who held the strings to him. It was a peculiar feeling, as no matter where he wanted to go or what he wanted to do, the puppeteer would yank on the strings, without any attempts to make the movements coordinate, and Ayre would be flailing in the air or hitting the ground. He was getting upset and frustrated over his lack of autonomy and looked up at the strings to see how he could detach himself, and if there was any way he could be freed from the cruel control of the puppeteer.

As he looked up, he was startled to see the face of the puppeteer, and it was so odd, he couldn’t stop looking at it. First it looked like his boss, Blanche, then it twisted into Mr. Johnston’s face, and finally it twisted again and became someone else’s face. As Ayre thought about whose face it was, it suddenly dawned on him that it was the face of Blanche’s friend, the senator. When the senator’s face manifested itself, the laugh was more cruel and he pulled much harder on the strings than the other two men before him had. It was clear that he was in full control of the strings and he intended to pull them however he wanted to. Ayre felt helpless in his grasp.

At that point in the dream, Ayre had woken up, with the tangible feeling of impotency as he found himself in another’s control, not knowing how to

detach himself. The dream seemed to be a warning against any involvement with the senator, though Ayre wasn't sure, as he had never put much stock in dreams. Of course, he had never had a dream like this one before either.

If there was any significance to the dream, it had come at an opportune moment, as he was going to have to announce his decision as to whether he would go to work for the senator. Although it was obviously a great "career" opportunity, he felt pretty hesitant about it after the dream. Every time he tried to think about it and weigh out the pros and cons, he was left with the sensation of the dream. Something just wasn't right about the whole deal.

After praying and giving it a lot of thought, he finally felt that he would have to scrap the offer, since his conscience was no longer at peace with it. He had tasted a little bit of freedom through all the changes that had begun in his life and decided he didn't want to take a step that would pull him back.

CHAPTER 39

It had taken a few weeks, but at last the terms of the settlement were completed and both parties agreed to the resolution. Amy would leave the Brethren community, but she would live on her own. Her parents would provide her with the means to start a new, more normal life elsewhere. Amy had not wanted to agree to this point, as she didn't want to be beholden to them, but that was one of the areas Roger had persuaded her to compromise in so that an agreement could be reached.

But at no point did the terms require that she or her children stay in the country—probably because that possibility had never even crossed Amy's parents' mind. Amy kept a secret smile in her heart at this, for although she was moving out of the community, which the Lord had indicated was His will for her at this time, the terms did not in any way limit her from associating with other believers, doing mission work at home or abroad, or her right to raise her children.

Her parents had been adamant that a provision regarding the schooling of the children in a public or private institution be included in the settlement, and that had been one of the bigger bones of contention in the mediation process. But Amy had stood her ground and claimed her rights as a parent regarding

that point, and would not bend in the slightest, even at the risk of scuttling the settlement altogether. Ayre managed to persuade her parents, and after much argument they had relented, and the clause had been dropped.

Amy had greatly admired Ayre during these proceedings, for he had practically acted as her representative on several points, coaxing the mediations along, and placating the Johnstons and his own boss at every turn. God had truly anointed him for this task, and Amy could see how the Lord had brought him to the Kingdom for such a time and a calling. He was so persuasive, yet reassuring. It was awesome to see all that the Lord was doing in his life. As she watched him, she smiled, amused at how *he* had turned out to be the knight in her dream! She had to admit to herself, though she would never say so to anyone else, that she liked him on a personal level too.

Finally the mediation was settled, an agreement was reached, and Amy felt she had a new lease on life. It had all been an extraordinary experience, and nothing had turned out as she had expected or planned. She felt some consternation about her future, and where the Lord would lead her now, but knew she had to go one step at a time until He opened the doors in His new place of service for her. Meanwhile, she would be very busy, for besides her children, she had a small following of her own to take care of with the different ones she had been witnessing to and leading to the Lord throughout the court case.

CHAPTER 40

Roger was curious to meet the new clients awaiting him. The success in Amy's case had brought some even more radical Christians to his doorstep, and he didn't know what to make of them. As he had listened to them on the phone, they had reminded him a bit of Amy, but the more he heard, he realized there were some core differences. He had agreed to meet with them, and was curious to see what they would be like.

As Ethel ushered them in, Roger rose to greet them. He couldn't help but see the warmth and almost tangible aura of love that surrounded them—similar to Amy's, but even stronger and more defined. Roger settled in for an interesting afternoon.

His clients, David and Luz Carings, had traveled the globe leading people to the Lord, along with their nine children. Roger felt he had to keep a grip on his bottom jaw so it wouldn't flap open. How had they managed to do such a feat, while homeschooling their children, learning foreign languages, and leading others to the Lord in so many places? Roger had taken what seemed like a lifetime to lead one person—Ethel—to the Lord. He was awestruck at the courage and humility of this couple, who seemed to exist in an entirely different realm from his own.

Luz was petite and cute, with her Latin, lively eyes and black hair which contrasted her white skin. She seemed to exude life and excitement and spark. He looked at her slim figure when he could do so without being noticed and couldn't imagine how such a small woman had carried nine children and still looked like a young person. She smiled and had a ringing laugh as they spoke and got to know each other. She looked deep in his eyes as though she could find him attractive. He looked over to the husband of such a woman, wondering how he felt with Luz's free nature, and saw that David was perfectly relaxed, with a deep look in his own eyes that reminded Roger of Amy. Roger relaxed and began to enjoy the pleasantness of the meeting.

Finally, after hearing many stories of their exploits in different countries in Eastern Europe and India and South America, he couldn't contain himself any longer and had to ask, "Why would people like yourselves be needing a lawyer?"

David thought for a while, organizing his thoughts and started. "We have found it of utmost importance that we have lawyers represent us who have gotten to know us and are familiar with our beliefs and lifestyle, so that if we do have any difficulties, they will be able to enter in with an understanding of us and the ways in which the Lord has led us.

"Our founder, David Berg, was an iconoclast. He preached against the evils of modern society and the move of mankind away from God and launched a challenge to many youths who were wandering in search of answers. He challenged them to give their lives to God and together we set out to live the way the early disciples did in the Bible, without compromising with the System, breaking away from our past lives and living communally as one family of God, serving God and winning as many souls to Heaven as we could. We were quite radical in our approach during our early days, and soon were in the news.

"Then, David received the call from God that we should leave America and go into all the world to reach the nations. Since that time, our members have traveled to over 100 countries, distributing our Gospel missives in the form of distinctive posters and tracts and other literature and music.

"Of course, our separation from the System, our communal lifestyle, our homeschooling, and our lives of faith as full-time missionaries, began to elicit some critical howls from jealous churches, or parents who were angry at the decisions their adult children had made. Some were determined to bring down our small movement. Anti-cult groups were formed. In fact, the very first anti-cult organization was formed to combat our group. This opposition only made David Berg more tenacious in his conviction that if God were worth serving, He was to be served with all our lives and hearts and spirits.

"Later on, much more controversy developed as he presented that contrary to what the churches have been teaching for centuries, God never intended sexuality to be viewed as something negative or inherently evil. In fact, he asserted that God created sexuality and intended for people to enjoy it, as long as it was performed by adults of legal age, with mutual consent, and innocent parties were not harmed thereby. This move towards sexual liberation elicited much reaction from the press, particularly when our founder received a revelation that Christ was calling our women to be 'fishers of men'—to be willing to give of themselves, even sexually if necessary, to lonely men in need of love and affection.

"Needless to say, many reacted strongly to this ministry, but as with all the revelations Father David received, this one also reaped much fruit in the lives of many, as many souls were won to Jesus who would never have heard the Gospel preached, who would never have walked through the door of a church.

“Father David, as I said in the beginning, was an iconoclast and dared to be different, dared to take a stance in whatever direction God led him. We came to affectionately know him as ‘Dad,’ and I can personally attest to the huge influence he has had on my life.” At this point, David paused, and pulled out a photo of the very man, and Roger looked at it intently, drinking in the loving, soft eyes.

Luz continued, and between her accent and smiles, she immediately had all of Roger’s attention. “It is often very difficult for religious people to understand our views on sexuality, as they cannot help but equate sex with sin, particularly sex outside of marriage. But Dad taught us that even when married we could open our relationship to others and share God’s love with others. Of course, we have made our share of mistakes in pioneering such a new expression of God’s love, but we consider that He has entrusted us with this precious freedom, which is a taste of Heaven and can be used to heal and help others.” Luz smiled winningly at Roger, and he couldn’t help but smile back.

Roger cleared his throat and asked, “What brought you to my doorstep? As you can see, I’m not your top-flight, affluent cutthroat lawyer. I run a modest firm, with just myself and my secretary, who is also my fiancé. I don’t have a lot of clout. With the kind of high profile situations you’re talking about, you might need better representation.”

“But no,” Luz exclaimed emphatically, “we are sure you are the right one. We read about the case you helped to mediate with that woman from the Brethren church, and we just knew you were the right one. We even prayed and God gave us a prophecy for you!” Luz pulled two sheets of paper out of her purse.

“A prophecy?” asked Roger, not understanding much about that side of things. Amy had mentioned to him on several occasions about how the Lord spoke

to her, but she hadn’t ever labeled it as a “prophecy,” so he hadn’t thought about it in such terms.

Luz handed him the paper, explaining how prophecy worked and how important it was to disciples in her group. Roger was not a little amazed at the prophecy, as it outlined many details of his life and heart and was filled with words of encouragement for him in his fight of helping persecuted individuals. Roger felt somewhat emotional, though he was not used to displaying his emotions openly and so said nothing, other than thanking them sincerely.

David and Luz could see by the discernment the Lord had given them that the prophecies had touched him profoundly. They were so thankful that they had followed the instructions the Lord had given them in prophecy regarding this special man.

“It would be an honor, should you ever need my services, to represent you,” Roger said.

David left him a large pile of reading material regarding past court cases, and detailed explanations of many of the group’s doctrines. Before leaving, Luz asked if they could say a prayer, and once again Roger found himself bowing his head and participating in prayer. It felt good. He felt good about this meeting and knew he was doing the right thing.

To his surprise, after the prayer as they took leave of each other, Luz threw her little arms around him and stretched up on her tiptoes to give him a kiss on the cheek. That felt good too. He rarely received this kind of affection from anyone but Ethel. David also came round and gave him a hug. *No wonder they were known as the Family of Love*, Roger thought to himself.

EPILOGUE

Many months had come and gone since first Amy and then David and Luz had become such an important part of not only Roger and Ethel's lives, but Ayre's as well, as they were all magnetically drawn together.

Roger and Ethel joined a Bible study group David and Luz hosted.

Amy had been a little reluctant to meet with David and Luz at first, as they were different from the conservative group she had been involved with before. But as she saw Roger and Ethel grow in enthusiasm and become founded more strongly in their faith with each passing week, she knew it was time to open her heart and life to something different. So it was that Roger and Ethel arranged for her to meet David and Luz and their community of missionaries. This encounter was eye-opening for Amy, as it cast Christianity in a different light than she had experienced before.

Although the Brethren did witness and live in exclusive communities, they did not take it so far as to live as the early disciples had. It thrilled Amy to see people living and working together in harmony and love, and most of all, witnessing all the time. David and Luz were very busy people, working with several others in their community and outside their community to

teach and train others in the faith. Amy was so enthused to see how many lives they touched, how many were growing and changing through studying the life-giving Words. It was precisely what she had so wanted to do since she had experienced her first taste of witnessing after leaving the Brethren's community. It wasn't long before she found herself working side by side with David and Luz, though she didn't dare formally move in the community, with all the trouble her parents had already caused.

Ayre, who left the firm the same week the papers and terms of settlement had been signed—now almost two years ago—had since gotten close to Amy, to the point of discussing plans on who would move in with whom.

Amy hadn't known how this could be best accomplished, as she had not forgotten the specific message she had received as to her calling to the poorer mission fields of the world. So far, she had been unable to accomplish this, comply with the terms of the settlement—which included frequent visits to and from her parents—and support her little family. But now, two years into the settlement, she could see God's infinite wisdom in this, as she had learned so much from David and Luz and was very involved in ministering to the many people she and they had met locally. So it had been time well spent, and she had garnered valuable experience for future mission work. But she did not forget that she had been called someday to leave, to serve as a missionary in some other, poorer country.

Ayre, impassioned as always, was set on investing his life, heart, and strength in uniting with Amy and her children. It had been a difficult decision when she expressed her desire to be a full-time overseas missionary like others who had gone on after receiving training in David and Luz's community. Ayre knew he would be taking on a lot, with three small children,

going overseas as a missionary and learning how to become one himself. He was not sure he was prepared for all this.

The two eldest of his younger brothers were old enough now to manage on their own, and the youngest now had a standing invitation to move in with Bill and his wife, and a promising job offer from Bill. So his obligations along those lines had been fulfilled and he had been faithful to his promise to his father.

At this difficult point of decision in his life, Ayre asked David and Luz and the entire community to pray for him and receive words from the Lord indicating what direction he should take. Ayre was earnest and recognized that he was at another crossroads in his life. The prospect seemed an awesome responsibility to Ayre, but his love for Amy had grown to such proportions that he was willing to consider it. He just did not know if God could trust him with all the responsibilities that this would entail. But he was determined to make the right decision.

So it was that in the gathering together of the believers, with one mind, heart, and spirit, that a great outpouring of words of love, encouragement, and faith were received for Ayre, who broke down and wept publicly. At first he was embarrassed, but it felt so good to place his life on God's altar. He felt as though the waters of a thousand clear streams were flowing through him, cleansing him and liberating him with their coolness. He himself began to spontaneously prophesy, with words that flowed through his being and were uttered effortlessly.

Ayre felt the overwhelming presence of his father at that meeting. He was sure that his father was around or participating in this special moment. And then, for a brief moment, he caught a glimpse of his father. He was smiling and nodding his head at Ayre in approval—a man of few words as always, but unmistakably expressive in his kindness.

In that moment Ayre's entire life suddenly made sense, as he saw how all the events therein had transpired to bring him to this moment of truth and decision. So he freely committed his life to the Lord, and to being a missionary with Amy and her children, prepared to face whatever challenges were to come his way. He finally perceived, in this magical moment, that his life had not been the result of haphazard circumstances without rhyme or reason, but that the Lord had brought him through each experience in preparation for this next step—a life of discipleship. It was a realization he would carry with him for many years to come, whenever difficulties arose.

It was some time before Amy and Ayre were able to officially marry and prepare for their departure to India—the field the Lord had indicated He wanted them to move to—as there were several obstacles to be overcome in this most unusual situation. In the meantime, Ayre went to work with Roger at his firm, while he and Amy devoted all the time they could to local mission work and projects, all the while saving for the day when they would be able to leave for a needy third world nation where they would be free to live their faith openly.

To the horror of Amy's parents, after Ayre and Amy had married (a bizarre twist of its own to Amy's parents) they proceeded to produce not one baby but two—twins! This seriously hampered the Johnstons' desire to eventually gain custody of their grandchildren, as neither could imagine the life they led with five small children honing in on their personal pursuits and privacy. After the birth of the twins, Amy's parents became noticeably reticent, putting off the obligatory visits imposed by the settlement, and finding excuses to minimize contact.

Amy was elated, though sad to see her mother withdraw into herself and her father become more distant. But at the same time she saw the miraculous

hand of the Lord in this. She continued to pray for her parents and her brother that they could come to understand His love.

Not long after the birth of the twins, her brother began to visit her and Ayre. Days before they left Chicago, he prayed with them to receive Jesus as his Savior, and was put in contact with David and Luz.

And so it was that Amy and Ayre set off for India with their children, now free, by her parents' consent, from some of the last, more restricting terms of the settlement.

After seeing their son also converted, the Johnstons saw no point in continuing to pursue the issue. Rather they continued their loveless lives, both lonely and empty in their own personal way. Amy's father buried himself in his work and alcohol more than before, and simply refused to speak of or even think on his children. Amy's mother suffered internally, feeling she had allowed herself to be alienated from her grandchildren and children, while already feeling isolated and alone in an empty marriage. Only the reassuring love of her son and daughter, who continued to reach out to her in love, sustained her during her moments of depression.

And so it was that all these circumstances that had seemed to blow as a wind of hapless tidings and of unwanted and unbidden ill to one of God's children, had brought about a greater purpose, each new development being but a note in a synchronized harmony, each new note building on another, to produce, in the end, a new melody, a new symphony never before sung, that carried and would carry many into newness of life, and the knowledge of their Lord, Savior, and eternal and righteous Advocate in the heavens.

ENDNOTES

A Brief History of the Brethren Movement:

A community of Protestant congregations, the Brethren trace their origin to Germany, when in 1708, wishing only to follow the New Testament commandments of Jesus Christ, **Alexander Mack** (1679–1735) formed a new fellowship by baptizing new members without the authorization of the established German churches of that time (the Catholic, Lutheran, and German Reformed churches). Members became known as “Dunkards” or “Dunkers” because of their baptism practices. Between 1715 and 1750, local intolerances and persecutions forced many of the group to move first to other parts of Europe, and then to the United States.

As pacifists, the Brethren were put in a difficult position by the American Revolution. Some of them tended to support Britain, because they were grateful to the crown for the freedoms enjoyed in America. This caused some of their properties to be attacked by the American revolutionary government—events that could very well have influenced their withdrawn character in the century that followed. After the Revolution, the Brethren joined in the general push westward, seeking good soil to establish their farms and build their communities.

Cultural changes in the latter half of the 19th century shattered their unity. A younger and progressive element pressed for new methods and practices such as other churches used. These included Sunday schools, revival services, institutions of higher learning, salaried pastors, and foreign missions. The resulting split in the 1880s created three branches. The conservative wing called itself the Old German Baptist Brethren. The liberal party chose to be called the Brethren Church. The middle-of-the-road majority continued as the German Baptist Brethren, later renamed the Church of the Brethren.

During the 19th century the Brethren uniformly wore the plain style of dress similar to the Amish, with beards and broad-brimmed hats for the men, and aprons and bonnets for the women. This garb now has almost entirely disappeared, except among the Old German Baptist Brethren, and in some parts of eastern Pennsylvania, the Church of the Brethren.

In general, the Brethren churches accept no creed but the New Testament, and stress obedience to Christ and a simple and temperate way of life. Members old enough to confess their faith are baptized by being immersed three times. The love feast (Holy Communion) is observed twice each year and includes feet washing, a fellowship meal, and anointing for physical and spiritual health. All branches of the Brethren, with the exception of the Old German Baptist group, have been active in sponsoring missionaries.

Courtesy of Encyclopedia Britannica. (Note: For more on the Dunkards, see ML#1350, “Faith of Our Fathers” and ML#1351, “My Family Tree”)

Erle Stanley Gardner (1889–1970):

The son of a mining engineer, Gardner traveled extensively with his family throughout childhood. He dropped out of university and settled in California, where he worked as a typist in a law firm. After three years he was admitted to the California bar (1911) and began defending poor Chinese and Mexicans as well as other clients. His interest in the friendless and unjustly accused was lifelong and led to his founding of The Court of Last Resort in the 1940s, an organization dedicated to helping men imprisoned unjustly. While practicing trial law in Ventura, California, he began writing for pulp magazines popular at that time, creating accurate courtroom scenes and brilliant legal maneuvers resembling his own legal tactics. By 1933 his first Perry Mason novel was published. Others followed once he gave up law to pursue his writing. Gardner later supervised the adaptation of the Perry Mason stories for radio and television.

(Courtesy of Encyclopedia Britannica and various on-line resources.)