

Jason once heard adventure described as “one moment of stark terror sandwiched between hours of boredom.” There’d been no shortage of boredom in the two years since he’d left the Family, but adventure had been in short supply. That is, until the morning he was compelled to go after Slater, a street-fighting surfer who needed less than 15 seconds to knock Jason down and almost out in a fight over a wave.

With the help of a beautiful stranger, Jason wins the first round, but as he finds out more about Slater and his associates, it is evident that the stakes will only get higher, and the decisions tougher, as the divinely engineered chain of events thunders toward its climax.



the surfer

the surfer

**AS TOLD BY
ERNEST HEMINGWAY**

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

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SATURDAY: THE FIGHT

Jason straddled his board in the waters off the pier at Huntington Beach and looked out across the Pacific Ocean. The sun was barely up and it was quiet except for the sound of the waves breaking behind him and the occasional screech from a seagull coming in second in a race for a scrap of food.

Jason loved to surf during the early morning hours. The waves on this Saturday morning weren't especially big, but that didn't bother Jason. Guys he knew lived and died for the big waves—the bigger the better. Big waves and as many rides as possible. But Jason was happy just to be in the water, happy to wait for the wave, happy to get a few good rides in. Maybe that came from not growing up a surfer.

Most of the surfers around Huntington Beach were locals who had been body surfing, body boarding, and surfing since they were kids. They'd grown up with it. It was part of living in Southern California. Total California dudes and dudettes, Jason would joke with the ones he knew. They were nice, friendly, fun to be with—some of them anyway—but definitely different from him.

No, he hadn't grown up surfing in California. He hadn't grown up in California, or America. Although he was American, he hadn't set foot in the States

until a month after his eighteenth birthday two years earlier. He'd grown up in Europe, South America, and Asia. But he was surfing in California now and a good wave was coming.

Laying down on his board he paddled toward the incoming swell fast and hard until it rose above him, then turning his board a one-eighty, he paddled frantically until suddenly it caught him and there was no need to paddle. No, you didn't paddle then, not when you were headed toward the beach at breaker speed. This was the best part of surfing, Jason maintained. Whatever happened after that, a wipeout or a great ride, was almost anti-climactic after the initial thrill of catching the wave.

As soon as his feet found the board, Jason knew this ride would be good. He cut up to the top of the wave, and then turned to ride it down, cutting across the water in a race to go as far as he could before the wave crashed on the shore. When it finally did, the board shot out from under him and his feet kept following. He hit the sand in a foot of water just as his board jerked to a stop, coming to the end of the cord connected to his ankle. He sat for a minute and let the water rush by him on its way back to the ocean. This was the life, he thought, at least one of the best parts of it. Surfing seemed to make the job, school, the everyday hassles of life worth it. A little peace on the weekend morning hours, a time to do something fun, something he really enjoyed.

"Hey you! Punk."

The voice, sharp and clear, shattered the morning tranquility like a dropped plate on a marble floor. Jason shielded his eyes from the sun and looked up. Six feet away from him stood a tall muscular man in his middle twenties. He wore wrap-around sunglasses and baggy shorts. He carried a towel over his shoulder and a surfboard under his arm. Jason pulled the cord and his board came toward

him. He rolled onto one knee, picked up his board, and stood up.

"Do you know who I am, punk?"

Jason looked into the eyes of the taller man. They couldn't get much bluer. Blue eyes, dirty blond hair, muscles like a heavyweight fighter, and an attitude like ... what was it the Laker's announcer Chick Hearn said about Rasheed Wallace in the 2000 Los Angeles/Portland Western Conference playoffs? ... "Rasheed Wallace, a very even-tempered guy—always mad."

"I know who you are, Slater."

"Good," said Slater, obviously pleased that his reputation had preceded him. "Then you probably know what I'm going to say. It's simple. When I'm in the water, stay out of my way. I'll only tell you once."

Slater poked Jason in the chest for emphasis, turned, and walked off—saving Jason the trouble of having to think up an answer.

Jason watched as Slater walked a hundred yards up the beach, dropped his towel and sunglasses, and paddled out. Jason adjusted the shoulder of his wet suit as he watched Slater pass up his first wave. Slater never wore a wet suit, no matter how cold the water got. Wet suits were for wimps, was his philosophy.

Slater was fairly well known in the surfing circles up and down the coast of California. He was a passable surfer, but that wasn't what he was known for. A graduate with honors from the University of California at Berkley, he studied for a year and a half at UCLA medical school before being expelled for fighting. Slater had a penchant for fighting and spent a lot of his free time doing it. Because he was a brilliant student the medical school looked the other way once or twice, but when Slater hammered a cop who came to break up a barroom fight that Slater was involved in, his medical school career came to an abrupt end.

Since then he'd been haunting the beach towns along the California coast, surfing by day and fighting

by night, and sometimes fighting by day. Jason had heard that he did a little drug dealing to keep himself in rent money, groceries, and beer. He'd also heard that he sometimes fished in Alaska during the winter, but he didn't know if either of these stories were true. He did know that Slater was a good guy to keep away from, and that's what he intended to do.

Jason caught a half a dozen waves as the morning wore on and the beach and the water began to fill up. With other surfers in the water you had to be careful. You could run into each other on a wave or run over someone who was paddling out. Jason had all but forgotten Slater and their encounter when he saw a beautiful swell coming toward him. He paddled toward it, noticing that there were not many other surfers doing the same. There'd been a number of good waves, which tended to thin things out as the surfers had more waves to choose from. That was all right with Jason—this one looked like the wave of the day!

He saw Slater just as he turned to catch the wave. Slater saw him at the same time. "That's my wave, punk!" yelled Slater. "Get back!"

Jason had a split second to decide. Should he sit on his board and let the wave go by, or go for it, and risk the wrath of the mighty Slater?

"Why don't we share it?" said Jason under his breath as he paddled like a mad man. Thirty yards to his left Slater let out a string of oaths as he paddled to catch the wave. Both men stood up at the same time. Slater immediately cut down the wave toward Jason, but Jason did some cutting of his own and managed to keep his distance. He walked his board a little, cut, turned, and rode the wave in. It was a great ride. Of course, it would have been really great if Slater wasn't a factor. But he was—no doubt about that.

When the ride ended Jason quickly slipped his foot from the rubber cord so that he wasn't connected to his board. He looked down the beach and saw that

Slater was doing the same. Then Slater threw his board up onto the sand and started walking toward him with murder in his eyes. Jason felt the adrenaline run through him as he tossed his own board up onto the beach. It amazed him how calm he was as Slater approached him. His body was in fight or flee mode, but his mind and spirit were calm. He knew there was no chance of running, but at the same time he knew that, athletic as he was, he would be no match for Slater in a fight.

As Slater approached, Jason started to say something about there being plenty of room on the wave, but a left hook to his jaw cut him short. He took a right to the body and a left to the head before getting off a couple of punches of his own. Then an upper cut caught him under the chin and he landed on his back in the sand. He rolled to his side and then to one knee, but a kick to his stomach knocked him back down.

Slater stood over him, his hands at his sides but still in fists.

"I told you to stay off my waves, punk. I gave you fair warning. Don't let it happen again or it will be a lot worse for you. Count on it." Slater backed off a little and Jason sat up. Slater glared at him a moment longer, then turned and walked off toward his board.

Six or eight other surfers and a couple of joggers had stopped to watch the exchange. They seemed relieved that it was over, and that the smaller guy had survived with just a cut to the mouth and a few bruises.

I'll bet I'm the only guy here who knows it's not over, Jason thought as he tasted the blood from his cut lip, and looked around at the people staring at him. For some odd reason, as he was thinking that Slater, beside being a total jerk, was indeed a formidable fighter, a quote slid into his mind like a canoe on a placid lake: *The size of the dog in a fight doesn't count as much as the size of the fight in the dog.*

Well Slater, Jason thought, you got involved with the wrong dog today.

Rolling to one knee Jason took off after Slater like a sprinter out of the blocks. He closed the twenty yards between them and leaped. Slater turned his head at the last minute but it was too late. Jason had his knee planted in Slater's back and his arm locked around his neck. Grabbing his wrist with his free hand Jason pulled back with everything he had and held on tight as Slater fell backwards on top of him.

Slater's arms were free but there was little he could do with them. He tried to reach back and grab Jason's hair, but when Jason tightened his hold on Slater's neck, Slater let his hands fall to his side. He was choking now, his air supply almost totally cut off.

Lord, help me not to do any permanent damage, Jason prayed as he loosened his grip slightly. Slater filled his lungs like there was no tomorrow, exhaled, and did it again. Jason tightened his hold one more time. He wanted Slater in the right frame of mind for the coming negotiations.

"All right, Slater, shall we call it quits?"

Jason felt Slater nod a yes.

"And are you going to leave me alone from now on?"

Again the nod.

"Okay then," said Jason, "roll over."

Jason once again loosened his hold on Slater's neck and dropped his knee. Slater started to roll over and Jason rolled with him, loosening the hold a little more but still keeping it in place in case Slater tried anything. When Slater made it to his stomach, Jason, who had rolled with him so that he was still on his back, finally let go. He got to his feet as fast as he could without making it look too fast, and moved ten yards away from Slater. He stretched his leg, which ached from being bent, and looked over to where his board still lay in the sand.

The crowd had gotten a little bigger, a look of surprise on almost every face. One pretty Oriental girl—a surfer who Jason recognized as a regular at Huntington Beach—caught his eye with a nod and a discreet thumbs up. Slater was on his hands and knees now, rubbing his neck and moving his head from side to side.

When he thought about it later, Jason couldn't figure how Slater had reached him so quickly on his hands and knees, but when he looked away from the girl Slater was crawling toward him like the Ghost and the Darkness. Jason turned to run but Slater grabbed his leg, pulling and twisting in one wrenching move.

Jason yelled and pitched forward into the sand. *Jesus help me!* he thought as the crippling pain shot up his leg.

Slater was crawling up on him now, his powerful arms pinning Jason to the sand. Jason looked into Slater's red face and bloodshot eyes. If he thought he'd seen murder in them before, he was sure of it this time. Slater grabbed Jason's wet suit at the neck and pulled him up as he cocked a massive left fist for a killer blow.

"Lord Jesus, help me!" yelled Jason as loud as he could. As soon as the prayer left his mouth there was sand everywhere. Then Slater wasn't on top of him any more and a moment later two hands were helping him up.

"Follow me, quickly!" a low feminine voice said as the hands pulled him towards the street.

Jason blinked his eyes a few times. A little sand was in them but the blinking seemed to help. If he squinted they didn't hurt as much and he could see some. The first thing he focused on was Slater who was stumbling around like a blind man, his eyes shut tight, his clenched fists out from his sides. "I'll get you for this!" he kept shouting over and over. "Next time you see me, you're a dead man, punk!"

What have I got myself into now? Jason thought.

“Let’s go!” said the girl, this time in a forceful whisper.

Jason looked over to recognize the Oriental girl. She grabbed him by the arm and pulled him toward the point where the pier met the highway. Jason let out a groan as his twisted leg hit the sand, but kept going. The girl was holding his arm now, giving a little extra support for his twisted leg. Jason looked down at her as he hobbled along. She had shoulder-length jet-black hair, still wet from the ocean, and what looked like a great body under her wet suit. She was three or four inches shorter than him, which would put her at about five feet six or seven. He already knew she had a pretty face. *Saved by an angel*, he thought.

They were alongside the pier now, ready to climb the long, wide stairs up to the street. It was a hard climb for Jason. His leg was throbbing and he was tired. The adrenaline wasn’t pumping now and his jaw was beginning to hurt. He shuddered to think what he would feel like if Slater hadn’t been stopped. Slater might have killed him, or almost killed him at the very least. He had a million questions to ask the girl. He figured he’d ask the simple ones first.

“What’s your name?”

“Lauren.”

“I’m Jason. I’ve seen you here before.”

“I’ve seen you too.”

They were at the top of the stairs when Jason remembered his surfboard. “Oh no,” he said, “I left my surfboard down there.”

“Don’t worry,” said Lauren. “A friend is bringing mine up and he’ll bring yours too.”

Lauren left Jason hanging onto the rail at the top of the stairs and went over to the pole that held up the streetlight. She pushed the button on the side of the pole and got back to Jason just as the little green man started blinking on the light across the street.

Together they moved into the crosswalk and began crossing PCH, the Pacific Coast Highway. They were a third of the way across the street when the little green walking man turned into a flashing red hand. After two years in California Jason still couldn’t help but laugh whenever he crossed the street. In the land where the car is king that little green man didn’t have much time to walk.

“What’s so funny?” asked Lauren.

“Oh, nothing,” said Jason as they stepped up onto the curb and headed up Main Street. “Hey, by the way, where are we going?”

“My place. It’s not far.”

It was late morning now and there were a lot of people on the street. Locals, tourists, bikers, yuppies, hippies, surfers, and rollerbladers moved in and out of the surf and tourist shops, coffee bars, restaurants and businesses that made up Main Street, Huntington Beach. “I wonder what it was like here thirty-five years ago,” mused Jason.

“Who knows,” said Lauren with a curious glance in his direction. “Why do you ask?”

“My family is with this missionary group that started here in 1968—in a club right on this street, apparently.”

“So that’s where your praying comes from.”

“What’s that?”

“Your praying. You yelled out, ‘Lord Jesus help me’ right when Slater was about to knock your lights out.”

“What happened then? All I remember was sand everywhere, and Slater looking like he’d gotten some in his eyes.”

“A bucket full of dry sand in the face will do that to you,” said Lauren.

“You threw a bucket of sand in his face?”

“Yeah. There was a kid’s bucket right there. I figured I better make use of it—in case God didn’t

have time to throw down a lightning bolt. Then I grabbed Slater by the neck and pulled him off of you. And here we are.”

Jason stopped and looked at Lauren. “Thanks for doing that. You saved me—maybe even saved my life. But it sure was a fast answer to my prayer.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

They were walking again now. “You’re welcome,” Lauren said after a moment. “But really, I should be thanking you. Huntington Beach ought to throw a dinner in your honor and give you the keys to the city for standing up to that jerk. Nobody’s ever done it before. Not around here, anyway.”

“Well, I’m glad I did,” said Jason a second before his foot caught the back of Lauren’s heel. He stumbled forward and Lauren caught him and pulled him up, but not before a slight but painful twist of his leg. “Sort of glad, anyway.”

A few more minutes and they turned off Main, then another turn, up a few houses and they were at Lauren’s. It was a small white house with blue trim and a shingle roof. A small cement path, with a well-kept lawn to either side, led to the front door. Lauren came up with a key from somewhere and opened the door. She held it open for Jason and nodded for him to go in. It was his first time walking without Lauren holding his arm, but he made it in. Lauren breezed by him, past the living room on the left and a couple of doors on the right, into a small bright kitchen. “Come on,” she said as she reached the door, “you could probably use something to eat, right?”

“Yeah, thanks. That sounds good,” said Jason as he slid into one of two chairs at the kitchen table.

“I see you picked the chair that lets you see the back door. Smart. Slater won’t be able to get the drop on you from there,” said Lauren, laughing.

“True,” said Jason, but he wasn’t laughing. “Lauren, can I ask you a favor? Could we not talk about Slater

for a while? To tell you the truth, the whole deal has me pretty shook up. Not so much what happened but what might happen. I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I don’t want to think about it for awhile.”

“No problem,” said Lauren. “Sorry. Hey, what do you want to eat? A sandwich?”

“Sounds great.”

Lauren opened the refrigerator and surveyed its contents. “How about cream cheese and sprouts on rye bread?”

“Sure,” said Jason, a little more enthusiastically than he felt. He liked cream cheese and was okay with rye bread, but he wasn’t sure what sprouts were.

Lauren asked him if he wanted Dijon mustard, and he said yes and a minute later the sandwich was in front of him, a handful of squiggly green and white sprouts peering out between the bread. Lauren watched him as he took the first bite. The sprouts were crunchy but mostly he tasted the cream cheese, mustard, and rye. “It’s great,” said Jason, glad that he meant it. “Thanks.”

“Glad you like it,” said Lauren. “I’m going to take a shower. If you’re still hungry when I get back I’ll make you another one.”

“Okay.”

Lauren walked out of the kitchen and disappeared into the bathroom. Jason could hear her peeling off her wet suit. Then the water started to run and he thought he could hear Lauren step into the shower. Or maybe it was just his imagination. In any case he held the thought. *Lord, is she beautiful.* Suddenly Jason felt an overwhelming desire to pray. He laid his sandwich on the plate, put his face in his hands, and began silently pouring out his heart to the Lord.

Jesus, thank You so much for saving me. Thank You for having this girl, this angel, Lord, of Your mercy there to save me. I hate to think what could have happened to me. I don’t want to think about it but I can’t help it.

But ... thank You for saving me from a terrible beating. I know You didn't have to. I know I probably didn't deserve the help. But You gave it anyway, so thank You for that.

It felt good to be speaking to the Lord again, and Jason kept on going. He prayed for his family in India, for their work, for his mom and dad and each of his seven brothers and sisters. He prayed for his friends—his friends who were still missionaries, and his friends who had left to do other things. He prayed for his situation that had gone along all right for quite awhile, but that he now knew was going to change, and perhaps very quickly. He prayed in tongues, silently crying out to the Lord, thanking Him for His goodness and mercy and love.

Jason didn't know how long he prayed, but when he looked up he saw Lauren's shapely form peering into the refrigerator. She was dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and sandals. Jason couldn't help but notice that she looked great from that angle. She came out with an orange and sat down across from Jason.

"Jason, can I ask you a question?" asked Lauren as she began peeling her orange.

"Sure."

"What were you just doing?"

"Oh, I was praying. Sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry you were praying."

"No, I know. I mean I'm sorry I didn't hear you come in."

"You pray a lot, don't you?"

"To be honest, not as much as I should, at least not for awhile. But today's situation kind of got me started again. First I found myself praying that I wouldn't strangle Slater. Then, when he got me, that prayer just kind of came out on its own."

"Yeah," said Lauren with a shrug. "I pray sometimes, but not so often. I've never heard anyone pray like that though, like you did, yelling out loud like

that. You really think that when I threw that sand in Slater's face, it was an answer to your prayer?"

"Would you have done it if I hadn't prayed?" asked Jason.

"I ... I don't know. You probably could have shouted anything."

"Maybe ... but you were really quick to be there and respond. Remember I told you about the missionary group my folks belong to? Well, the guy who started it—David Berg—once said that God answers prayer with the same intensity you pray it with, like a beam of light reflecting back off a mirror, or a batter getting a good piece of a ninety-mile-an-hour fastball. That prayer was one of the most intense I've ever prayed, and the answer came intensely fast—thank God—or I'd be in an intensive care unit instead of here talking to you."

Lauren raised her eyebrows slightly and nodded her head up and down. "Well, from that perspective it does seem to have a ring of truth to it."

Jason opened his mouth to say something but stopped when, through the kitchen window, came the sound of an incredibly off-key voice belting out a rendition of an old Beach Boys song. The voice was soon followed by the singer, who rolled in on a one-speed bicycle with a custom-made surfboard rack holding three boards tied down with bungee cords.

"Woody!" Lauren greeted him through the window. "Thanks so much."

"No problemo," answered Woody as he loosened the boards. He set Lauren's and Jason's against the house, and fastened his back on the rack.

Lauren went out the back door and Jason hobbled out behind her.

"Woody, I don't know if you know Jason."

"Not until now," said Woody, extending his hand to Jason. Jason shook his hand and Woody continued. "But after today, man, everybody's going to know this

dude. And you, too, Babe—the flight attendant who helped bust Slater.”

“I’m a flight attendant,” explained Lauren to Jason. “It’s what I do for a living.”

Jason nodded and looked at Woody, who seemed quite inspired by the events of the day.

Woody pushed a green “Surf City” baseball hat with a tan bill to the back of his head. “I’m telling you, this is a watershed moment in the history of California surfing. The day the great and terrible Slater was taken down, not only once by an exotic knee-slash-strangle-hold combination—where did you learn that one, dude?”

“I dunno ... just came to me, I guess.”

“Hmm ... but then once again by the quick-thinking, beautiful Vietnamese surfer chick who stuns the mighty behemoth with a sand blast, yanks him off the wounded hero, and then skirts said hero away to safety. It’s classic.”

Jason laughed. “Maybe they’ll write a ballad about it,” he said, not sure if Woody was half serious or just totally joking.

“Right! Ricky Martin could sing it. And a movie! With Matt Damon as Jason, Lucy Liu as Lauren, and some corny Baywatch surfer dude as Slater! Yes!” Woody was looking off into the distance as if he could see it all happening.

They all laughed, which did Jason good, even though it hurt his jaw. Like he’d told Lauren, and even the Lord, he didn’t like thinking about Slater, but it looked like there was no way around it for awhile. It was nice that Woody had showed up and done a little comedy on the subject. It was nice to get his board back too.

“Thanks again, Woody, for bringing the boards over.”

“Hey, you’re welcome. Least I could do. Listen, I gotta ride but I want to take you two out to dinner

tonight. I’m serious, and”—he held up his hand to hold back any possible protest—“I won’t be denied. Not only that, I just might show up with some female companionship, making it an official double date! Seven tonight alright for you?”

Lauren and Jason looked at each other and shrugged. “What can we say, Woody?” said Lauren.

“Yes’ is the only acceptable answer,” said Woody. “See you at seven.” Then he pulled his hat down low over his eyes, kicked his feet into the pedals, and raced down the driveway, his T-shirt and shorts flapping in the breeze.

Lauren and Jason stood and watched until Woody disappeared down the street.

“Quite a character,” said Jason after awhile. “Seems like a nice guy.”

“He is,” answered Lauren. “And definitely a character.” Then she led Jason back into the house. “Are you going to finish that sandwich?”

“Yes. For sure,” said Jason, and slid back into his seat to take a bite.

Lauren pulled another orange out of the refrigerator, sat down opposite Jason, and started peeling. “What are you planning on wearing to dinner tonight?” she asked, with a look at Jason’s wet suit.

“Good question.”

“How did you get down to the beach?”

“I drove.”

“Clothes in the car?”

“Yes.”

“Want me to bring your car over here?”

“Sure, that would be great. It’s a white Toyota Tercel, in the parking lot just north of the pier. There’s a hide-a-key inside the back bumper, right above the tail pipe.”

“All right, I’m off. I’ll see if I can find out what became of Slater. If you want to take a shower, go ahead. There’s a robe folded up on the shelf in the

bathroom you can use if you want. There's a towel there too."

"Okay, thanks. I probably will."

"See you soon, then," said Lauren, before disappearing out the front door.

Jason ate the last couple of bites of his sandwich, made another one with a few less sprouts, and finished it off. Then he stepped into the bathroom for a shower.

Lauren's wet suit was hung on a hook on the bathroom door. There was a free hook next to it so he hung his next to hers. He pulled out the towel from the shelf, threw it over the rod that held up the shower curtain, and stepped into the shower.

Jason had taken many a bucket bath in his day, usually in countries where the water was rationed because of drought or politics, but he'd never been a Navy shower aficionado. Still, he didn't like to waste water so he was in and out in a reasonably short time. He dried off and found the terry cloth robe where Lauren said it would be. He didn't have a comb so he used his fingers to get his hair somewhat in place. Everything done, he walked out into the living room.

For a beach house the living room was a large one. It was really a living and dining room in one, with a dining table at one end. There was a large couch with bright colors in Native American patterns, a cane and glass coffee table, a chair that matched the couch, and a large bookcase almost full of books. *A lot of books for a woman your age*, Jason mused. He walked up for a better look, but the couch looked a lot more inviting. He pulled a book on photography off the shelf, lay down on the couch, flipped fifteen or twenty pages, and fell asleep.



Jason usually didn't remember his dreams. He'd had a couple of significant dreams in his life, dreams that he had known were the Lord speaking to him

on some topic that needed specific attention. But the last one had been a long time ago, and the dream he dreamt on Lauren's couch didn't seem to fall into that category.

Throughout the dream Jason was on a beautiful white sandy beach looking out at the ocean. There was no one else on the beach or in the water where Lauren, wearing a black string bikini, was surfing on perfect green waves against a blue sky. Although Jason never left the beach he could see Lauren from every angle. He'd see her from behind as she'd catch a wave, see her jump up onto her board, watch her as she'd cut and turn. It was as if she could see him too. She'd look back and give him a coy smile, then she'd turn and wave to him on the beach.

Then she was on the beach at the water's edge. She dropped her board and began to run, the water flying off her skin and little white explosions going off, one after another, as her feet hit the sand, carrying her perfect form toward him. She was almost there now, running toward him with a smile, wearing the heart-stopping black string bikini...

Jason stirred and opened his eyes just as Lauren came in carrying a pair of shoes and a bundle under her arm. She looked over at him on the couch. "Your clothes," she said holding them up as Jason swung his feet around to the floor and sat up.

"Thanks," he mumbled as she set his clothes on the arm of the couch. She was still wearing jeans and a T-shirt. *Maybe she has the bikini on underneath*, Jason thought to himself. *No, it was just a dream. Quite a dream, though. Quite a dream.*

"Get a good nap?" called Lauren as she moved into the kitchen.

"Yes, I did. I guess I was tired."

"It was a busy morning. I'm going to have a coffee. You want one?"

"Yeah, thanks."

While Lauren was in making the coffee Jason got dressed. He folded the robe, put it back in the bathroom, and walked into the kitchen.

“Should we have the coffee out in the living room?” asked Lauren.

“Sure.”

“Put this out on the coffee table,” said Lauren as she handed Jason a tray with two cups, a couple of spoons, a bowl of sugar, and a jar of coffee creamer. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

Jason walked into the living room, set the tray on the coffee table, and sat on the couch. Lauren came in a minute later and sat on the other end of the couch. “It’ll be ready in a few minutes,” she said. “You didn’t tell me your car had a clutch.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. How did it go?”

“Not bad. I’ve driven standards before, a little anyway. So now I’m a little more experienced,” she said with a smile. “I parked it in the garage so it would be out of view.”

“Thanks.”

“So,” Lauren said after a momentary pause, “you said your parents are missionaries. What exactly does that mean? Like, did you grow up on an island playing with naked natives and stuff like that?”

“Not exactly,” answered Jason with a chuckle. “I grew up in a lot of different countries—Argentina, South Africa, India.”

“You’re kidding me,” said Lauren.

“I’m not. It’s the truth.”

“Your parents lived in all those places and took you along with them?”

“Eight of us, actually, by the time we moved to India. Three sisters, four brothers, and me.”

“Eight kids?” Lauren asked.

“And that’s a small family compared to some clans in *The Family*—that’s the name of our missionary group.”

“The one that started right here in Huntington Beach?”

“Yes, back in 1968.”

“How does a *missionary* group start in Huntington Beach, of all places?” asked Lauren.

“That’s a whole story in itself,” answered Jason.

Lauren stood, went to the kitchen, and came back with a pot of coffee and some slices of cake. She set the cake down between them, poured a cup of coffee for Jason, then one for herself, and sat down again with a pleased sigh.

“I’m not going anywhere,” said Lauren as she pushed the sugar and milk towards Jason. “So tell me your story. I’m already fascinated.”

Jason and Lauren talked for the next hour and a half. Lauren had a way of asking questions that brought out the full story. Jason told her about the beginnings of the group, how David Berg’s mother, Virginia Brandt Berg—a former evangelist—told him he should come out to Huntington Beach, where she lived, to do something for the hippies.

“She used to tool out in her wheelchair and give them sandwiches and she kept writing her son that they were good kids being ruined by drugs, and they really needed someone to tell them about Jesus. At first he wasn’t so into the idea, and basically detested hippies, as most respectable people of that time did. But, his mother had asked, and so David Berg came here to Huntington Beach. Once he was here, and he wandered the streets and saw all these hippies drugged out and lost and aimless in their lives, God began to speak to him that there was a job to be done with these hippies.

“So he and his family started in. There was a Christian group that had a coffee house on Main Street, and they got use of it on the off nights. God showed him that Bible prophecy was what the hippies would respond to, and since it was one of many topics

he'd studied, that's what he taught. He'd go down to the club dressed in a robe and a beret with a big medallion around his neck, doing his best to look like a hippie even though he was at least a generation too late, and had four teen-aged kids of his own. But the hippies saw that his concern and love for them was genuine, and they listened.

"Uncle Dave, as some took to calling him, had always believed that it was possible to live as the Bible said the early Christians lived. One verse, in particular, always stuck with him, and it's used often in our group. It says, 'And all that believed were together, and had all things common, and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.' It's from the book of Acts. I could find it if you have a Bible here."

Lauren shook her head, and Jason continued.

"Anyhow, in all his searching among other Christian churches and denominations, Berg never found anyone who wanted to at least try living that way again today. But once he started preaching to the hippies, he found many of them were willing to join his quest, hippies who had become as disillusioned with the snobbish church people and their largely do-nothing religion as Berg had. He was looking for a better way to obey the commandment Jesus had given to all Christians, to 'go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.' And because his approach was so radically different from what most churches of that day were doing, the hippies liked it and were willing to give it a try.

"Before long hippies were moving in with Berg and his family, and soon they filled up his mother's little beach cottage. Then some of the local churches started getting jealous of Berg's obvious success with these young people—even if they were hippies that those churches had refused to let through their own doors—and began stirring up trouble.

"This got Berg so angry that one night, in a defining moment for our movement, he launched into a fiery speech against the churches and the System, blasting them with pure and righteous vehemence for their failures in fulfilling the commission and responsibility that God had given them. And the hippies, of course, rejoiced at this blatant anti-establishment outburst. A reporter who was there that night immortalized the event with an article about it, which served to convince certain parties that Berg and his outfit of hippies were a dangerous bunch.

"So when things began heating up further, the Lord showed Berg that it was time to get out of Huntington Beach, to hit the road, along with whoever wanted to join him. So the first band of hippies, together with Berg and his four children, set out in their own dilapidated vehicles to travel across the States and preach the Gospel wherever they went.

"Despite the tough conditions—living in tents, in cold weather, with little food, and plenty of encounters with sickness—lots of other young people, hippies and otherwise, started leaving behind their schools and lives and families to join Berg's radical Christian outfit, much like the early disciples of Jesus dropped everything to follow Jesus. Then God showed them they had to warn America that she was disobeying God. So they dressed in red sackcloth and took long staves and scrolls with messages of warning right out of the Bible, and marched into public places like Rockefeller Plaza and Pennsylvania Avenue, D.C. in two lines, pounding their staves to the pavement in unison as they walked, and then standing silently as people came and read the messages of judgment to the nations that forgot God.

"Needless to say, it was quite a spectacle, and reporters were all over it. One of these reporters, after visiting Berg and his roving band of hippies in a campground, coined the term 'Moses and the

Children of God' for the group in one of his articles. The name stuck, and the movement soon became known internationally as *The Children of God*—the forerunner of a 'Jesus Revolution' that started sweeping the nation about the same time."

"Yes, that does sound familiar," said Lauren, "though I have no idea where I've heard it."

"There was a whole article in *Time* magazine about it, and they even had pictures of the sackcloth vigils, as they became known. Anyhow, the vision was always to go out and preach the Gospel, to tell people about Jesus instead of building and sitting in churches. And that's how a worldwide missionary movement started out in Huntington Beach, California. As you might guess, we've never really been 'typical' missionaries such as might be affiliated with your local church."

"You said your group was called *The Family*," interjected Lauren.

"You don't miss anything, do you?"

Lauren smiled.

"Well, after traveling around the States, Berg got in contact with an old friend of his—actually one of the very first televangelists, by the name of Fred Jordan. Jordan gave Berg a couple of places that became bases for the Children of God, and the movement began to expand, and soon reached three bases and over 400 members. Not one to limit his vision or the Word of God to America, Berg took a trip to Europe and the Middle East to look into the possibilities of starting bases there.

"Eventually, when the Children of God wore out their welcome with Fred, Berg encouraged most of them to leave America to her own damnation, and to go preach the Gospel to people who were willing to listen. So many of them branched out to Europe, Asia, and Central and South America. In the meantime, his travels had shown Berg that he did much better

managing the affairs of the Children of God from a distance. So he kept in contact with the various bases and leaders through his letters, which became known as the MO Letters, after his new nickname, Moses David.

"Sometime in the mid seventies is where things get really interesting."

"This has *all* been very interesting."

"Yeah, but ... you go to church?"

The question stunned Lauren. She hesitated and nodded a yes. Jason looked at her with a suspicious smile, and she shook her head.

"Well, I've been a few times ... but yeah, nothing serious."

"Okay, good," answered Jason. "Because if you did, I probably wouldn't go much further, because now sex is going to come into the picture."

Lauren lifted an eyebrow.

"You see, when Berg officially disassociated himself from all the churches, he went back to the Bible to see exactly what it said, and what things were merely myths that had been propagated by the church. He came across a number of revelations, some more startling than others. One of the most startling ones was that the Ten Commandments did not apply to saved and born-again Christians. Instead, Jesus had given us a new law—one law—to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This was termed the Law of Love, and so long as that one law was kept, none of the others mattered."

"So what does that have to do with sex?" Lauren asked, her eyes bright and interested.

"Well, it's a little complex, but the gist of it is that, so long as whatever you're doing is being done in love, then it would even be okay to have sex with someone who isn't your husband or wife, even if they are somebody else's husband or wife."

"You mean cheating?"

“No, it isn’t cheating, because the husband or wife could and would have to agree to ‘share’ each other with others who needed it, or even just for the pleasure of it. Or if two people who are not married agree, then they can have sex together. In short, if all concerned parties were informed and okay about it, then under the Law of Love there was nothing wrong with such sexual interactions. Berg, or Father David as he later became known, was very frank about sexual matters, preaching that sex was not a sin, that God had created it for mankind’s pleasure—words that didn’t exactly sit well with people from a churchy background.”

“I can imagine,” Lauren answered.

“Anyhow, the big sensation came when Berg suggested that sex could be used as a tool to tell people about God’s love, and to show them this love in a real way. I mean, who doesn’t like or enjoy sex, right? It kind of started in these dance clubs that Berg would visit with his wife. He saw all these lonely men sitting around, and suggested that his wife be kind to them by going up and dancing with them. When he saw how appreciative those men were of the gesture, he took it further by suggesting it would not be immoral to give these men what they *really* wanted, as in sex, to prove God’s love for them. It turned into a totally new evangelistic endeavor that became known as Flirty Fishing.”

“You mean like prostitution?” asked Lauren, her brow furrowing.

“No ... not at all. It wasn’t sex for pay. If the men wanted sex, the women could feel free to give it to them if they wanted to. It was an unusual way to preach the Gospel, but it worked, and—like Berg’s original ministry to the hippies—reached people the church would never have bothered with. But of course the churches had a cow over the whole thing, and condemned it up and down as sinful, dirty, perverted, or whatever.

“Anyhow, about that time, due to some problems that had arisen, the organizational entity of The Children of God was officially dissolved, but many individuals chose to remain in contact with Berg, and formed a new movement by the name of *The Family of Love*, which eventually was shortened to simply *The Family*. Then after the whole AIDS thing, the ministry of Flirty Fishing of course stopped, and The Family became more settled, with Homes and families and children, in countries all over the world, who continue to focus on simply preaching the Gospel by fairly standard and traditional methods. Still, even today, whenever *The Family* finds itself in the news, you’ll inevitably hear reference to its history with Flirty Fishing.

“Anyhow, that’s the history of The Family in a nutshell. My father was a hippie who dropped out of college before he met the Children of God, and then found and joined a community in Dallas. He met my mom in Sweden. They got married, moved to Argentina, where I was born, then to South Africa for a while, and eventually to India, where I lived with them until I was thirteen. After that I traveled to several countries on my own, including Russia, helping out in various Family Homes and communities. And that’s basically my history.”

Lauren remained silent for some time, staring at Jason as if he had just told her that he was from K-pax.

“So,” she finally ventured, “why are you here then, and not off in, say, Africa or someplace?”

Jason sighed and looked into his empty cup. He’d known the question was coming, but still wasn’t sure how to answer.

“Well, when my folks brought all of us to the States for a visit two years ago ... I’d never lived here before, you know. Well, I kind of liked it here, felt like I needed a break from being on all these foreign fields,

and decided I wanted to see if I could get into college and stuff, live my own life for a while, that kind of thing. So they arranged for me to live with my aunt and uncle—my dad’s brother and his wife.”

“Is that where you live now?”

“Yeah. They have a place here in Huntington Beach, other side of town. Anyway, I started going to the community college, started working, started surfing. And to be honest, I haven’t really thought much about the Lord or looked back at what I’d left behind until today’s incident. By the way, what did you find out about Slater?”

“Oh, he was taken to the emergency room and they washed the sand out of his eyes. He’ll be all right but his eyesight will likely be blurry for a few days. All he talks about is how he’s going to get us.”

“Us?”

“Yeah, I’m in on it too, now. Talked to a pair of bicycle cops who happened to be at the scene when I got there. It seems like the story is all over town. The cops knew it was me who threw the sand in his face.”

“Did they have any advice?”

“They said to avoid contact with Slater.”

“Excellent,” said Jason with a shake of his head.

“They also said that for a few hundred we could go to the courthouse and get a restraining order, but it’s worthless unless Slater comes on our property and we can hold him there until the cops come.”

“Not likely.” Jason sighed. “Lord help us. What are we going to do?”

“Let’s go out to dinner with Woody and enjoy ourselves. The cops told me that the emergency staff said Slater wouldn’t be able to see straight for a few days. So we’ve got nothing to worry about for the moment.”

“That’s true. I can use the time to worry about the future instead,” said Jason, putting his palms to his forehead.

“Come on Jason, it’s not that bad. At least we have some time to think it over.”

“You’re right. Sorry. I don’t mean to be on such a bummer. It’s just hard to think of spending my life looking over my shoulder waiting for Slater. Why did I ever go after him in the first place?”

“That’s the question of the day. Why *did* you?”

“Well,” said Jason, stopping to think for a moment, “I’m not entirely sure myself. All I know is that I was lying there, defeated in the sand, when I felt this strange compulsion to go after him. I knew I didn’t have much of a chance, but I knew I had to do it. And ... at least for the moment I’m glad I did—else I might not have met you.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” said Lauren. “I don’t know what compelled me to come help you, and get myself involved in all this. But I’m glad I did.”

Jason looked at Lauren and smiled. He leaned towards her, wanting to kiss her but wanting to make sure she wanted him to. Lauren returned his gaze and tilted her head slightly to one side. Jason thought he saw an amused gleam in her eye. She wasn’t exactly encouraging him, but she wasn’t discouraging him either. It was a look that seemed to ask, “So Jason, where are you going to go from here?”

Jason leaned forward a little more, searching Lauren’s eyes for any last clues, until finally their lips met in a gentle kiss. They kissed again and then another two or three times. Jason pulled her toward him, and Lauren pressed against him as they continued kissing, more ardently now. As their hands started moving over each other’s bodies Lauren let out a little sigh ... then the doorbell rang.

Lauren sat bolt upright and straightened her shirt. “It’s got to be Woody,” she said as she looked at her watch. “He’s ten minutes early.” Leaving Jason to straighten himself out, she walked to the door and opened it.

“Hey babe,” Woody greeted her, “you’re looking great as usual.” He turned to a tall blonde woman on his arm. “Lauren, this is Jill. Jill, Lauren.”

“Hi Lauren. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too. Please, come in.”

Jason was standing now and Woody greeted him and then introduced him to Jill. Jill wore a black pinstriped business suit with a skirt short enough to show off her long black-stockinged legs. Her long wavy blonde hair reached past the middle of her back and her figure would have to be described as voluptuous. She had a pretty face and a radiant smile. She was gorgeous, thought Jason. A definite knock-out.

“Sorry to be wearing the corporate garb,” apologized Jill. “I came right from work. Woody called me right in the middle of a meeting and asked me out for tonight. Can you believe that?” she said turning her hands up and looking at Lauren.

“I hate to say it, but yeah, I can.”

“Hey, I’m a bum,” said Woody. “I admit it.”

“I should have told the bum to get lost, no? But I wanted to meet you guys so I told him okay.”

“I told Jill the tale of your exploits,” said Woody.

“He did,” said Jill. “Then I had to tell a roomful of lawyers. They all wanted to know why it took five minutes for me to get off the phone. When I told them, one guy wanted me to call Woody back and get more details.”

“So, you’re a lawyer?” asked Jason.

“I am a lawyer. And you, Jason, are a jewel!”

“Because I asked if you were a lawyer?”

“Because you didn’t ask if I was a legal secretary. I get asked that about four times a week.”

“Ah,” nodded Jason.

“Hey,” said Woody, “you’re young, you’re beautiful, you work in an attorney’s office and you don’t look like a lawyer. You should be thankful.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Anyway, I am a lawyer,

I just came from work, and that’s why I’m overdressed. So where are we going to eat?”

“Joshua Sloucom’s in Newport Beach. If you like steak.”

“Yes,” said Jill, Jason, and Lauren in unison.

“All right then, let’s go,” said Woody.

Lauren turned off the lights and locked the door and the four piled into Jill’s Camry. “How do you like this guy?” said Jill as she pulled away from the curb and down the street. “He calls me at the last minute, and then asks me to drive. He’s a true bum, no? But he’s still a sweetie-pie. I guess that’s why I put up with him.”

“I’m the man,” said Woody as Jill made her way to Pacific Coast Highway. “I’m the man.”



Joshua Sloucom’s was close to full, but as soon as Woody gave his name the party of four was shown a table. They ordered drinks. When the cocktail waitress didn’t ask for ID’s, Jason breathed a sigh of relief, a fact that didn’t get by Lauren. “How old are you, Jason?” she asked.

“Twenty. How about you?”

“Twenty-two. What about you guys?”

“Twenty-five,” said Jill.

“Me too. Twenty-five,” said Woody.

A minute passed while everyone looked at each other and nodded a “that’s about what I figured” nod.

“Imagine,” said Woody as he raised a glass of water, “the kid who brought down the great and terrible Slater can’t legally buy a beer. So I propose we toast him with water.”

All took a glass and drank. A minute later, when the beers arrived, Jason said, “I’d like to propose a toast to Lauren who saved the kid who brought down the great and terrible Slater, because I definitely wouldn’t be sitting here if she hadn’t.”

They all drank and then Lauren raised her glass.

"I propose a toast to God who I believe inspired Jason to stand up to Slater, and me to help Jason."

Woody and Jill hesitated, but then raised their glasses and drank together with Jason and Lauren. Then Jill looked squarely at Lauren.

"Why God?" she asked. "I don't mean to be skeptical, but what makes you think God had anything to do with it? Maybe you just did it—a natural reaction."

Jason and Lauren looked at each other, but Lauren answered for herself.

"Well, I pretty much saw the whole thing from the beginning. I'd been surfing for about an hour and had just sat down in the sand to catch a breather when Slater and Jason came in on their wave. I knew something was up. I could hear Slater yelling something although I couldn't make it out. Then, after they came in, I saw Slater go over and start punching Jason. I saw Jason go down, and then Slater kicking him back down when he tried to get up. Then I saw Jason bring Slater down with that stranglehold, and then let him back up. And finally Slater crawling across the sand faster than most people can run to pull down Jason. There must have been twenty other people there watching, and they all heard Jason shout out his prayer for Jesus to save him.

"By that time I already had the bucket of sand. It was there on the beach, not ten yards from where they were fighting, full of white, dry sand. I guess some kid left it there although no kids were around. I still wasn't exactly sure what to do, or if I even wanted to do anything. Then, when I heard Jason's prayer, when he yelled that prayer, something came over me, and I just let that sand fly. Then I got both of us out of there as fast as I could. Now it could be a coincidence that the bucket was there, and that it was a gut-reaction to help Jason, a guy I didn't know..."

"But who I think she's glad she knows now," said Jason.

"Yes, who I'm glad I know now, but who I didn't know then," answered Lauren, looking from Jill to Woody. "I mean I'd seen him around, but I've seen Slater around a lot more and believe me, what I did was not something I would do under normal circumstances. So yeah, I think God had something to do with it."

"I didn't know you believed in God," said Woody.

"Maybe I didn't ... then again, maybe I just hadn't met Him yet."

"And you, Jason? You think it was God?" asked Jill.

"Jason's a missionary kid. He believes in prayer and stuff," Lauren answered for him.

"Yes," added Jason for himself. "I definitely believe God had a hand in all of this. Of course, it takes faith to believe it. It might have been easier to believe if He'd knocked Slater down with a bolt of lightning in response to my prayer, but in my experience, God doesn't usually work that way."

"Would've been cool, though," said Woody. "I could see a picture of that on the front page of the *Orange County Register* for sure."

"But instead," said Jason, "God used Lauren and a forgotten bucket of sand to put Slater out of action for three whole days. I'd call that an effective answer to prayer under the circumstances."

"It could also just have been a coincidence," said Jill.

"It could have," answered Jason, "but that's where faith comes in. For me it's like this: I prayed for Jesus to help me, and Lauren did something she would not likely have done under similar circumstances. And then, what are the odds of a bucket of sand so totally incapacitating someone like Slater? I'd say there's more evidence for a miracle than a coincidence."

"Well, I still would've preferred the lightning bolt," said Woody. "You've got to admit, that would've been awesome."

“Woody!” said Jill. “This is serious! I’m trying to understand this.”

“I don’t see what there is to understand,” said Woody in his pragmatic way. “Jason and Lauren laid it out pretty straight. You either believe it or you don’t.”

“Okay, so what about you?” challenged Jill. “Time for the moment of truth. Do you believe it?”

Woody looked down for a moment, turned his drink around a few times, and sat up in his chair. Finally he looked at Jill. “I’d have to say I’m willing to acknowledge the possibility.”

“How about you, Jill? What do you think?” asked Lauren.

“I don’t know. It’s not that I don’t believe you, but it’s a little hard for me to rationalize.” Jill stopped for a minute, and then continued. “I guess it’s the lawyer in me coming out. You know, in criminal law it’s a constant search for the truth. Either that or you know the truth and you’re trying to cast doubt on it, trying to create reasonable doubt in the minds of the jury. But miracles and prayer and God don’t generally make appearances in my line of work.”

“I can imagine,” said Jason. “Still, I have a feeling that you believe it more than you don’t. Am I right?”

Jill looked at Jason for a moment and then pointed her finger at him. “You’re a shrewd one, you are.” She pulled her finger back in and turned her head toward the room where the waiters were hustling back and forth between the kitchen and the tables. After a minute she turned back and looked at Jason. “Yes, I suppose if you’d nail me down to an answer, I’d have to say that I’m inclined to believe it more than I doubt it.”

“Alright then,” said Jason raising his glass, “let’s drink to faith, and to a God who is still in the business of doing miracles.”

“A strange toast, but ... why not?” said Jill, raising her glass. “To faith and all that goes with it!”

They ordered more beer with dinner and more toasts flowed forth.

“Now I have a question for you, Jason,” said Jill as the four worked through their plates. “You’re a Christian, a missionary kid, even. And yet you’re drinking beer. How does that work? Aren’t Christians like not supposed to drink and stuff?”

“Well, in our group we don’t believe drinking is a sin,” answered Jason.

“And they don’t believe sex is a sin either,” added Lauren with a broad smile.

Jason blushed.

“Is that so? Man, what group is that?” asked Woody.

“It’s called The Family,” answered Lauren. “Used to be the Children of God. Started right here in Huntington Beach, believe it or not, with a bunch of hippies.”

“Sounds familiar,” answered Jill. “And you’re Christian *missionaries*?”

Jason hesitated. “Yeah, they are,” he finally said, and dug back into his plate.

Lauren read the signal, and casually changed the topic to something else.

When the evening was over Jill insisted on paying the bill. Woody protested, saying he’d invited them with the understanding that the party was on him, but Jill wouldn’t have it—she was going to pay.

“I want to tell you guys that this has been a great time for me,” said Jill. “It really has. I had a boss once who used to say that you can learn something new every day if you pay attention, and all that about prayer and God and ways that He works, that is definitely something new for me. Very informative.”

“Yes, it was,” said Lauren. “It’s been somewhat of a crash course for me as well. But I like it. It’s invigorating.”

“Okay,” said Woody, “let’s ride. Do you want me to drive, Jill? I quit drinking over an hour ago.”

“Sure,” said Jill, handing Woody the keys. Fifteen minutes later Woody maneuvered Jill’s Camry alongside the curb in front of Lauren’s house and Lauren and Jason piled out.

“Thanks so much guys,” said Lauren. “That was really fun.”

“Yeah, thanks,” said Jason. “It was great to meet you guys.”

“It was good to meet you,” said Jill.

“We’ll see you soon,” said Woody as he pulled away from the curb and down the street. Lauren and Jason watched the car disappear around a corner. They turned and walked toward the house. When they got to the door Lauren turned toward Jason and took his hand.

“I’m sorry about back there in the restaurant. I hope I didn’t embarrass you.”

“Nah, it’s okay, I guess. I just didn’t feel like going through that whole story again.”

“Jason, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Do you think we’re going to sleep together? I mean, sooner or later, do you think we will? Like, it wouldn’t be wrong for you or anything like that.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Would you want to ... I mean, sometime?”

“Yeah, sure, sometime.”

“Good. But I don’t want it to be tonight. I don’t want the first time to be right after we’ve been drinking. I want to think about it a little more.”

“Sure, that’s cool,” said Jason. “But a goodnight kiss, that would be alright, no?”

“Yeah, that would be alright,” said Lauren, stepping closer to Jason and tilting her head. “I think we can handle that.”

They kissed a long gentle kiss and said good night. Lauren came up with a notebook, took Jason’s number,

and wrote hers down for him. Jason took the paper and put it in his shirt pocket. Then he reached into his pants pockets and pulled out his car keys. A few coins came out with the keys, and tinkled onto the walkway. Jason reached down and picked them up with his free hand. It seemed to take a long time and when he stood up he lost his balance for a minute. He took a deep breath and looked at Lauren.

“I guess we have been drinking,” said Lauren.

“Yeah,” said Jason, shaking his head. “I’m glad I lost my balance now before I started driving. I didn’t think I’d drunk that much.”

“You can spend the night if you don’t mind sleeping on the couch.”

“I don’t mind at all,” said Jason. “I’ve slept on that couch before and it’s a winner.”

“Alright,” said Lauren with a laugh, “come on in.”

Jason followed Lauren into the house. She flipped on a few lights and then came up with a couple of sheets and a blanket. “Come on, I’ll help you make up the bed ... I mean the couch.”

The job done in under two minutes, Lauren went in and grabbed one of the two pillows from her bed and brought it out to Jason. “Here you go,” she said, handing it to him.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And thanks for everything.”

“If you mean the thing with Slater, you already thanked me.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that actually, although for a rescue like that I think multiple thanks are warranted. But I was thinking of the whole day, the evening, the great time I’ve had since I met you.”

“I’ve had a great time too.”

“Your friend Woody is quite a guy. Where did you meet him?”

“Surfing. He came up to me at the beach one day and started talking. We’ve been talking ever since.”

“Jill’s real nice too.”

“Yes, she is. I liked her.”

“Is she Woody’s girlfriend or what?”

“Why? Are you going to put a move on her?”

“No!”

“Hey, take it easy. I was just kidding,” laughed Lauren. “I’ll bet there are plenty of guys who would like to, though.”

“Yeah. She’s a looker.”

“Woody told me she paid her way through law school modeling for *Playboy*.”

“I don’t doubt it. She certainly has the job qualifications. Is that the first time you’ve met her?”

“Yes, first time. Woody’s been talking about her for a couple of months, though. He likes her a lot, but I have a feeling this was the first time they’ve gone out together.”

“How did he meet her?”

“He told me he needed her professional services—as a lawyer, not as a *Playboy* model. He didn’t tell me why and I didn’t ask.”

Jason nodded and a minute later yawned, bringing his fist up to cover it. Lauren yawned too, and they both managed a weak and tired laugh.

“It’s been a long day, hasn’t it?” said Jason.

“It sure has,” Lauren said through another yawn. “By the way, do you need to use the phone? Do you have to call your aunt and uncle to tell them you’re not coming home?”

“No, they’re on vacation. They’ll be gone for a couple of weeks.”

“Well, good night then,” said Lauren, heading toward her bedroom.

“Good night, Lauren. See you tomorrow.”

- 2 -

SUNDAY: LAUREN

Jason woke up as the first light found its way through the blinds and into the room. He stretched under the blanket and looked over to Lauren’s door. It was closed and would probably stay that way for quite awhile he figured. There wasn’t much sense getting up early on a Sunday if you didn’t have to. He rolled over and tried to go back to sleep but couldn’t. *I could read some Word*, he thought, but then he remembered he didn’t have any Word with him. Didn’t have any Word with him? Who was he trying to kid? He didn’t have any Word, period.

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. He did have a Bible, a *Memory Book*, and a *Basic MOP*. But where were they? Packed away somewhere. They could have been in Nome, Alaska for all the good they were doing him. He’d read them for awhile, the first few weeks he’d been in the States. But then he’d got into work and school and surfing and there just wasn’t time. Besides, he wasn’t a missionary anymore and reading the Word made him think about his family and friends and missionary work and it was uncomfortable. He didn’t want to think about it.

Praying was a little different. He still prayed but mostly because lots of things went wrong, and he was in the habit of praying when they did. *I guess that’s*

why I prayed like a madman yesterday, he thought. Things were going real wrong. *Still, praying only when you need help is almost like not praying at all.* And witnessing? Forget about it. Yesterday was as close as he'd gotten in a long time. He had to face the facts—he was on the scrap heap as far as any usefulness to the Lord went. He knew he was going to be when he chose to stay in the States and pursue his own life, but what changed? Why did it suddenly feel so different? *Just because you got in a tight spot and the Lord got you out? And how do you know it was the Lord, really? Maybe it was a coincidence, like Jill said.*

And what about the rest of your life? Where are you going? Or rather, where is life taking you because you know you're not really going anywhere. You learned something about computers in your first eighteen years, so you're doing that instead of flipping burgers. And you're going to the local community college picking up enough credits to maybe get into a real college eventually. So maybe, in four or five years, you'll be able to land a better job than you have now. But let's face it, you'll still be punching a computer for someone else. You'll be helping them get rich while you move upward like a snail in a snowdrift. Your future doesn't look too bright. Not too bright at all.

Jason pulled the covers over his head and groaned. He tried to think of something positive, but there didn't seem to be a positive thought in reach. The negative kept coming at him like a runaway freight train. He started thinking back over his life and he could see every rotten thing he'd ever done. He knew he couldn't keep going down this road. He had to get desperate.

Curling to his knees until he was a covered ball on the couch, Jason poured out his heart to the Lord for the second time in less than twenty-four hours. “Jesus, Jesus, please save me, Lord. I need You, Lord, I need You desperately. Rebuke the Devil, Lord, who is barraging me with these thoughts. I rebuke you, Satan,

in the name of Jesus! I rebuke you, you God-damned Devil, in Jesus' name! Lord, I've done hardly anything for You when You've done so much for me. I left my plow in the field because I wanted a change, I wanted to do something different, I wanted to go to school, I wanted to earn some money. I know that I shouldn't have, Lord, but I did. But in spite of that I know that You still love me, Jesus. I know You do. I learned that all my life, I know it from Your Word, I know it's true. I haven't been hit like this for a long, long time. I haven't had to face this kind of attack for years. Please deliver me, Jesus. Deliver me, Lord, in Jesus' name!”

Jason continued to pray, pouring out his heart to the Lord, until finally he had nothing left to pray with. He stretched out and lay face down on the couch, his tear-stained face buried in his hands. He was totally spent—drained—but it felt good. It had been a long time since he'd really gotten desperate with the Lord. He knew the Lord was going to answer him, but he didn't think it would be so quick.

Get up and get a pen and paper, a voice seemed to say inside his head. *There's something I want to say to you and I want you to write it down.*

Jason got up and found a pen and notepad by the phone. He took them to the table. There was enough light to see clearly, although he could sense it was still early. “Alright Lord,” he whispered, “I'm ready with the pen and paper.” As soon as he said it the words started to come and he wrote them as fast as he could.

Jason, it's so good to talk to you! It's been a long time and I've missed you. I miss our times together. I'm still here. I haven't changed. I still want to talk with you, to commune with you. There are a few things I want to tell you. The first and most important is that I love you. I don't love you any less than I ever have.

Things have changed, yes, but My love hasn't changed. I love you, just you. Remember the Letter with that title? Well, it's true—I love you. Don't let the Enemy ever tell you different for I will always love you.

I am happy that you are calling out to Me in your time of need. I will help you like I helped you yesterday. I will answer your prayers as you continue to call out to Me. I'm happy that you are standing up for Me again. I'm proud of you for following those checks and speaking those words I put in your heart to speak, to Lauren and to her friends!

You can have a tremendous witnessing ministry, Jason. There are so many who still need Me and need to learn about Me. Teach them! You can, because you have been trained to since you were a child. Start with these that I have led you to. Dig out the Word that you have and read it. You will need your strength, for the battles will be great, but I will help you to win if you spend time with Me in My Word, and if you continue to call out to Me. That's all for now, Jason, but let's talk again soon. And remember, what you've done or not done in the past doesn't change My love for you.

Jason stopped writing and tore the top page from the notepad. He took the pad and pen and put it back by the phone. Then he went back to the couch and lay down, pulling the top sheet and blanket over him. He pulled the paper out from under the blanket and read it. "Thank You, Lord," he whispered. "Thank You, Jesus."

He didn't remember dropping back to sleep, but he must have because when he woke up the prophecy was on the floor next to the couch and Lauren, in a short black silk robe, was making coffee in the

kitchen. Jason flung back the covers and swung his feet to the floor. Lauren heard him and looked out from the kitchen.

"Good morning," she said. "How did you sleep?"

"Great," said Jason. "How about you?"

"I slept good too, thanks. Want some coffee? It will be ready in a minute."

"Sure."

When the coffee was ready Lauren poured two cups and sat down with Jason at the kitchen table. They talked and laughed, enjoying the coffee and each other's company. After awhile Lauren asked Jason if he'd like an omelet.

"Sure. That would be great."

"What do you want in it?" asked Lauren, as she stood up and put a frying pan on the stove. "Cheese? Tomatoes? Onions? Bell peppers?"

"It all sounds good," said Jason.

"Hey, if you want it all you're going to have to help."

"I'm there, babe," said Jason, standing up. "Tell me what to do."

"So I'm a babe now, huh?" said Lauren, turning toward Jason with a coy smile. Jason looked at her leaning against the stove, a cup of coffee in her hand, her shapely legs crossed, her free hand on her hip, her black silk robe matching her glistening hair.

"You are definitely a babe," he said as he closed the gap between them, put his arm around her waist and kissed her. Lauren put her arm around his neck and kissed him back, her body pressed against his.

"Are you agreeing to what I'm agreeing to?" Lauren asked with a saucy look in her eye.

"Um..."

"Don't you, like, want to show me God loves me or something?"

"Well, if you put it that way," Jason answered, still mentally calculating if this was something he

wanted to do right now. “I guess you’ve thought about it enough, then?”

“Mmmm,” was Lauren’s only answer as she kissed him again and started fingering the rim of the beach shorts he’d slept in.

That ended the calculations, and soon they were in the bedroom kissing, caressing, hugging and undressing each other. Between kisses they managed a quick conversation about their sexual histories and, each satisfied that the situation was kosher, continued doing what came naturally until they both lay pleasantly exhausted in each others’ arms.

A minute or two later Jason dozed off. He wasn’t asleep long but it was enough time for Lauren to throw on her robe and make two cheese, tomato, onion, bell pepper omelets with whole-wheat toast and orange juice. She put it all on a tray and brought it back to the bedroom.

Jason opened his eyes as she came through the door. “I guess I fell asleep again,” he said sheepishly. “I feel guilty.”

“Hey, you deserve a little sleep after such a stellar performance.”

“You think so?” said Jason, smiling.

“I do. Not only that, but I think you deserve some breakfast too,” said Lauren as she set the tray on the bed and sat down across from Jason.

Jason looked at the food and then across at Lauren. He leaned across the tray and kissed her. “Lauren, you are the best thing that’s happened to me in a long, long time—so good that I half expect the Lord to somehow be behind it. I’m so glad that I met you.”

“Me too,” said Lauren, mildly embarrassed but excited by Jason’s intensity. “Should we eat? Before it gets cold?”

“Yeah, for sure. Uh ... do you mind if I pray for the food?”

“Go ahead.”

Jason reached over the tray and took Lauren’s hands. When he closed his eyes Lauren closed hers too. “Thank You, Jesus, for this food. Bless Lauren for fixing it, and really help us to enjoy it. And thanks for the fun time we had before breakfast.”

Lauren blushed and handed Jason his plate.

“It was fun, wasn’t it?” she whispered.

Jason smiled, widened his eyes, and slowly moved his head up and down in an exaggerated nod. Then he cut off a piece of his omelet and put it in his mouth. Lauren watched him as he chewed, waiting for a response. She had to wait while he cut off a bigger piece and devoured it, washing it down with a gulp of orange juice. He was about to put the third piece in his mouth when he caught her eye. “Lauren, you should eat—this is delicious. You’re going to eat, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Because if you’re not hungry I could...”

“I’m going to eat. If you’re really hungry we can make some more.”

“Don’t tempt me, I might get addicted! This is a great omelet.”

“Well, thank you,” said Lauren as she took her first bite. Then after a pause, added, “It is good, if I do say so myself.”

Lauren and Jason finished their breakfast, then Lauren set the dishes aside and returned with a cluster of grapes in her hand. They took turns plopping the grapes into each other’s mouths, kissing again every so often, and when the last grape was gone they made love again. Afterwards they lay quietly side by side.

“That was so nice,” said Jason.

“It was,” said Lauren. “Very nice.”

“Lauren, can I ask you a question?”

“I sense a heavy one. You can ask if you don’t mind if I don’t answer.”

“That’s fair.”

“Go ahead then. Ask away.”

“You said that you hadn’t had sex for a whole year. Why is that?”

“Well, it wasn’t that great ... a one-time thing, really, with this guy at work. He is a pilot, one of the few unmarried ones around. I like him a lot but I’m not in love with him. He wanted me to marry him. I could have. I like him and he’s a good guy, great paycheck, these pilots, and good prospects, but I just didn’t want it. So I had to back away, because we still work together—not all the time, but we are on a lot of flights together. And in the airline industry you know a lot about what is happening, who is with who and all. So I didn’t want to get involved with anyone else in the industry because I didn’t want to hurt him, which could jeopardize my own career. It’s a pretty competitive field out there, so you have to be careful. And then I haven’t met anyone outside of work that I really liked that much until you.”

Jason nodded as he took in this new information.

“How old was he?” he asked.

“Thirty.”

“Ah.”

“Does that bother you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a little. Feels a little odd I guess. I’m a full two years younger than you.”

“Well, that makes little difference to me. At least you’re taller than I am.”

“You mean he wasn’t?”

“No, he was a midget. He had to put phone books on the pilot’s seat to be able to see out the window. But the airline didn’t mind because they got the phone books free and they saved money on his uniforms since they didn’t need as much material. On in-flight food too—he didn’t eat much.”

“So you’re a comedian as well as a flight attendant, huh?” said Jason as he grabbed Lauren and started tickling her.

Lauren laughed. “I couldn’t resist.” She rolled on top of Jason and kissed him. “So now let me ask you a question.”

“Okay.”

“Same question you asked me. You said your last time was six months ago. Since you’re obviously okay with having sex, how come it’s been so long since you’ve had it? And don’t tell me you’ve had a hard time getting girls.”

“Well, there was one girl, met her in one of my classes. But it only lasted a few weeks before differences in our expectations came to a head, and she called it off. That was about a year ago. After that it was another girl from class, but it was a one-night thing at a party, and she was so gone I hardly even count it. After that I kind of kept to myself, mostly because I kind of got sick of the whole dating scene when I didn’t find anybody who had what I was looking for.”

“And what was that?”

“I wasn’t entirely sure myself, but I knew what I wasn’t looking for—one of those girls who isn’t going anywhere, who only thinks of parties and shoes and clothes and phone calls, and has no vision of what she wants to make of her life. Funny thing is, I’m not really going anywhere either. I’m studying and working, but whenever I start to think about what I’m doing it all for, it somehow feels pretty pointless.”

“And so you stop thinking about it.”

“Exactly,” answered Jason, surprised that she understood his feelings. “Growing up, there was always a purpose to everything we did—God’s greater plan and salvation for all mankind, becoming the kind of disciple God wanted you to be and things like that, sometimes to the point of aggravation, at least for me. It was one of the things I wanted to get away from when I chose to stay here. I never thought I’d come to miss having that kind of purpose and vision for my life.”

“So why don’t you go back to it, then?”

“That’s a good question.”

“Is it possible?”

“Oh yes, of course. I mean, there are steps to go through, like applying to join any organization or even corporation, but I’m sure it would work out if I really wanted to.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to?”

“Man, can you ask the questions!”

“Sorry. It’s not really any of my business. Was just curious, I guess. Your face seems to light up when you speak about your past or this group.”

“I know, which makes your questions difficult to answer. To be honest, I never seriously considered rejoining for a number of reasons. For one, it’s a hard life. It’s something you really have to want to do. Another thing is it’s humbling to go back. It’s an admission that whatever reasoning made you decide to leave was wrong.”

“Why? A lot of people try something different for awhile and then go back to what they were doing before. That doesn’t mean their reasoning in doing it was flawed.”

“Maybe, but it’s more complicated than that ... different.”

“It doesn’t sound that complicated to me. It sounds like you could get back in if you wanted to.”

“Yeah, I probably could, but it’s complicated.”

“If you say so.”

Ten minutes went by with Jason and Lauren each absorbed in their own thoughts. *It’s amazing the difference one day can make*, thought Jason. Before this Slater thing he hardly prayed, never spoke of the Family or his history in it, didn’t hear from the Lord, and had no sex life. Now he was praying and getting his prayers answered, witnessing right and left almost in spite of himself, talking about rejoining the Family, beginning a relationship with a beautiful

girl who was dynamite in bed, and even hearing from the Lord again. It was a little overwhelming to have it happening all at once.

Lauren stretched, her head back, one arm over it, and the other extended out from her side. She moved her head from side to side, stretched just a little further, and then relaxed. “That feels so good,” she said with a sigh.

“It looks good too,” said Jason, who had raised himself up on one elbow to watch. Lauren pulled the sheet over her breasts in a mock show of modesty.

“Naughty boy,” she scolded with a laugh. “Hey, let’s do something.”

“Sure ... what?”

“A walk on the beach?”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

Lauren swung her legs off the bed but before she stood up Jason put his hand on her arm. “Lauren, I’m glad we didn’t wait long. After what you said last night I thought it might take awhile, but I’m glad it didn’t.”

Lauren looked at Jason for a moment. “I’m glad too. I thought about it and concluded that you were mature enough to handle it.”

“I like to consider myself a mature person,” said Jason with a smile, “and I’m glad you concur.”



Jason and Lauren made their way to the beach and headed south toward Newport, walking barefoot near the water’s edge, their shoes hanging by the laces over their shoulders. They walked hard for the first forty-five minutes and then slowed down for the next fifteen. Then they turned around and repeated the pace on the way back. There were a few surfers out and they watched them as they headed back up the beach. A half a mile from the Huntington Beach Pier they stopped and grabbed a bite to eat at Zack’s Too, a beach supply rental shop that also offered a limited

menu of snacks and drinks. They sat on metal chairs and watched people make their way on the wide paved path that cut through the sand, running parallel to Pacific Coast Highway and the water's edge. There were rollerbladers, cyclists, skateboarders, joggers, walkers, young people, old people, kids and babies in jogging strollers, black people, white people, Orientals, Latinos, yuppies, hippies, punks, surfers, fishermen, bums, and millionaires all out enjoying the beach on a Sunday.

Jason always liked the beach but something was different today. He started thinking of his family in India. He sent them emails every once in awhile, but he didn't think too much about them most of the time. But suddenly he felt burdened to pray for them so he did, silently praying for his folks and each of his brothers and sisters. He prayed for their work and protection and for the Lord's supply. He prayed for other missionaries he knew in different parts of the world. Then he prayed for his friends that had left the Family—the ones who were doing all right and the ones who weren't. Finally he prayed for himself and for Lauren, that he could find a way to tell her more about Him, and pray with her to receive Jesus into her heart.

"Should we get going?" asked Jason.

"Yes," said Lauren. "I've got to start getting ready for tomorrow's flight."

"Where are you going?" Jason asked as they angled toward the water.

"L.A., New York. New York, Paris. Paris, L.A."

"Wow ... real globe-trotter, huh?"

"Yeah, right ... look who's talking."

"When do you get back?"

"Friday."

"Can I see you then?"

"I should hope so," she said taking his arm and leaning her head on his shoulder.

"There is one thing I'd like to do with you before you leave." The words popped out before Jason could stop himself.

"Oh really? What is that?"

"Well, we've been talking about these things, God, answers to prayer, preaching the Gospel and all that, and I think you've understood it all."

"Uh-huh. Well, I did get some catechism in school, but to be honest, I'm a little hazy exactly what you mean by all this 'preaching the Gospel' business. Not that I haven't heard it before, but I guess I've never really had a specific reason to be interested in exactly what it means until now. What does it mean?"

Jason cleared his throat, watched another couple walk past them, and turned back to Lauren.

"Well, the Gospel means the good news, and the good news is basically that Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for all the sins of mankind, and that if people will believe in Him as their Savior, and accept Him into their hearts and lives, then they can partake of His gift of forgiveness, and inherit the eternal life that is promised to all true sons and daughters of God, and be welcomed, at the end of this life's road, back to their Father's house, or Heaven, to be with Jesus forever."

"Sounds straightforward enough."

"It is, and it's all summed up in one simple verse from the Bible, that if you took catechism, you may be familiar with."

"I wouldn't count on it," answered Lauren. "I was six years old."

"Okay, well, it basically says that God so loved the world—which means He loves you, because you are part of the world, right?"

"Yes," said Lauren with a nod.

"...that He gave His only begotten Son—Jesus—that whosoever will believe in Him should not perish—or end up in Hell—but have everlasting life—in Heaven."

"And that's it?"

“As far as Heaven is concerned, yes. There’s a lot more when it comes to being a follower and a disciple, like I told you, but that won’t affect your salvation, as we call it, or your guaranteed ticket to Heaven, in one way or another. That ticket is a free gift given to anybody who simply reaches out their hand in faith to take it—and the really cool thing about this ticket is that it never expires, and can’t ever be voided, no matter what you do, or how good or bad you are.”

“And so preaching the Gospel is basically like handing out this ticket to people?”

“Exactly. It’s for everyone.”

“So do you have one for me?”

“You want one?” asked Jason.

“If it’s everything you say it is,” she answered.

“No, it’s not an if. Like Woody said, you either believe it or you don’t.”

“Then I believe,” answered Lauren with a tone of determination.

“Okay. Then repeat this prayer after me.”

“What? Right here?”

“Yes. You want the ticket, don’t you?”

“Sure. Okay. Why not? I mean, yes, I would love to.”

“Okay. Close your eyes. I’m serious about this, Lauren. Now, repeat after me: Jesus...”

Jason prayed the prayer and Lauren repeated it after him, asking Jesus to come into her heart, to forgive her sins and to give her His free gift of eternal life. Jason also included a phrase requesting the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

“What’s this infilling of the Holy Spirit have to do with anything?” asked Lauren when the prayer was over. “I mean, what’s that all about? When I was a kid going to catechism I learned that the Holy Spirit was part of the Holy Trinity, but I never heard of ‘getting filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Why do you ask for that?”

Jason hesitated. The phrase had popped out more by force of habit than anything else, and he now had to dig somewhat deeper into his memory banks to recall the significance of it. “Well, the Holy Spirit gives you power to witness, the ability to tell other people about this same thing.”

They talked for another hour, Lauren asking questions and Jason answering them with snippets of verses and stories from the Bible that were starting to come back to him in such clarity that he felt as if he’d heard them spoken just yesterday. There was no doubt about it. In the parlance of the Family, Lauren was a total sheep.

“Wow,” Lauren interjected during a lull in the conversation, “I mean, where does all this stuff come from? I swear you’ve quoted more Bible than I’ve ever heard in any sermon—though I haven’t heard many.”

Jason shrugged. “I don’t know. Most of it I feel like I’ve known since birth. A lot of it comes from the MO Letters I mentioned. There are over 3000 of them. Berg was big on explaining the Bible and making it simple to understand.”

“Three thousand letters! Did you read them all?”

“No. A lot of them were written when I was a kid. But I read a lot of them. Over half of them, for sure.”

“Well, you sure seem to know your stuff.”

Jason smiled. “Thanks. I’m really glad you prayed to ask Jesus into your heart. It ... it feels good to know that that’s taken care of.”

“So what do I do now?” asked Lauren.

“I guess you’ll be pretty busy packing and all once we get back.”

“Yeah, why?”

“Well, if you have time in the next couple of days, you should try to get yourself a Bible.”

"I'll have some time in New York. I can get one there."

"Good. Get a King James Version. There are all kinds of translations of the Bible but the King James Version is the best."

"Why is that?"

"Oh, a whole list of reasons. I don't remember them all right now. But basically that group of translators really got the whole thing right, whereas some of the more modern translations kind of screwed certain things up. It's in King James English, sort of Shakespearean, but not as bad, so it takes a little getting used to. But once you do, I think you'll like it. It's very powerful."

"All right then, King James it is."

"Good. Don't bother with the Old Testament for now. It's a bit more involved. Start by reading the Gospel of John. It's a good book to warm yourself up to the Bible with. Then read the other Gospels, by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. That'll give you a pretty clear picture of Who Jesus was. If you finish all those before you're back, then read Acts, the Epistles, Psalms, Proverbs, Genesis, Revelation—whatever looks good."

"Isn't it all supposed to be good? After all, it's the Bible."

"Some parts are more interesting or easy to understand than others, that's all. You'll see when you read it. Just remember, start with the Gospel of John."

"King James Version, Gospel of John," Lauren repeated. "Okay, got it. And we'd better get going."

On their way back, when they got near the pier, they saw a lone surfer carrying his board toward the water's edge. "That looks like Woody," said Lauren.

"I think it is," said Jason.

"Hey, Woody!" yelled Lauren.

Woody stopped walking, looked their way, and waved. He stuck his board in the sand and ran over to

where they were walking. "Jason and the L. woman," he said, spreading his arms wide. "Good to see you."

"You too," said Jason and Lauren in unison.

"Last night was a blast, wasn't it?" said Woody.

"Sure was," said Lauren.

"Hey," Woody said, "talk about a coincidence or miracle or whatever, Jill wanted to get back in touch with you, Jason. I gave her your number, Lauren. Hope that's alright. It's the only one I had. So you can be expecting a call from her."

"Okay, we'll be expecting it," said Lauren.

"You guys take care, then," said Woody.

"You too, Wood," said Jason. "See you later."



Back at the house Jason and Lauren worked together to make a simple dinner. They worked quietly, both a little sad that the weekend was ending and with it their time together. They both knew they'd see each other soon—Jason was going to come over Saturday morning—but it seemed a long wait after an intense and emotional two days.

When they'd finished eating Jason asked, "What time do you have to leave for your flight tomorrow?"

"Seven-thirty. What time is your first class?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Do you want to spend the night?"

"Absolutely," said Jason. "I was feeling sad about leaving."

"Me too," said Lauren. She pulled her arms over her head in a graceful feline stretch. "It'll be nice to have a little more time together."

"Yes," said Jason, pushing his chair away from the table, "especially if you keep that up."

Lauren locked her eyes on Jason's, got up slowly, and walked enticingly over to him. Slowly she straddled him, lowering herself onto his lap, her hands behind her head. She then stretched her whole body, tightening her legs, pulling her elbows and head back and

thrusting her breasts forward. “You mean this?” she asked as innocently as possible.

“Yes,” said Jason, with a satisfied groan.

“You’re a fun guy Jason. I’m glad we met.”

“You’re more fun than me,” said Jason. “You’re a wild woman.”

“You think so, eh?” she asked as she climbed off him. “If you do the dishes I’ll check the message machine and see if Jill called.”

“That’s right, I’m glad you remembered.”

Two people don’t generate many dishes and Jason had them almost finished by the time Lauren handed him a note with Jill’s phone number on it. “She wants you to call her. She said she really enjoyed the conversation last night and wants to know where she can find out more about prayer, miracles and any other related topics. Those were her exact words.”

“Should I call her now?”

“She won’t be home this evening. She said to try and reach her tomorrow night.”

“Okay,” said Jason as he folded the paper and put it in his pocket. “Where’s the broom?”

“Over there on the side of the fridge.”

Jason got the broom and dustpan and did a quick sweep of the kitchen. “It’s still pretty early. Do you want to go out and see a movie?”

“Not really,” said Lauren. “I wouldn’t mind getting a video, though.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Jason walked down to the local Blockbuster and picked out a movie while Lauren showered and packed for her flight. Jason took a shower when he got back and then they settled in for the movie, slouched on the couch, feet on the coffee table, microwave popcorn in a bowl between them, remote within reach.

Ninety minutes later, the movie over and the popcorn gone, Lauren stretched another enticing stretch. Jason stood up and pulled Lauren up to

him. “You know I can’t resist those stretches,” he said as he scooped her into his arms and headed for the bedroom.

“That’s the idea,” said Lauren with a giggle. “This is kind of nice, getting carried into the bedroom. Romantic.”

Some time later, with Lauren asleep in his arms, Jason prayed. He thanked the Lord for the change that was taking place in his life. He thanked Him again for Lauren, for saving him from Slater, for the ability to still witness. It amazed him that he’d been able to do it. He knew it was the Lord’s Spirit—he’d actually felt it, the Holy Spirit, when he was witnessing and speaking of his faith and the Lord. He’d hardly witnessed a lick in two years, but it still seemed that now, when he got started, boom, there was the Holy Spirit using him to answer questions and speak to Lauren, and even Woody and Jill. Acts 1:8 came into his mind, a verse he’d learned and reviewed often in his childhood. He knew he shouldn’t be surprised that it was becoming a new reality to him, but somehow he was—surprised and thankful.

He prayed for Lauren, that she’d find time to get a Bible, and grow through reading it. He prayed for Jill and for Woody, that they’d get saved. He prayed for his safety, that the Lord would protect him from Slater—the longest and more ardent prayer of all that night, because he knew Slater was going to come after him. He thanked the Lord one more time for the miracles He’d done in the last two days and then he fell asleep.

MONDAY: THE HITCHHIKER

The alarm went off at quarter to seven. Lauren hit the off button, crawled over Jason, gave him a big kiss, and then got up and started getting dressed. Jason watched her as she put on her panties and bra, her blouse, her pantyhose and her uniform. She looked at herself in the full-length mirror mounted on the door and straightened her collar. Then she turned around and looked at Jason watching her from the bed. "When I get back you can watch me take it off again," she said.

"That'll be nice," said Jason as he rolled out of bed. "I'll hold that thought until you get back."

"You do that," said Lauren.

"Lauren, should we pray together before we start the week?"

"Sure."

They both sat on the edge of the bed and Jason prayed that they'd have a good week. He prayed that the Lord would keep Lauren safe as she traveled and that He would protect him from Slater. He prayed for his family in India, that the Lord would keep them healthy and safe and that He would continue to provide for them. When he was finished Lauren thanked the Lord that they had met and for the time they'd had together.

“Amen,” said Jason, squeezing her arm.

After a coffee, toast, and an orange juice each, Lauren and Jason kissed on the back steps and Jason walked to the garage and started his car. He drove out into the street just as the airline company van pulled up to get Lauren. When he stopped at the corner stop sign he watched in the rearview mirror as she boarded the van, and saw the van pull away. *What a weekend*, he thought as the van made a U-turn and headed up the street. *What a woman*.

Jason drove home and stowed his board and wetsuit in the garage before changing into a fresh pair of jeans and shirt. He grabbed an apple from the fridge and ate it as he drove up Beach Boulevard, down Warner Avenue, and into the parking lot of Coastline Community College. After retrieving his backpack from the trunk he found his classroom and slid into his seat at one minute after eight. It was Monday morning and the week was on.



By noon he'd finished three classes and was having a hamburger at a place near the college. From there it was a half-hour drive to work where he spent another three hours entering data into a computer. He'd had this job for about four months and it paid fairly well for part-time work. Sometimes it was interesting, but lately it was not much more than typing. Still, it paid all right, and he needed the money. It amazed him sometimes how much it cost to live, even when you were living frugally. Without provisioning, when you had to pay cash for every need, money went out as fast as it came in. He was thankful he had his aunt and uncle. He paid a flat rate each month that covered his room and board. He knew it would cost him a lot more in another situation.

He'd thought about getting a place of his own. He felt funny sometimes being twenty years old and in

a “living at home” situation. He'd talked to a couple of people about going in on a place, but nothing ever came of it. When he thought about it he'd decided that living with his aunt and uncle was a good deal. Because it was a stable situation he didn't have to deal with a lot of uncertainties that he might have, like when your roommate can't come up with his share of the rent, or worrying about being busted for someone else's dope.

Dope. Now that was a subject. He'd smoked grass a few times the first year he was in the States. A few times at parties, and a few times at night on the beach with a group of people he used to hang with. The first few times it was kind of fun—similar to having a few drinks in some ways but more of a mind thing. But by the time he quit it just made him tired and paranoid. It was a weird type of paranoia. Part of it was a fear of getting busted, which wasn't really paranoia since that was a real threat, although not always an imminent one. Thinking what your friends, the people you were getting stoned with, were thinking was where the real paranoia came in. Most of the time it was confined to thinking that they were talking negatively about him. Sometimes when that happened he'd know it was marijuana induced, and although it was real and bothered him, he knew it would pass when he came down. It was just something you had to deal with when you smoked dope.

But one time at a party that a friend of his was having he imagined some people he'd just met were planning to take him outside and beat him senseless. It was so real that he heard the guys planning it down to how they would handle the heat they'd get from the guy throwing the party. He was so freaked out he left immediately. A few weeks later he met one of the guys who'd been there and asked him about it. “No way,” the guy said. “Sounds like a bad case of marijuana paranoia.” Jason had to agree.

As bad as it got, Jason had to admit he probably would have kept it up, and even given hard drugs a try if not for an encounter with a recovering junkie who he picked up hitchhiking one day. It was a weekend and Jason was headed south on Pacific Coast Highway when he saw a black guy about his age with his thumb out. Hitchhiking was a rare form of transport in the new millennium—people were afraid to hitchhike and drivers were afraid to pick them up. Jason looked the guy over as he drove past and made a quick decision to pull over.

The young man grabbed his backpack and ran to the car. “Thanks,” he said as he opened the front door. “Where are you headed?”

“Oceanside.”

“I’m going to San Diego but Oceanside’s closer than here.”

“Hop in then. Put your stuff in the back seat.”

As they drove south they talked about the weather, movies, basketball. Finally Jason asked him if he lived in San Diego.

“I’m going to. If I can talk my brother and his wife into letting me stay.”

“Where do you live now?”

“Portland. But I can’t go back there.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s too hard to keep away from junk there. I’m a heroin junkie,” he said, bringing his right hand up near the dash where Jason could see it. “Name’s Eric.”

Jason laughed as he reached over and took Eric’s hand for a brief but firm handshake. “Glad to meet you. I’m Jason.”

“Why are you laughing?” asked Eric, in a tone that indicated he wasn’t offended, only curious.

“Don’t get me wrong,” said Jason, “but it struck me as funny the way you introduced yourself right after you told me you were a heroin junkie. I mean

the way you said it just flowed, like ‘I play right field for the San Diego Padres. Name’s Eric.’”

Eric laughed an easy laugh. “Sorry, I’ll have to watch that. In Portland everyone knows I’m an addict so I don’t have to tell them. I guess I’ll have to practice my delivery. Anyway it’s good to meet you too and thanks again for the ride. I was out there awhile.”

“Sure. I’m glad for the company so it worked out for both of us. So do you think you’ll be able to stay away from heroin in a new city?”

“A new city won’t do it but it’s a start. I’m going to get into a program and I’m pretty sure I’ll beat it. I’m determined to.”

“I guess it’s a pretty hard thing to kick.”

“Yes, it is. It’s pretty much impossible if you’re around a lot of drug people outside a program. You can’t keep away from it then. I couldn’t do it in Portland.”

As they drove south Jason and Eric talked about the perils of drug life. Eric had become addicted to heroin, but he’d tried just about every drug under the sun from crack to ecstasy. He spun off a dozen stories of friends who had died of overdoses, of dealers killed for their cash and drugs, of lives wasted or cut short. He had a way of presenting details that was matter of fact and chilling at the same time, like a detective listing the facts in a homicide. Jason knew people who could tell a good story, people who could play to the audience, even if it was only an audience of one, but he could tell that Eric wasn’t one of them. When Eric talked it was almost like he was back on the streets of Portland, back with the police cars and crack addicts, the junkies nodding away on the park benches, the dealers making money hand over fist until they got busted or killed. Eric, without trying to, made a compelling case for keeping away from drugs.

Still Jason wondered. He’d been offered a variety of drugs in the months since he’d come to the States.

He had to admit he was curious. He'd thought about giving it a try, but he hadn't so far if you didn't count marijuana.

They were almost in Oceanside when Eric asked if Jason would mind taking him to the Amtrak station. "I think I'll take the train the last leg into San Diego."

"Sure," said Jason, pulling off the freeway onto Oceanside Boulevard. As he was making his way to the station Jason told Eric about the wide variety and availability of drugs in Huntington Beach.

"I'm not surprised," said Eric. "You could probably get the same in Sioux City, Iowa or anywhere else. It's the free enterprise system."

"I guess that's right," said Jason. "You can sure get what you want in Huntington Beach. I've never tried anything except grass, but I might sometime. I'd just like to try it once."

Eric looked over at Jason but didn't say anything. Neither one of them spoke until they pulled up to the station five minutes later. "Here we are," said Jason.

"Yeah," said Eric jumping out of the car and retrieving his pack from the back seat. He dropped his pack at his feet, and leaned back into the car balancing himself with one hand on the dash and an arm over the backrest. "Thanks again for the ride, Jason. I really appreciate it."

Eric went on without giving Jason time to reply. "You mentioned you've thought about giving drugs a try, a-one-time-only-just-to-see-what-it's-like-try? Well, they're too good to try once, if you catch my drift. Every story I told you back on the road, every one of them including my own, started out just like that. 'I'll give it a try and see what it's like. I'll only do it once.' That's how every junkie, every drugged-out hooker, every doing-hard-time dealer, got into it—they all just tried it once to see what it was like and"—snap went Eric's fingers six inches from Jason's face—"it got 'em. Drugs have brought down a lot of people Jason, a lot

of people. If you are thinking about trying them, you are in danger."

The car door swung shut and a moment later Eric was out of sight. From that time on Jason never seriously considered trying hard drugs. He smoked grass one more time before deciding to quit that too.

That was a year and a half ago, Jason thought as he drove home after work. He wondered what Eric was up to, if he'd beat drugs and turned his life around. Then the thought flashed through his mind that maybe Eric was an angel sent from the Lord to warn him not to walk down the road he'd been pondering. Jason felt an urge to talk to the Lord so he started praying, just conversing with Jesus as he drove along. "Thank You so much, Jesus, for sending Eric along when You did. I don't know if he was an angel, or a junkie trying to recover like he said he was. Either way, Jesus, he really helped me. What he said really hit home, and I was able to stop flirting with drugs, and I didn't have to suffer all that I would have if You hadn't sent him to warn me. I was getting ready to get more deeply involved with drugs, and I'm sure I would have if that conversation with Eric never happened."

Jason drove on a little bit and then asked the Lord if He had anything to say on the subject. A few seconds later the Lord spoke to Jason's mind and heart, a sentence at a time.

So Jason, you think Eric might have been an angel? Well, he might be, but if you don't mind I'm not going to tell you now. As you know, I love a mystery so let's just keep it a mystery for now. You are right about Me sending him. I did arrange that and I was so happy when you heeded his advice. I can set things up, I can present people with the choices, I can even suggest which choice is good and which choice will be harmful. I do try to influence My children, but I can't make the choice for them. They have to do that themselves. I was proud of you, Jason, for making the right choice.

In the weeks to come you will have many important choices to make, for I am working in your life and I will bring these choices to you. You will know which way I would have you choose, for I will make it clear. It will not always be easy to make the right choice, for there will be sacrifices involved and, of course, the Enemy of your soul will be there to try and persuade you to go the opposite of the way I would have you go. Still, the grace to make the right choices will be there, and if you do you will be a happy and fulfilled man indeed.

One last thing Jason, dig out that micro-tape recorder you kept, so that you can record these messages from Me. The gift of prophecy is a great thing, Jason, a mighty weapon in these last days, so try to use it every day.

“All right, Lord, I’ll do it. Thank You, Jesus, thank You for talking to me,” said Jason as he made a mental note to find his micro-tape recorder.



When Jason got home he made himself some dinner and ate it while watching the news. Then he retrieved Jill’s number and gave her a call.

“Hello,” came Jill’s voice.

“Hi Jill, this is Jason.”

“Jason, ah, great. Thanks for calling. You got my message.”

“Yeah, over at Lauren’s. Also we saw Woody at the beach yesterday and he said you were going to call.”

“Yes. Well, the reason I called was because I wanted to ask you ... actually I just wanted to talk more about those things we talked about the other night. To be honest, I never talk about miracles or prayer or answers to prayer or Jesus or any of those things, but I really liked it. I used to go to church and Sunday school when I was a kid, but I quit a long time ago. I don’t know if talking about all that brought back memories or what, but I really enjoyed it—it was like discovering a whole new world.”

“It is like that, isn’t it?”

Jason and Jill talked for another thirty minutes. They talked about faith, reading the Word, praying and witnessing. They talked about their lives and then more about the world of the spirit, about spirit helpers and angels, battles and victories. Finally Jason asked her if she knew if she was going to Heaven when her life was over, and when she said she wasn’t sure he explained how she could be.

“You mean if I ask Jesus to come into my heart and forgive me for my sins He will, and He’ll guarantee I’ll end up in Heaven?” asked Jill.

“That’s right,” said Jason. “Heaven is not something you work for, contrary to popular opinion. It’s a gift that Jesus paid for when He died on the cross, and He’ll give it to anyone who asks Him for it.”

“Incredible!” said Jill.

“So do you want to pray the prayer and ask Him to come into your heart?”

“For sure,” said Jill, “I definitely want to go to Heaven.”

Jason led Jill in the salvation prayer, and then got her to pray to receive the Holy Ghost. Then he told her about getting a King James and about reading the book of John and then the other three Gospels. Jill said that she would and that she was thankful he’d prayed with her to get saved.

“I wonder if I could ask you something else, Jason?”

“Yes, sure.”

“I wonder if you could pray for me ... against depression. I get very depressed sometimes, and it’s pretty horrible.”

“Yes, of course. I can pray for you right now if you want.”

“Now is good,” said Jill.

“Lord, we pray that You will be with Jill, that You will take away any depression, any discouragement,

anything that's not of You, Jesus. We pray that You will let the light in, Jesus, because we know then that the darkness will flee of itself. We rebuke the Devil who would try to get her depressed and we pray that You will give her peace, in Jesus' name. Amen."

"Amen. Thank you, Jason. I know that's going to help."

"It will. Prayer works, and I'm speaking from recent experience!"

"So you think depression has something to do with the Devil?"

"Sure. If it's something bad then it has to come from him, right?"

"I suppose so."

"I'm sure there are a lot of psychological reasons, and I've heard there can be chemical imbalances that bring on depression, but I know that asking the Lord to take it away and to rebuke the Devil who would try to bring it on is a great way to start."

"It sounds good," said Jill. "I must say I feel good asking the Lord to take it away. I'm not so used to praying though, or even thinking in those terms, especially when it comes to the Devil. I'm not sure I even believe in a Devil. It's not something I ever think about."

"I don't think much about the Devil either, although I know he's real. The thing to keep in mind is that he can't do anything without the Lord's permission. He's powerless against God's children as long as they stay close to Him. Of course, if they get away from Him and get out of His will then the Devil can affect them, but even then only with the Lord's permission. When you get your Bible, read the first few chapters of Job. It gives a real clear picture of how it works."

"All right, I'll do that. And thanks for the explanation."

"Thank the Lord."

"What?"

"I just said 'thank the Lord,' didn't I?"

"Yes."

"I haven't said that in a long time. It just kind of popped out." Jill didn't say anything so Jason offered an explanation. "It's an expression I used to use a lot when I was doing missionary work. It's just a way of acknowledging the Lord for everything and not taking the credit yourself."

"You *are* strange guy," Jill said with a laugh. "Very different. But I must say I like that about you."

"Thank the Lord," said Jason with a laugh of his own.

"All right, I've got to go. And I will get that Bible. King James Version as per your instructions."

"That's the ticket."

"Can you recommend anything else? I'll probably go to one of those Christian bookstores, so I could get something else while I'm there."

"They might have a *Daily Light*, that's pretty good. If you hold off on anything else I might be able to come up with some good stuff for you. I could get back to you in a few days. But don't wait on the Bible, get that as soon as you can."

"Okay. Hey, Jason, it was great talking to you. And thanks."

"It was good to talk to you too, Jill. I'll see you later."

WEDNESDAY: INTERVENTION

Two days later, after Jason got up, ate breakfast, and drove to class, he continued the debate he'd been having with himself ever since he'd talked to Jill. The question—should he contact the Family's 1-800 number to get some Word for himself and Lauren and Jill—was still unresolved. Of course he knew he needed to do it. Where else was he going to be able to get the Word he needed to feed this new flock the Lord was giving him? So it really wasn't a debate, just a struggle.

Jason was sure he'd get a warm reception when he called, and he knew he'd be able to get the literature he needed. He also knew he needed to make a move soon since Jill was waiting for him to get back to her, and Lauren would be back in a couple of days. So he'd have to make the call—that was that. He'd have to explain who he was, what he needed, and work out how to get it. It wasn't a big deal and he knew the Family would be glad to hear from him, even if he hadn't talked to a Family member, outside of his own family, in over two years. It would be a bit humbling—that's what was holding him back, he knew—but he had to get over that and make the call. He'd do it tonight, he resolved.

Three hours and three classes later he was headed back to his car in the college parking lot. He got into

his old semi-faithful Toyota Tercel, and started it up. He was about to put it in reverse and begin backing out when he saw a man in a black ski mask coming toward him from the front. There were four or five rows of cars between them, but the man was closing in fast. He had something in his hand but Jason couldn't make it out. Unless ... Jason strained his eyes to see—it was a gun. *A guy in a ski mask is coming at me with a gun*, Jason thought. “Lord help me,” he prayed just as the man, still twenty yards away, raised his arm and fired. Jason ducked down as three shots entered the windshield and buried themselves in the seats above him. “Lord help me,” Jason prayed again. “What should I do?”

Follow my instructions and you'll be all right, said a voice in Jason's head. *Reach over and open the passenger side door*. Jason reached over and pulled the handle, giving the door a slight push open.

Blam—a bullet smashed the door's window, sending a shower of glass onto the pavement.

Now, use your foot to open the other door.

Jason pulled up on the handle with his foot and kicked the door open. The gunman's fifth bullet shattered the glass of the driver's side door. In the split second before he got his next instruction Jason wondered why the gunman hadn't closed the distance between them and shot him at close range.

He's afraid you could have a gun, came the voice. *We reminded him of that possibility. Now, crawl out through the passenger side door, lie down on the ground, and roll under the pickup next to your car*.

Jason followed the instructions and a moment later he was looking up at a leaky transmission. He lay still and then he heard a muffled oath and the crunch of glass underfoot. He looked over and saw two feet less than a yard away. Then another curse, louder this time, as the foot kicked at the broken glass sending a few pieces under the truck, one of them nicking Jason's face.

Lie still, said the voice. *Don't worry, he won't find you*. Jason wasn't so sure, but there was nothing he could do. If he tried to get out now he'd be shot for sure. All he could do was wait.

You're doing the right thing, the voice told Jason. *I won't lead you astray*.

More curses were coming from the gunman. It sounded like Slater, but the ski mask distorted the sound so Jason couldn't tell for sure. Still, who else could it be?

A second later Jason heard the report of the gun and the sound of crashing glass as three bullets took out the remaining windows in his car. He saw the shoes walking between his car and the truck he was hiding under, heard the glass crunch underneath them, and then just heard the shoes on the pavement until even that faded and the only sound came from the traffic out on Warner Avenue.

Jason lay under the pickup for another five minutes thanking God that he was alive. Then he thanked the Lord for sending the voice that got him through it.

You're welcome, the voice said inside Jason's head. *I'm glad we could help you*.

“Who are you?” asked Jason.

I'm one of your spirit helpers here on special assignment. Although I'm the only one speaking to you there are a few of us on this job. When you prayed, the Lord dispatched us to help you through your little situation. You did real well—you listened and did what we told you, which is why we have a good outcome.

Jason had a mouthful of questions but the voice just kept talking. It was as if he knew what Jason was going to ask and he wanted to answer him, but he didn't have much time so he was going to plow through.

I'll give you a little personal background in case you're interested. I was a spy for the Germans in World

War II. My English was good, hardly any accent at all, so they sent me to England to spy. I got a lot of training first and I was well suited for the work, but the British had some good spy catchers, clever types, and they got me after about six months. One of the guys that caught me is on this job right now. Anyway, when they catch spies in wartime they shoot them, and that's what they did to me. I died when I was about your age, so I arrived in Heaven early you might say. No regrets, though, it's been great.

Listen, we've got to go. You can get up now. Slater is gone so you don't have to worry about getting shot at any more today. There might be some other problems so be on the lookout for them. Take care.

Jason lay still under the truck a little longer. He thanked the Lord again for keeping him safe and for sending a team of spirit helpers to get him through ... what did that German spy call it? ... "His little situation." Finally he rolled out from under the truck, and went over to look at his car. The front windshield had three bullet holes a foot apart from each other and the rest of the windows, including the back one, were totally shot out. The car was still running so Jason reached in and turned it off, pocketing the keys. The silence was a welcome relief and somehow took his mind off the car and the mess it was in.

Although he was extremely thankful to have come out of the shootout without a scratch, it still bugged him that his car took every bullet Slater fired and now looked like a casualty from a bad gangster movie.

He looked out over the parking lot. It was almost full except for a few spaces along the perimeter. *I wonder if anyone saw what happened*, Jason thought. *It seemed like there should be more people around in the middle of the day. You'd think people would have heard the shots.* There were a few people around, getting in and out of cars, but no one was paying any attention to Jason or his shot-up car.

Jason opened the trunk and tore a flap from a cardboard box where he kept a few tools and an extra quart of oil and went back to the driver's side of the car. He knew he should call the police and report what had happened, but he wanted to clean some of the glass out first.

He noticed the gun, on the floor just in front of the brake pedal, when the glass he swept off the seat pinged against it. He heard the sirens about the same time and a minute later two black and whites, lights flashing and sirens wailing, turned into the parking lot and thundered toward him. Jason, feeling uneasy about the gun and the sudden arrival of the police, shot up a quick prayer to ask the Lord for His protection, wisdom and anything else he might need.

The two cars, one after the other, screeched to a halt in front of him. The doors flew open and a policeman jumped out of each car.

"Move away from the car slowly and lay face down on the ground!" ordered the cop closest to Jason. He was the taller of the two by a couple of inches and looked like he was close to retirement age. He had a weathered face that didn't look unkind, just weary, like he'd seen a lot and didn't like surprises.

"What?" asked Jason. "What are you talking about? I'm the one who's been shot at."

"Move away from the car and lay face down on the ground!" said the cop again. His tone of voice didn't change but he unbuckled his holster and put his hand on the butt of his gun.

"All right, fine," said Jason, dropping face down on the pavement. The second policeman moved in and snapped a set of handcuffs onto Jason's right wrist, then carefully pulling the cuffed arm behind Jason's back he brought Jason's left arm down and cuffed them together. He stood up, looked down at his work, and let out an almost inaudible sigh to congratulate himself for a job well done.

This didn't escape Jason, who had rolled up on one shoulder and turned his head so that he could see the two cops standing over him. The second one, the one who had handcuffed him, was a Latino, and looked to be in his late twenties. His uniform wasn't particularly tight, but it was easy to see he spent a lot of time lifting weights.

"Nice job," said Jason, his frustration getting the better of him. "You must have excelled at handcuffing when you were at the police academy."

"No need for wisecracks, kid," said the older cop as the weightlifter reached down and pulled Jason up. "You're in enough trouble as it is. I need to see your driver's license."

"My wallet is in my right back pocket, but tell me, why am I in trouble? For what?"

"For this," said the cop, motioning to Jason's car. "The last I checked it was still against the law to discharge a firearm in public." The cop who had pulled Jason up took his wallet from his back pocket, retrieved the license and handed it to the other officer who looked at the license, then at Jason, and back to the license again. "You still live at this address?"

"Yes," said Jason, and then, "I didn't shoot up the car, which belongs to me, by the way. In fact, I was in the car for part of the time it was being shot at. Then I crawled out and hid under that pickup there."

"Is that right?" said the older cop as the younger one went over and began looking around the car.

"Yes," said Jason, "that's right."

It didn't take the second cop long to find the gun. He reached in, used his thumb and forefinger to pick it up by the trigger guard, and brought it over to Jason. "This belong to you?" he asked, holding up the gun.

"No."

"How did it get into your car?"

"I imagine the guy who shot the car up probably threw it in."

"Why would he do that?"

"So he wouldn't get caught with it. To make it look like I did it. Who knows?"

The cops didn't answer. The older one was looking at Jason trying to discern if he was telling the truth or not. He nudged the other cop and they walked off a few yards to talk things over. Jason watched them go and then looked around to see that a small crowd had gathered.

Great, he thought as he recognized a professor and a couple of girls from one of his classes. A few days ago the crowd was admiring him for bringing down the big bully. Now they were getting a view of what they probably thought was a crazy who blasted his own car half to bits. Or maybe a drug dealer whose deal went bad. Or a guy involved in a gang shootout. He was pretty sure no one watching would guess that he was standing handcuffed before his shot up car because he stole a wave from a lunatic surfer. *Oh well, fame is fickle*, he thought. *Thank You Lord for keeping me safe, for not letting me get shot, and for sending spirit helpers to protect me.*

The older of the two cops walked back over to Jason while the Latino cop asked questions in the crowd. "He's going to ask if anyone saw anything," said the older cop. "You want to tell me your story?"

"Sure," said Jason, "but do you mind if I ask you a question first?"

"Go ahead."

"Understand that I'm not trying to be a wise guy, but don't you have to read me my rights?"

"We haven't actually arrested you yet. If we do then we're required to read you your rights."

"All right, what do you want to know?"

"Just tell me what happened."

"I finished class and came out to leave. Got in my car and started it up and then looked up and saw this guy coming through the cars up there. He was

wearing a ski mask so his face was covered. When he got about twenty yards off he started shooting. I ducked down and then crawled out and hid under that pickup truck. The guy came around and shot out the rest of the windows, then left. I waited a few minutes and came out and you showed up a couple of minutes after that.”

“Yeah. We got an anonymous call saying someone was out here shooting up a car.”

“It was probably Slater.”

“Who is Slater?”

“He’s the guy who shot up the car, left the gun there, and called you. I had a fight with him last Saturday at the beach and he got the worst of it—mostly because a girl threw sand in his face. He swore he was going to get even, so I guess he’s getting started.”

“You said he was wearing a ski mask?”

“That’s right.”

“So you can’t be sure it was this guy Slater.”

“Well, I couldn’t identify him in a court of law, but it was him all right. He was the same size, and he’s the only person I know who has a reason. So unless some serial shooter who specializes in taking out windows turns up, I’d say he’s the guy.”

The younger cop walked up and looked Jason up and down. “No witnesses,” he announced, dragging the last syllable into a menacing hiss. He pulled his lips back so that he could add the next pronouncement through his teeth. “No one saw anything.”

If anyone saw anything then there would be witnesses wouldn’t there, Jason thought. He considered mentioning this to the hissing, handcuffing cop but then thought better of it. He looked at the cop, with his muscles and his badge and his gun and now his attitude and suddenly felt sorry he’d made the smart remark before. Having to lay face down on the ground and getting handcuffed after being shot at was no fun, but the cops were just doing their job—a job that

wasn’t that pleasant most of the time.

Jason looked into the eyes of the cop. “I’m sorry I made that comment when you were handcuffing me. It was out of line and I apologize.”

The cop stared hard at Jason as he tried to figure if he was sincere or not. When he decided that he probably was his face looked confused for a moment as if he didn’t know quite how to react. Finally it softened. “Don’t worry about it,” he said as a slight smile crossed his face. “I’ll live.”

Jason smiled back, glad he’d spoken up. Years of living communally had taught him an interesting thing about apologizing: If you had a problem with someone and you apologized, things often turned out better than if there was no problem to begin with. Of course this whole window-smashing shootout thing was a problem that wasn’t going to evaporate, but at least he wasn’t at odds with the cops.

The older cop motioned to the younger and they moved off again to talk. When they returned the older cop shifted his weight from one foot to another like he didn’t like what he was about to say. “We’re going to have to take you in, kid. We believe your story, but there aren’t any witnesses and we’ve got a gun and a shot-up car. We can’t just walk away from it.”

“So am I under arrest?”

“No. We’re just taking you to the station for questioning. Go ahead and uncuff him, Miguel.”

Miguel came up with a key, turned Jason around, and took off the handcuffs, replacing them neatly into the case on his belt.

Jason brought his arms in front of him and rubbed his wrists. He was glad the folks looking on were there to see the cuffs come off. He caught the eye of one of the girls from his class and managed a smile, hoping that somehow she and the others would realize he wasn’t responsible for this mess. At least now they’d know he didn’t fall into the armed-and-dangerous category.

“Do you want to take him?” the older cop asked Miguel.

“Sure,” said Miguel. He looked over at Jason as he moved toward his police car. “Hop in.”

Jason walked to the passenger side of the car and looked into the back seat. The complete seat, the floor, and the back section of the front seats were made of one seamless piece of rubber so that the whole area was easily cleaned out if a drunk got sick or a barroom brawler was bleeding. Between the front and back seats was a partition of black heavy mesh to keep the occupants away from the police in the front. Jason knew there were no handles on the inside of the back doors. The back seat was a little rolling jail cell. Not too inviting.

Miguel noticed Jason checking out the back. “You can sit up here,” he said as he slid into the front seat.

Jason followed suit, thankful for one more indication to the people looking on that he was not in any big trouble with the law. He thought about winding down the window and announcing that he was only going in for questioning, but then laughed at the thought as Miguel pulled the car out of the parking lot.

“What’s so funny,” Miguel asked looking over at Jason.

“Nothing really. I was thinking I should tell the crowd that I was only going in for questioning, but I’ll settle for riding in the front with no handcuffs.”

“Yeah, they’ll get the picture. Besides Swanson—the other officer—he’ll tell them. People usually come up and ask once things have settled down.”

“Well, that’s good. I don’t usually get that concerned about what people think, but being handcuffed in the parking lot with your classmates and professors looking on kind of changes your perspective.”

Miguel laughed. “I guess it would.”

They were out in traffic now and Miguel brought the car to a stop for a red light just to the right of a mint-condition Pontiac GTO that looked to be from the late sixties. On the passenger side was a young Latin with his arm out the window moving with the beat of the music blasting out from the car’s sound system.

Miguel rolled down his window. “Turn down the music a minute, will you?” he said in Spanish. The young man complied and looked over at Miguel who continued speaking in Spanish. “Listen, I know it’s not your car, but tell your friend he needs to visit Midas and get them to look at that muffler. Either that one’s not working or he needs a better one.”

“It is pretty loud,” said the young man, smiling.

“It’s real loud,” said Miguel. “So loud that I should give your friend a ticket, which would cost him. I’m going to let it go this time, but tell him to get it fixed, because if I see him next week and it’s still this loud it’s going to be ticket time.”

“I’ll tell him,” said the young man as the light turned green and both cars moved off.

“That was nice of you to give him a little time to get that fixed,” said Jason in almost flawless Spanish.

“He’s got you to thank for that. If I wasn’t taking you to the station I might have tagged him. Where did you learn your Spanish? It’s pretty good.”

“Thanks. It’s nice to have a chance to practice. I learned it in South America, Argentina mostly. My folks are missionaries and we spent about five years there.”

“Missionaries, huh? Good for them. What about you? You’re not following in their footsteps?”

“Not for the last couple of years.”

“Well, here we are,” said Miguel, switching to English as he turned into the parking lot of the Fountain Valley Police Department, filled with police cars. Miguel pulled into a spot, got out of the car, adjusted his gun belt, motioned for Jason to follow,

and then headed into the building with Jason beside him. “You can wait over there,” said Miguel motioning to a row of chairs.

“Okay,” said Jason as he took a seat in a plastic chair next to the doors they had just come through. Miguel walked up to the desk sergeant who was sitting at a long high counter that ran eighteen or twenty yards across the center of the room. At each end of the counter partition walls ran back toward the front entrance. Each partition had a door at the corner nearest the entrance. Behind the counter where the sergeant sat were desks with people working. Some were policemen and policewomen, and some were dressed in street clothes. Miguel said a few words to the desk sergeant, who looked over at Jason, and said a few words back to Miguel. When they were done talking Miguel walked back over to Jason.

“I’ve got to go in the back,” Miguel explained. “We called Huntington Beach P.D. to check out this guy Slater so hopefully we’ll hear back from them. This could take a little while so make yourself at home.” Miguel was almost sympathetic now. “There’s a phone on the wall over there. There’s a convenience store across the street. Just tell the sergeant if you leave. The convenience store has a bathroom.”

“All right,” said Jason. “Thanks.”

Miguel nodded and disappeared into the back. Jason stretched his legs out and took a deep breath. He hoped it wouldn’t take too long, but it didn’t look promising. He didn’t have to work today so that was one less thing to worry about. He pictured himself calling in to explain why he was going to be late for work. “Thank You, Lord, that I don’t have to do that,” he said under his breath as he tried to erase the thought from his mind.

He should have brought his books, he thought, he could have studied a little. Or his Bible or *MOP*. He glanced around the room, checking out the chairs for

a magazine or a newspaper, but there was nothing there. No coffee table with magazines, or magazine rack on the wall like at a dentist’s office or the auto repair. *I guess it’s bring-your-own-reading-matter at the police station*, thought Jason. *It’s not like they’re looking for satisfied customers or repeat business.*

Jason looked over at the pay phone that was on the wall on the other side of the main entrance. There was a row of plastic chairs running along the wall just under the phone. Jason noticed that the cord connecting the handpiece to the main body of the phone was long enough so that once he dialed he could sit down to talk. A small point for sure, but a point on the side of making the call.

Jason fished in his pocket but didn’t come up with any change. Then he realized change wasn’t going to do him any good because he didn’t have the number. There was a toll-free number if he could just remember it. He tapped his head. “Come on, baby, I know you’re in there,” he said out loud, and then it came to him: *1-800-4-A-Family.*

Jason picked up and dialed before he could get hit with any doubts. He knew it would be all right and he wanted to make the call. He needed to if he was going to be able to help the folks who were looking to him for help. Still it was a trial. Two years is a long time and...

“Hello, this is Monica, can I help you?”

“Yeah, sure. Uh ... is this the Family?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Great,” said Jason plunging ahead. “My name’s Jason. I grew up in the Family, but I left a couple of years ago. I’ve met some people that I’m witnessing to and was wondering if you have anything I could give them to read. Something to help them grow. They’re brand-new babes.”

“We do!” said Monica, her enthusiasm carrying through the phone lines. “We’ve got a magazine called

Activated now that covers everything from salvation and the Holy Spirit to the different degrees of discipleship, faith, healing, the last days, everything. There are fifteen issues and we mail them out once a month.”

“That sounds good.”

“Yeah, it’s a great mag,” said Monica. “If you’re trying to feed the sheep it will definitely do the job. You know your voice sounds really familiar. Were you ever in Bangalore?”

“I lived there for three and a half years. My folks are still there, Andrew and Fay.”

“I can’t believe it! Jason? Is that you? It’s me, Monica. I was in Bangalore the same time as you. Don’t you remember?”

“No way—it’s really you? Of course I remember, Monica,” said Jason. “There are some girls you never forget.”

“Still the charmer, I see,” Monica laughed.

“I guess so,” said Jason, “but you always were a special girl, I thought. You were a fun person to be with and you had a lot of conviction. I always admired you.”

“Well, thank you, Jason. It’s nice of you to say so.”

“Where are you anyway?”

“Escondido. It’s about forty-five minutes northeast of San Diego. How about you?”

“I live in Huntington Beach, but right now I’m at the police station in Fountain Valley.”

“What are you doing there?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Give me the condensed version.”

“All right, I can try. Last weekend I got into a fight with a guy who likes to terrorize any surfer who dares to cross his path. I don’t think I would have tried standing up to him, but something got into me and I did. I got him down and really had him and made him promise to leave me alone, but he didn’t have a

long memory for promises. When I let him up he went after me and would have pulverized me if this great girl hadn’t thrown sand in his face. Anyway, today he emptied a gun into my car with me in it. The Lord saved me, though. I didn’t get hurt even though my car is a mess.”

“So how come you’re at the police station? What about the guy who shot at you?”

“By the time the police got there he was gone. He threw the gun in my car so the police thought I might have done it. I think they believe me now, but they’re still checking things out. I don’t know what, exactly, but that’s what they told me. I’m not under arrest or anything, but I’ve got to wait here until they let me know what’s going on.”

“We’ll pray for you,” said Monica.

“Thanks, I really appreciate it. This guy is a real case, and I don’t know what he’ll try next. I’m afraid he might go after Lauren, the girl who helped me.”

“We can pray for her too.”

“Thank you. Hey, Monica, it’s great to talk to you. I was having a hard time calling the Family, but I’m so glad I did.”

“Me too. It’s great to hear from you.” Monica paused for a minute before asking the next question. “Besides this police thing, how’s everything going?”

“It’s funny you should ask me that,” Jason said with a laugh.

“Why?”

“If you would have asked me that last week I would have said things were going great. I’m going to school, which is what I wanted to do. I’m pulling good grades—B’s mostly and a couple of A’s.” He thought about leaving out the C but decided against it. “And one C. I’ve got a good part-time job that pays me enough to live. I have a good living situation with my aunt and uncle. I do a lot of surfing, which I really like, so all in all I’d say I was doing real well. Until...”

Monica waited for Jason to continue but when he didn't she prompted him. "Until...?"

"Until this thing with Slater, that's the guy's name I'm having the problem with, sets off a chain of events most of which, I must say are pretty positive."

"Go on."

"Well, Lauren takes me home and I witness to her. Her friends take us out to dinner that night, and I end up witnessing a bit to them as well. The next day Lauren gets saved, and later I talk to one of the friends on the phone—this drop-dead-gorgeous lawyer—and she gets saved as well. So I'm witnessing, I'm hearing from the Lord, I'm praying, and starting to read the Word again—activities I haven't done for a long time."

"So you're doing well."

"Yeah, I'm doing great, but I'm a little uneasy because I don't know where the Lord is taking me."

"It sounds like He's taking you to a good place!"

"That's probably true."

"Of course it's true. Go ahead and ask Him. Use that gift of prophecy! In the meantime let me fill you in on some of the stuff we can send you."

"All right."

"You should get an *Activated* subscription like I said. You can get the people you're witnessing to on them later. We can send you the *Wine Press*."

"What's the *Wine Press*?"

"It's a magazine for former members. It's a lot of Word and testimonies. Some of the Word is from the latest GNs."

"Really? Wow ... didn't know. Yeah, send me that."

"I can also send you a catalogue which has all kinds of great books, tapes, CDs, videos, and other stuff you can order if you want. And here are a couple of Web sites to check out. Got a pen?"

"Just a second," said Jason as he took a pen and scrap of paper from his pocket. "All right, go ahead."

"Okay ... *thefamily.org* is one. Then *countdown.org*, which is about the Endtime, and *activated.org*."

"Got it."

"Now give me your address so we can send you the goods."

Jason recited his address and Monica typed it into her computer. "We'll be sending out a mailing in a week," she said, "so you shouldn't have long to wait."

"Thanks. By the way, how much does it cost?"

"The *Activated* is fifteen dollars for fifteen issues. Actually it's fifteen dollars for twelve issues, but we give three issues for free if someone gets saved, which I know you are. For the *Wine Press* we ask for a donation, and if you order anything from the catalogue you pay the list price plus a shipping charge. We'll send you a bill for the *Activated* magazine."

"All right, sounds good," said Jason as he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Miguel standing in front of him. "Monica, I've got to go. There could be a break in the case of the shot up Toyota."

"Okay, Jason. I'll talk to you later. I'm glad you called."

"I am too. Really glad. I'll definitely call again."

"Bye for now then."

"Bye," said Jason, cradling the receiver and turning to Miguel. "So, what's happening?"

"Huntington Beach P.D. looked up your friend Slater," said Miguel reading from a report on a clipboard. "His full name is John Timothy Slater, a.k.a. Jack Slater. He's been arrested a number of times for fighting but always released when the parties involved refused to press charges. He did serve one year for resisting arrest and breaking a policeman's jaw. Suspected of dealing marijuana on a small scale but has never been apprehended with an illegal substance in any of his arrests. Officers found him surfing at Huntington Beach and questioned

him. He produced a parking stub that had been electronically stamped at 8:45 this morning. He said he's been surfing since then."

"And they believed him? All that proves is that his car was in the parking lot, if that. He could have come to the college another way."

"Listen, I don't know if they believed him or not, but they didn't have enough to arrest him on."

Jason shook his head. "What now?"

Miguel motioned to the bank of chairs on the other side of the main entrance and he and Jason walked to them. Jason took a chair and Miguel sat two chairs down and put his clipboard on the chair between them. He looked up at Jason. "We're going to let you go because we believe your story and because your car getting shot up is the only damage, which isn't much in the big scheme of things. We'll run a check for prints on the gun, which probably won't yield anything, and then we'll file the case which will sit and never be touched again unless there are new developments."

"Like I turn up dead, that kind of development?"
"Right."

Jason shook his head again. "And there's nothing the police can do?"

"We'll keep investigating and if we get some solid evidence that Slater was there shooting at you we'll arrest him. Then if the District Attorney thinks he can prove it in court he'll prosecute. But there are no witnesses and your boy Slater seems to have covered himself pretty well, so the reality is nothing is likely to happen."

"So I'm just supposed to wait for Slater to try to kill me again?"

"I didn't say that," Miguel said, his voice dropping a few decibels. "Listen, what I'm going to tell you, I never told you, you understand?"

"I think so."

"If you ever say I did I'll deny it, and that includes in court. On top of that I'll be pissed off because I'm going out on a limb to help you by telling you this."

"Don't worry, I'm won't tell anyone."

"Good. Do you own a gun?"

"No."

"If I were you I'd get one. I'd learn how to use it and I'd keep it handy. And if I got into a situation like the one you were in today I wouldn't hesitate to use it. I'd shoot that sucker in a hot second."

Jason thought for a moment. "Wouldn't that present some legal problems? Aren't there laws about concealed weapons?"

"There are laws about all kinds of things. You could try and get a permit to carry a concealed weapon and who knows, you might even get it. But permit or not I'd get a gun and hope you don't need to use it. If you do, well, it's better to be judged by twelve than carried out by six, right?"

"That's a good point."

"You bet it is. Listen, I've got some work to finish up here. It will take about twenty minutes. After that I can give you a ride to what's left of your car."

"Thanks, but I think I'll walk. I could use the exercise and a little time to think."

"Suit yourself," said Miguel. He reached into his shirt pocket and came out with a business card. "Here, take this. Let me know if you have any more trouble."

"I will," said Jason as he slid the card into his shirt pocket. "Thanks."

"And don't forget to get yourself a shooter. I don't think your problem with this guy is going to go away by itself."

Jason nodded and watched Miguel disappear back through the door he'd come out of. Then he walked out of the station to the street and started making his way toward the college. It felt good to be out of the

police station and walking even if it meant breathing in fumes from the start of rush-hour traffic. He thought about what Miguel had told him. It sounded crazy, but he had to admit it was a pretty crazy situation. Lauren would be back soon and Slater might start going after her. Maybe he should get a gun.

He imagined himself in a run-down pawnshop paying cash for an automatic pistol and a holster. He pops out the clip from the butt of the gun and takes a fresh one from the shifty-eyed character behind the counter, slamming it into place with an open palm. Deftly he slides the gun into its holster and, bringing his arms behind him, hooks it onto his belt under his coat. Then he walks out into the cold damp air, the sounds of soft eerie jazz following him into the night.

A long blast of a horn and a short to-the-point curse from an irate driver brought Jason back to reality and up onto the curb and out of traffic. He looked up at the red hand on the light across the street telling him to wait. *How did I miss that*, he wondered, but he knew the answer even before the question was complete in his mind. *Daydreaming*. Casting himself as the hero of some 1940s detective movie. Imagining himself as Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* or *The Big Sleep*. *Lord help me*, thought Jason, *I'll be sleeping the big sleep myself if I don't watch my step*.

The red hand turned to the little green man and Jason started walking. A couple of thoughts ran through his mind as he made his way across the street and started down the sidewalk on the other side. The first was that getting a gun probably wasn't the way to go. He was determined to ask the Lord about it just to make sure, but he felt a peace about the situation that he couldn't explain. He knew if he prayed and claimed the Lord's protection that he'd be all right. The Lord would protect him and Lauren, and this whole ordeal would eventually be behind them.

The second thought was something that Jason always enjoyed even though he hadn't thought about it much in the last couple of years. Like most kids in the Family, Jason had asked the Lord into his heart at two or three years of age, so he'd been saved for as long as he could remember. He'd understood salvation from an early age, as much as you can understand a mystery, but one night, not long before his thirteenth birthday, the Lord used his dad to help him see it from a deeper perspective.

That night he accompanied his dad to a travelers' meeting in Paharagange, an area of New Delhi for serious low budget travelers. Once a week the Family rented a room on the ground floor of a ramshackle hotel where they played music and witnessed to dozens of young travelers from all over the world.

There were usually four or five musicians and eight or ten other Family members from different Homes in Delhi singing for a solid hour or more before the first break in the music. The room was right off the entrance to the hotel, and the music carried out into the streets drawing in travelers like an oasis. The same music kept the goats away because there was no mistaking the message.

Jason had rocked along, singing with the music, and then witnessed to a girl about his age who was traveling with her mom. When the girl and her mom left, Jason sat for awhile and watched the witnessing. It was great to see. Most everyone seemed inspired, and people were in deep conversations, some pointing out verses in the Bible, some bowing their heads to pray.

Then Jason saw his dad talking to an Australian in his late twenties.

"What have you got to lose?" Jason overheard his dad ask the traveler. "If what I'm telling you is true and you pray and ask Jesus into your heart, you'll be saved. You'll have Heaven in your heart now and

forever. And when this life is over you'll go to Heaven to be with Jesus. It's a winning combination."

"But what if it isn't true?"

"Then you haven't lost anything, have you? Besides, it is true, which you'll see clearer after you do it."

"How am I going to see clearer?"

"You said you were raised as a Catholic, so you've probably heard of Saint Augustine, right?"

"Yeah."

"He said that understanding is the reward of faith, so you should not try to understand so you can believe, but believe so you can understand."

At that point Jason's dad looked over and noticed Jason was watching them. He motioned him over and Jason drew his rattan stool closer in.

"Jason, this is Rick," his dad said. "Rick, Jason, my oldest son."

"Good to meet you," said Rick as they shook hands.

"Nice to meet you, too."

"You guys do this every week?"

"We do," said Jason. "I come as often as I can. I really like it."

"I can see why. The music is awesome. Different than anything I'm used to, but pretty heavy."

Rick had a lot more questions and Jason's dad kept answering them one after another. Jason was amazed at his dad's patience. He just kept answering Rick's questions even though some of them seemed pretty antagonistic to Jason. Finally his dad asked Rick again if he wanted to pray and he said yes.

They prayed and then Jason's dad told Rick, "You're going to Heaven now. You have Jesus in your heart and you'll never have to worry about where you're headed when this life is over. Jesus has given you the most valuable thing it's possible to have, worth more than all the wealth and fame in the world. It's an amazing gift. It's a rush just to think about it."

"Yeah, I can see you're really into it."

Jason looked at his dad who was beaming from ear to ear. His face, although fairly weather beaten and craggy for a man in his early thirties, seemed to radiate.

"For sure. Now consider this: From this point on you have a place in Heaven which you can never lose. Nothing that's happened in your life so far, or will happen, will change that. You can lose everything—your money, your friends, your health, and even your life, which we all lose sooner or later, right? But you can never lose your place in Heaven. Here, read this." Jason's dad handed the man an open Bible, his finger pointing to a verse.

Rick took the well-worn Bible and read. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life, and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him."

"So if you believe on the Son you have everlasting life, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. That's what it says."

"Hey, you don't have to guess—you've got it! And you can't lose it. If you could it wouldn't be everlasting would it?"

"Good point," said Rick, smiling.

Jason never forgot that smile. The next day Rick left Delhi for Kathmandu. Two days later he met some Family members on the street and told them about getting saved at the travelers' meeting. He also told them that he wasn't feeling well. The next day he came down with severe stomach cramps and checked into the hospital where he was diagnosed with hepatitis B. He died two days later.

The brethren in Kathmandu were able to meet and comfort Rick's parents when they flew in for the funeral. A few months later his sister also came and talked with the Family there. Then she flew down to Delhi and met with Jason's family. She had a letter

that Rick had sent her that he'd started to write the night he got saved, and had finished in Kathmandu before he got sick. She said it didn't arrive until after his funeral and that it was a great comfort to his parents when they read it.

Rick wrote about meeting Jason's dad, about the music, and about praying to receive the Lord. He wrote about St. Augustine and said that, sure enough, once he said the salvation prayer and believed he did understand it a lot better. Finally he wrote about his place in Heaven and how he knew he had it because of what it said in the Bible, that it was everlasting "and if you could lose it, it wouldn't be everlasting, would it?"

Rick's sister stayed in Delhi for four days and visited the Family every day. She got saved, praying with Jason's mom, and continued to write and support Jason's family for many years. She even used to write a separate letter or postcard to Jason from time to time because she knew he'd been with his dad when Rick got saved and she felt especially close to him.

The whole incident had left a lasting impression on Jason, not just because Rick had died shortly after praying with his dad, although that was a big part of it. The joy that he saw in his dad's face, the anointing the Lord gave him to witness, he still remembered that, but that wasn't what stood out to him the most. The thing that stuck with him from that night was so simple that he wondered why he'd never seen it before. Actually he had seen it before. He'd just never really realized it fully until that night. The smile on Rick's face when his dad had told him that salvation would last forever had frozen the moment for Jason. Rick, a guy who most likely avoided the very thought of death, figuring Hell was right behind it, had prayed and received Jesus. And from that point on he knew that he was saved, that he was going to Heaven, not Hell, and that it was a sure thing, definite, unchangeable, irreversible.

From that time on, Jason started paying closer attention at the travelers' meetings. He watched his dad, and his mom on the nights she went, and anyone else who was witnessing. He heard how they'd answer the many questions they were asked, and how they'd try to lead the questioner closer to the truth with each answer. He'd pray as he watched, especially if he could sense a real battle in the spirit, a battle for a soul waged between the Spirit of Jesus and David against the spirit of Satan and Oplexicon, fought on rattan stools in the rundown hotel room.

He'd often pray for the brother or sister who was trying to woo and win a traveler, he'd pray the Lord would give them something that would break through and turn the tide. Sometimes right after he'd pray something said would seem to click and the traveler would stop and pray and receive the Lord. It was a thrill when that happened, and once Jason saw a vision of himself throwing a lance to a mounted knight who used it to run a dragon through. It was a real battle at those travelers' meetings and Jason learned to revel in it.

One day he came across a quote in the *MOP* that summed up his feelings about the spiritual warfare he encountered at every meeting: "I love to fight the Enemy, as a strong man that loveth to run a race, as a strong man shouteth by reason of wine, as a knight that loveth the fray and arouseth himself to fight the Enemy." He wrote it down in his notebook, memorized it, and quoted it to himself before every travelers' meeting. He aspired to be that knight, a fighter for the Lord, sold out, dedicated, determined to fight the Enemy, win souls to Jesus, and enjoy it to the full.

Jason hit the last light just right, the little green man giving him the go ahead just as he reached the corner opposite the community college parking lot. He crossed the street and headed toward his car. It was

late afternoon, and the lot had thinned out, so he was able to spot his car when he was still sixty or seventy yards from it. Even from that distance it looked bad. It didn't get any better the closer he got.

He approached the car carefully, sweeping the area with his eyes in search of anything out of the ordinary. He didn't expect to see anything. What was there to see? Unless Slater was waiting for him, which didn't seem likely. But seeing his car with every window shot out of it and remembering that a few hours before he was on the floor with bullets flying over his head had a way of making him cautious and prayerful. "Thank You, Jesus, for sending those spirit helpers to get me through that," he prayed.

That part still amazed him—how that voice had guided him through the whole shootout. He knew that if he had managed to get out of the car on his own he never would have felt safe hiding under the car next to him. He'd have wanted to get some distance between himself and Slater. But it had worked, thank God, just like the spirit helper said it would. If he had tried to run, Slater might have come after him, and it would have been hard for the spirit helpers to plant the idea in Slater's mind that he might not be the only one carrying a gun—even in California with concealed weapons as common as cell phones. The Lord had saved him, using a spy and a counter spy from World War II. It was amazing, there was no way around that.

It was interesting, Jason thought, that the idea of angels and spirit helpers was pretty common in movies as far back as *It's a Wonderful Life*, to *Ghost*, and *Maid to Order*. It was an accepted concept in the movies, in the arts, but if he had told Miguel and his partner that side of the story, he'd be in the hospital undergoing a psychiatric evaluation instead of figuring out how to get his car home.

Jason found a newspaper in the back seat and began sweeping glass into it with a small detail brush

he kept in the car. It took him fifteen minutes and four trips to a garbage can to get all the glass off the seats and most of it off the floor. That done, he wound down all the side windows and, climbing behind the wheel, started the engine. It roared to life, and Jason put the car in gear. The bullet holes in the front window didn't obstruct his view and the back window was blown out completely. With the side windows rolled down the car almost looked normal if you weren't looking too close.

Even sticking to the less traveled roads it didn't take Jason long to get home. When his aunt and uncle were home he parked on the street, but with them gone he'd been parking on the driveway. He could have parked in the garage, but decided the driveway was good enough—one less door to open. The garage looked good today though. He didn't think his aunt and uncle would appreciate his shot-up car gracing their driveway. Thank God it was just the windows, which would be expensive enough to fix, and would take a good bite out of his checking account. Bullet holes in the car body would have been much worse.

There was still a little time in the business day so Jason thought he'd use it to work on getting his windows fixed. He called a couple of auto wreckers and got a good price on the windows. Then he called around to some auto-glass shops until he found a guy who was willing to put in the front and back windows. Jason figured to put in the door windows himself to save money. He wasn't working tomorrow and he planned to skip his morning classes, so he could get started right away. Driving around without windows was not something you could do for long. Not in Southern California.

Jason fixed himself an early dinner and studied for about an hour. He turned on the TV and flipped through the channels for a few minutes, but he didn't see anything interesting. Something was wrong and

he knew he needed to address it, but he didn't want to so he flipped through the channels for another ten minutes. He could feel himself being drawn in by the hard-selling advertisements that were both irritating and effective, the inane situation comedies, the cops and murderers shows—cops and robbers didn't cut it anymore, the viewing public wanted to see the bad guys go down for murder one.

Then there was wrestling, a choreographed display of acrobatic mayhem where huge men and now women, and in some cases men and women together, beat each other to what would be near death if it wasn't all an act. And of course there were game shows. You could win a million dollars by answering more questions than the other guy or by backstabbing your friends in some remote arid location in a quest to "survive"—to be the last man or woman standing, having outlasted the field of wannabe manipulators and connivers, proving that none had honed those skills better than you. The news was useful and you could catch an interesting movie now and then, if you could stand the endless advertisements that increased in frequency toward the climax of the film. Overall though, as a pundit had pointed out decades ago, television was the vast wasteland, and Jason knew it would waste you if you got too much of it. But if you wanted to turn your brain off for awhile it was the ultimate one-stop distraction.

Jason flipped the off button on the remote and sat back in his chair as the silence filled the room. He wanted to turn his brain off, to park himself in front of the tube and get lost in the airwaves, but he knew he had to come to grips with the questions that had been trying to surface even before the Slater thing started. Monica had asked him how it was going and he told her it had been fine—school, work, it was all going good and then things changed, for the better mostly, when he met Lauren and Woody and Jill. That

part was true, things had gotten a lot better. More intense and interesting anyway.

In a way even the first part was true, his life was pretty good even before the Slater thing got it in high gear. He liked school all right and work was okay. He had a good living situation, and he'd avoided some of the pitfalls, slippery places and activities with hidden hooks that some of his friends had fallen into when they left the Family. He knew he was on track to getting a good education and then a high paying job and maybe, if things worked out, he'd find the right girl to share that with, a real partner, a soul mate, a heart mate. Somebody like Lauren.

Still, he knew, something would be missing. If he could project himself five years into the future, if he had an education, a good job, if Lauren and he were married and head over heels in love, there would still be something missing. He'd still feel a void, a slight ache in his heart, an ache so slight he could put it out of his mind, sometimes for weeks at a time, but an ache he never seemed to get rid of. At least he hadn't so far.

What it all came down to, Jason knew, was the big question: What do you want to do with your life? And then the questions that surrounded it: Why did you leave the Family? How do you like your life now? What do you think the Lord wants you to do? And then back to the big one: What are you going to do? He knew he had to decide, to come to grips with these questions, to answer them honestly, and to answer them soon.

Jason slid off the easy chair, found a notebook and pen in his room, and came back to the chair. He prayed, praising the Lord for a few minutes, and then asked, "Jesus, You know my whole situation, You know it better than I do, so I want to ask You what would You have me do? What do You want me to do?"

Jason waited for less than thirty seconds, although it seemed longer, and then the words started to come.

He wrote as fast as he could write and still keep his handwriting legible.

Jason, it's so good to hear from you. I'm so glad you are coming to Me to get My advice and counsel. I think it's safe to say that My will for you is no mystery. I have raised you in the Family, on the mission field, I have trained you to be a missionary. What else could My highest will for you be?

There is an undeniable need for laborers to preach My message in these last days. The harvest is plenteous but the laborers are few. I am raising up more laborers, but I need My children who have been raised in the Family to teach and train this new army. You can be a great help to Me and I can use you mightily if you say yes to Me.

Of course the choice is yours. I will not force you. I cannot. But you have asked Me what I want you to do and this is My answer. Come back to full-time service for Me. I can use you. I have a place for you. I need you. If you choose to accept this challenge I will help you. All the promises in My Word are yours. All My guarantees will come your way. If you choose not to follow this path I will still love you. My love for you will never diminish, not one ounce, regardless of your choice. I will use you as much as you let Me in whatever situation you are in. But if you want to be used to the full, if you want to have the full anointing, if you want My best for you, then come back to full-time service, rejoin the elite corps I have called you to.

Jason stopped writing and read what the Lord had just said. Rejoin the Family—that was the message. Simple, clear, nothing complicated about it. If he

wanted to be in the Lord's highest will, if he wanted to fulfill his destiny, he should go back to the Family. If he didn't want to, if he didn't want to pay that price—and the price was high, Jason knew—then the Lord would still use him as much as He could, and He'd love him like He always had. So that was the question Jason had to ask himself. What was he going to do? Was he going to rejoin or not?

Jason sat for a few minutes thinking things over. He remembered a quote from one of the early Letters where Dad had said that once he'd heard from the Lord he sometimes had a battle doing what the Lord had told him, but at least he heard. That's how Jason felt now—he was glad he'd heard from the Lord, but the magnitude of the decision did present a formidable battle. It was a big decision and he'd have to make it, one way or the other, but he was glad he didn't have to do it tonight. He was tired. In fact, he couldn't remember ever being so tired. He went to bed and slept a solid eight hours until sparrows, chirping and playing outside his window, woke him the next morning.

THURSDAY: WOODY AND JILL

Jason got up and got dressed, got the coffee going, and went out to the garage. Up against the inside wall of the garage his uncle had built a set of shelves they used for storage. Way up on the top shelf was a dusty suitcase. Jason retrieved an a-frame ladder leaning against the far end of the shelves near the garage door. He opened it, locked it in place, and set it in front of the shelves just under the suitcase. He climbed up and then gently slid the suitcase onto the top of the ladder. It was heavy, but he was able to get it down and onto the floor. He opened it up and the smell of musty clothes greeted him. He reached in and moved his hands through the clothes until he came up with what he was looking for. He pulled them up into the light—a *Basic MOP*, *Daily Might II*, the first four *Daily Bread* volumes, and his trusty old micro-tape recorder, which appeared to still have working batteries in it.

He set the books aside, closed the suitcase, got it back up on the shelf, and returned the ladder to its proper place. Then he went back into the house and poured himself a cup of coffee. He spent the next hour and a half in the Word, something he hadn't done for a long time. When he finished he felt good—stronger and more at peace. He didn't know how everything

was going to work out, but he had the faith that it would. Lauren would be back in a few days. He was looking forward to seeing her.

Jason kept that thought as he made himself a breakfast of bacon, fried eggs, and toast. Then he pulled his car out into the driveway and put an old bike of his uncle's into the trunk. It was too big to go all the way in, so he tied the lid of the trunk down over the partly exposed bike wheel. He stood back to examine his work. *Not too bad*, he thought. Besides if he got stopped it wouldn't be for a bike sticking out of the trunk. Not with every window in the car busted.

Jason drove to the auto wrecker he'd called the day before. He parked in the dirt lot in front of an old wooden building that badly needed paint. Around the building was a chain link fence at least eight feet high. A roll of razor wire across the top of the fence added another two feet. Every few yards a sign let would-be intruders know that if they managed to make it over the fence some night, vicious attack dogs would meet them and probably take a piece out of them.

Through the chain links Jason could see what the fence and the dogs were there to protect—row upon row of wrecked cars, most of them ten to fifteen years old. On top of the building was a tin sign that let Jason know he'd come to the right place. *Jeff's Auto Wreckers*.

Jason walked into the building and up to a stand-up counter. A man behind the counter was telling someone on the phone that they did have a transmission for an '89 Ford Escort, and that he could come and get it any time. The man wore a blue short-sleeve shirt with a small oblong patch above the pocket that told Jason the man was Jeff himself.

"What can I do for you?" said Jeff as he hung up the phone.

"I called yesterday about a complete set of windows for a 1990 Toyota Tercel."

"Right, I remember. We got 'em. It'll take about an hour."

"All right. I'll wait."

Jeff picked up a microphone and spoke into it. "We need a puller. Anybody free?"

A voice came back through the radio intercom. "This is Bill. I'll be free in about five minutes."

"Yeah, Bill, pull a full set of windows on a 1990 Tercel, will you?"

"You got it."

Jeff put down the microphone and looked at Jason. "It might be less than an hour. Bill's pretty fast."

"Great," said Jason as he stepped back to the wall that faced the counter and sat down on a car seat that had been pulled out of one of the many wrecks that had found its way to Jeff's Auto Wreckers.

"How is it you need all six windows and you don't need a fender or a door? What was it—vandals? Did someone break them?"

"Somebody shot them out."

Jeff shook his head but didn't say anything. He probably didn't want to hear any more. Jason didn't mind. He didn't feel like going over it again.

A couple more customers came in and Jeff took care of them, calling for pullers on the microphone. Jason noticed a number of signs on the wall behind the counter. There were at least three announcing that cash was the only acceptable form of payment.

Checks not accepted. Cash only.

In God we trust—all others pay cash.

Another sign read, "Poor planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on our part."

Even with cash you can't have everything, thought Jason.

Forty minutes later Bill called Jeff on the radio to tell him the windows were ready. "Bring 'em up," said Jeff into the microphone. Jason walked up to the counter and Jeff told him how much he owed.

“Do you guys take checks?” Jason asked.

“What did you say?” asked Jeff, looking up from the receipt he was writing. “Did you ask if we took checks?” His voice hit a high note as he spit out the final word like a worm in an apple.

“Just kidding, just kidding,” said Jason as he brought out his wallet and counted out the cash onto the counter. “But don’t worry, I’ll never use the c-word in here again.”

“Good,” said Jeff without a trace of a smile just as Bill came in with the front windshield.

“Here it is,” said Bill. “Where’s your car?”

“Out front.”

“Good. I’ll meet you out there with the rest of them,” Bill said as he handed the windshield to Jason, who took it and headed for the door. He heard Jeff mumble something about taking checks, but he just kept walking out the door and across the dirt lot to his car. By the time he got it loaded into the back seat, Bill was there with the back window. Jason set it on the floor of the back seat and put the four side windows, which Bill brought out next, in the trunk.

Fifteen minutes later he was at the auto glass shop. There was no one in the office so he walked through to the work area in the back. A tall thin man with a large moustache was installing a windshield. He looked up.

“What can I do for you?” he asked in a clear voice.

“I called yesterday about getting some windows put in.”

“Where’s the car?”

“Right out front.”

“All right, bring it in. I’ll be done with this in ten minutes.”

Jason drove the car into the shop, the man with the moustache motioning him to park it in a space near where he was working.

“How did you lose all your windows?” the man asked when Jason got out of the car.

“They got shot out. I made a world-class enemy recently.”

The man grimaced as he looked at the car. “Bad business,” he said. “Well, let’s see what we can do. Are those the windows in the back seat?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll need about an hour. There’s a place to wait in the office and a café down the street. Or you can stand here if you want.”

“I might try the café,” said Jason. “Thanks.”

Jason walked to the café, drank a coffee, read a newspaper and walked back. The man was just finishing up when Jason reached the shop.

“There you go. It will be as good as new when you get the rest of the windows in.”

“I’m going to do that today. That’s the plan anyway,” said Jason as he reached for his wallet.



Twenty minutes later he was back at his aunt and uncle’s place. He pulled into the garage and started working. An hour and a half later all the windows were in place. He stepped back and surveyed his work. “Not bad,” he said to himself. “Not bad at all.” He cleaned up the last of the broken glass and the frames from the old windows and threw them in the trash. Then he went into the kitchen and made a couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. *Haven’t had one of these in a long time*, he thought as the sweet, chewy taste of peanut butter, jelly, and bread hit his pallet.

A feeling of thankfulness suddenly swept over him and he started to thank the Lord for keeping him safe and fed. It was easy to take for granted and to think he was doing it himself. He worked, he got paid, he bought the things he needed. But if he thought deeper, he realized it was the Lord who had given him everything, like the brains and the arms to

work, the eyes to see, the ears to hear. It was the Lord who had given him parents that took care of him until he was able to take care of himself. It was the Lord who kept him from getting hit by a car, or mugged, or drowned—events that weren't entirely uncommon in this area. *It's good to remind yourself of that*, Jason thought as he finished his prayer. *It's good to thank the Lord for everything.*

When he finished eating Jason went into the front room and laid down on the couch. A few minutes later he was asleep. He didn't take naps that often, as his schedule was fairly busy, and when he felt like he could use one, like after lunch, there usually wasn't a quiet place available. Sometimes he'd doze off in the parking lot at school, but not that often—too noisy, usually too hot, and not very comfortable. But half an hour on the couch at home after a couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, that was living.

When he woke up he made himself a cup of coffee. What was he going to do with the rest of the day? He'd cut a couple of classes to get his car fixed, but he wasn't worried about that. He could copy the notes from someone the next time he went. There were guys he knew who showed up for the first day of class when the professor gave the dates of the mid-term and final exams. They would diligently record the dates and that would be the last anyone would see of them until about a week before the tests. Then they'd come to class, borrow people's notes, photocopy them, and cram like mad. If you were good at cramming you might get a C, and Jason knew one girl—and girls that only showed up for tests were rare, it seemed to be more of a guy thing—who got a B in an unstudied class that he got a C in. Some guys fell short with a D and some got overwhelmed with how much work it was going to be and took an F without even taking the test. Jason wasn't into major cramming but copying a day's notes for a missed class was all right.

It had turned into a beautiful day, sunny but not too hot. He walked out into the backyard and felt a gentle breeze. His aunt and uncle's house was a couple of miles from the beach but sometimes, like today, you could smell the ocean. He looked at his watch—still plenty of daylight left. He didn't often get a chance to surf in the middle of the week, especially not this early in the afternoon. He thought about it for a minute and decided to go for it. He loaded his surfboard and wet suit into his car and pointed it toward the beach.

Jason found a parking spot on Pacific Coast Highway right near the pier. He executed a flawless parallel parking maneuver and fed a stack of quarters into the meter. He didn't think he'd be there more than two hours, but even if he had to come back and put in a few more quarters it was still cheaper than paying six dollars to park in the city-owned lots. You weren't supposed to "feed the meter," as there was a two-hour parking limit there, but it was unlikely you'd get caught on a weekday afternoon when there seemed to be plenty of parking spots to go around. Still, if he ended up overstaying, he'd check the tires to see that a parking enforcer hadn't marked the time with a chalk mark on the wheel. You didn't want to get caught coming between the city government and their money.

His uncle had told him how it used to be that a lot of people parked their cars on Beach Boulevard, which ran perpendicular to PCH. They'd then walk to the beach from there, even though it could be up to a half a mile walk, depending on where you parked. Sometimes, if it was a family or a group, the driver would drop everyone off right at the beach and then drive down Beach Boulevard to park, and walk back himself. It was the only place anywhere near the beach you could park for free as all the streets in the downtown area of Huntington Beach were metered. But not anymore.

In any case, Jason now had his parking place right on PCH so he wasn't going to worry about it. It was a clear, sunny weekday. The beach wasn't that crowded, and even though there were a few surfers in the water there was still plenty of room.

Jason already had his wet suit on. He grabbed his board and headed for the water. He walked out onto the wet sand and let the water rush around his ankles. He kept walking until the water got above his knees and then he threw himself on the board and started paddling out to where four surfers sat on their boards waiting for a wave. When he was about twenty-five yards from where they sat, three of the four surfers started paddling away from him, headed for a wave.

He watched as they sped toward it and then, almost in unison, did a complete turn around and started paddling toward him. He could tell they were all going to catch it and as they shot by him, one to his left and two to his right, all three still on their bellies, he paddled to the crest of the wave, dropped down the other side and sat up so that he could turn and watch their ride. They all stood up at about the same time, and Jason watched as they cut down and across the wave. One guy, the guy who had been to his left, lost his board seconds later. Jason watched as he fell backwards and his board shot up pulling his leg with it. The other two made it all the way to the beach, a good ride, and apparently their last as they picked up their boards and headed toward the parking lot.

Jason resumed paddling toward the last surfer, the one who didn't go for the wave. When he got near he pulled up on his board, looked out toward the horizon and then over at the other surfer.

The other surfer looked at him. "Jason, my man!"

"Woody, is that you?" asked Jason, shielding his eyes so he could see. "It is you."

"None other," said Woody. "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing fine, thanks. How about you?"

"Everything's cool with me. Have you heard from Slater?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," said Jason. "He took some shots at me in the parking lot of the community college. I got out and hid under a pickup but he blew out every window in my car. I just got finished fixing it."

"That guy is really dangerous," said Woody shaking his head. "Dangerous and crazy."

"You won't get an argument from me."

"What are you going to do if he keeps coming after you?"

"I don't know. I know I'm going to pray, but I don't know what else."

"You ought to get a gun. Go for the permanent solution."

"That's what people keep telling me."

"It's good advice. Slater is a malicious dude, Jason. He won't rest until he's killed you or hurt you real bad. Why put up with that, you know what I'm saying? It's him or you, that's how I see it. If it was me, if he was after me that way, I'd get a gun and put a hole in him if he so much as put his hand in his pocket within fifty yards of me. And if it turned out he was reaching for his comb I'd apologize for my bad judgment and take my chances in court. I'd get Jill to defend me. I'd get her to bring in every surfer that Slater pushed around, I'd find a few of the many he's pounded on, and I'd get them all to testify. When it was over I'd walk, Slater would be dead, and the world would be a better place."

Woody was sitting up on his board, his shoulders back, his eyes intense. All this talk about Slater was getting him worked up.

"How is Jill?" Jason asked because he wanted to know and because he wanted to change the subject. "She called me the other day."

"Yeah, she told me. She's okay. I guess she gets depressed sometimes. She's going through one of those

times now and it's pretty rough on her it seems. I don't know what to tell her."

"When I talked to her I told her to pray and read the Bible. I'm going to send her some more stuff to read as soon as I get it."

"You really think that helps, huh?"

"For sure. There's a verse in the Bible that says 'God hath not given us the spirit of fear but of power and of love and of a sound mind. Perfect love casteth out fear.' My dad told me one time about this guy they met in the seventies who had done so many psychedelics that he could hardly communicate. He couldn't form a complete sentence. He just talked in two or three word phrases. So they sat him down and gave him a Bible and put headphones on him with an Alexander Scourby tape."

"Who's Alexander Scourby?"

"He's an actor—he was an actor, and a narrator. He's dead now. He did a stentorian recording of the King James Version of the Bible."

"Stentorian?"

"It means loud and clear. I heard someone say it in a movie so I looked it up. It's the first time I ever actually used it."

Woody looked out at the horizon and nodded his head. "I'm glad I was here to share the experience."

"Right," said Jason, his lips curling slightly in a sly smile. "Anyway they got this guy to read the Bible and listen to the tape at the same time and after a couple of days he was back to normal, could carry on a normal conversation, remember things, could read, write—all the stuff he couldn't do before because he'd done too many drugs. All that to say that praying and reading the Bible can really help, no matter what the problem is."

"Well, it sounds good. I hope it works for Jill. I don't know if she is reading the Bible or not. I haven't seen her for a few days. I've talked to her on the phone and

she says she gets pretty depressed. She still goes to work and everything. She can function all right but she gets pretty bummed out I guess."

"I'll keep praying for her."

"Yeah, do that. Give her a call and tell her you are. Maybe it will encourage her."

"All right."

"How's Lauren?"

"She's fine I guess. She gets back Friday afternoon. Tomorrow. Tomorrow's Friday, right?"

"It is. Are you going to meet her at the airport?"

"I might. Maybe she'd appreciate it even though she doesn't need a ride. They drive her right to her door."

"But if you pick her up she won't have to wait until they drop everyone else off and it will show what a sensitive, caring guy you are." Woody laughed.

"She already knows what a caring and sensitive guy I am, but maybe I will."

"Tell her it was my idea."

Woody and Jason surfed for the next couple of hours. There were other surfers in the water but not too many, and there were plenty of waves to keep everyone happy. Afterwards they walked up to Jason's car and stowed their surfboards. The meter was red but there was no ticket. Jason checked for chalk marks but didn't see any so fed a couple of quarters into the meter. That done, he and Woody walked across Main Street to a place that specialized in slurpies. They each got one. Jason paid, and they went out onto the sidewalk where the place had set up tables and chairs.

They drank their slurpies in silence, watching the street scene carry on. Then they talked for awhile about surfing, women, basketball. Finally the conversation got around to their dinner with Lauren and Jill and about answered prayer and the Lord. It seemed to Jason that Woody was the kind of guy who might ask Jesus into his heart right there. Or maybe he wouldn't,

maybe it would be thanks but no thanks. *There's only one way to find out*, thought Jason. The Enemy fought him, trying to get him not to ask.

Don't do it Jason, he'll think you're a jerk. He's a cool guy, he's not going to go for it, don't make a fool of yourself.

I must be on the right track, thought Jason, *or the Devil wouldn't be trying to convince me not to do it.*

"So Woody, do you want to ask Jesus into your heart and make sure you're going to Heaven when this life is over?"

"Yeah, I would," said Woody. "What do I have to do?"

"Just repeat this prayer after me," said Jason. And so Woody prayed right there at the outside café across the street from where the Light Club once stood.

"Awesome," said Woody when he'd finished praying. "It feels good knowing I'm going to Heaven."

"It is a wonderful feeling isn't it?"

"It is. No doubt about it."

"One of the good things about it is that no matter how you feel, either now or later, you'll definitely go to Heaven. A lot of people feel great when they receive the Lord, but some don't feel anything. Sometimes when reality sets in, you know, people who felt a real high when they prayed to receive Jesus maybe don't feel so great after awhile, then they start to wonder if they lost it. The feeling is gone so they wonder if the salvation is too. It isn't though. Once you're saved you are saved for eternity no matter what you feel like. It's important to understand that because feelings can come and go, but when you receive Jesus you are saved once and for all."

"Well, that's good to know. Jill was wondering about that, I think. She told me you prayed that prayer with her and that she'd asked Jesus into her heart, but she says she still feels depressed. I think she was hoping she'd get over that."

"Pray for her. I will too. I figure I'll get some good things I can give her to read within the next day or two and I'm sure that will help."

"Good idea," said Woody as he looked at his watch. "Oh, I've got to go. Hey, Jason, it was good to talk with you. Good to pray with you too. I've got to boogie. Got to get some work done."

"Okay, Woody, see you later. By the way, speaking of work, what do you do?"

"Oh, a little of this and a little of that." Woody was standing now, ready to go. "Your car is open, isn't it? Can I just take my surfboard out of it?"

"Sure."

"Listen, I'm not trying to prevaricate on that work thing, but it's not something I can define in a word or two. Actually that's not entirely true—I could define it, but it's something that needs an explanation with the definition. I'll explain it to you sometime."

"Sure," said Jason, wondering if he should ask Woody what prevaricate meant. He decided against it since Woody was in a hurry and Jason didn't want to hold him up. He made a mental note to himself to look it up later. Prevaricate. Jason liked the sound of it. It had a nice ring.

"Adios, amigo," said Woody as he headed toward PCH and Jason's car.

"Until then," said Jason with a wave. He had to wonder, as he watched Woody jaywalk across PCH, how he'd come up with a word like prevaricate. Woody was a bright guy, but he didn't strike Jason as the type who spent a lot of time working on his vocabulary. Maybe he just kept a few choice words in reserve for when other guys started throwing around words like stentorian.

Jason spent another ten minutes finishing his drink and watching people go by before heading for his car. Using a beach towel to cover himself he stripped off his wet suit and pulled on a pair of shorts and a

T-shirt. He didn't feel like going home, so he drove to a do-it-yourself car wash, stuck five quarters into the slot that paid for four minutes of soapy water, high-pressure rinse water, and spot-free rinse water. There was wax if you wanted it, but Jason passed. Signs said to move your vehicle out of the washing bay to dry it, but there weren't any waiting customers so Jason dried his car where it stood with a cotton cloth he kept in the trunk.

He still didn't feel like going home, but it was getting close to dinnertime and he was hungry. It would be nice to eat out, he thought, but after having to pay for the windows, he couldn't really afford it. Dinner out wasn't cheap, especially if you wanted more than a hamburger in a fast-food joint. Besides, eating alone in a restaurant didn't appeal to him much. Eating alone at home didn't sound that great either, but it would be cheaper. He'd be glad when Lauren got back.

It didn't take Jason long to drive home. He looked out across the hood of his clean car and laughed to himself. Washing the car was a simple thing, but it never failed to make him feel good. Driving a dirty car irritated him to no end, but a clean car—that was life in the fast lane.

Jason pulled into the driveway and locked up the car. Now that it had windows he didn't feel the need to put it in the garage. The thought of meeting Lauren at the airport made him feel good. He was pretty sure she'd be happy to see him. He didn't want to push it, but things had moved pretty fast already and it seemed to be working well at that speed.

Jason called information and got the toll-free number for Lauren's airline. He dialed the number and got an automated voice that led him through a series of choices. He punched in the appropriate numbers and letters until he got the answer he needed—Lauren's flight would arrive from New York at 8:40 PM, Terminal Two. Friday traffic tended

to be pretty bad as people made it out of town for the weekend. Still by that time of night it should die down. If he left at 7:15 he should make it in plenty of time. Tomorrow would be a busy day. No more cutting class and he had to work in the afternoon. There'd be enough time to get home, eat, and clean up before going to the airport.

Thinking of eating made him realize he was hungry now. He looked at his watch. Ten minutes to six. He didn't think Jill would be home yet, but figured he'd give her a call, maybe leave a message on her machine, and fix himself some dinner. He retrieved her number from his room, returned to the kitchen and dialed.

The phone rang twice and then Jason heard Jill's silky voice on the other end. "Hello?"

"Hi Jill, this is Jason."

"Hi Jason. Believe it or not I was just thinking about you."

"You were?"

"Yes. I bought a Bible like you told me and I've been reading it. It's quite a book."

"Yes, it is."

"There were some things I read that I had a few questions on and I was thinking it would be nice to talk to you about them. I was just thinking about it when you called."

"Wow, that's something," said Jason. "I wasn't sure if you'd be home or not but I wanted to call. I figured I'd leave a message if you weren't there, but I'm glad I caught you."

"Me too. Have you had dinner yet?"

"No. I was going to fix something after I talked to you."

"Do you like Mexican food?"

"Sure."

"How about meeting me at El Torrito's on Beach. You know where it is?"

"Yes, just south of the 22 freeway, right?"

“That’s it. How long you think it will take you to get there?”

“About twenty minutes.”

“All right, I’ll see you in twenty minutes.”



Jill was sitting in the lobby of El Torrito’s when Jason got there. As she stood up and walked toward him, Jason noticed that she looked as good in a T-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes as she had in a black business suit.

“Hi,” said Jill, taking Jason’s arm and leaning forward to kiss his cheek.

“Hi Jill. I see you brought your Bible.”

“Yes,” said Jill holding up a black Cambridge Bible. “I’ve been reading it. It’s very interesting. Let’s get a table, I’m famished.”

As if on cue, a woman in a flowery skirt and a white blouse worn off the shoulder appeared with two menus. “Dinner for two?” she asked in a friendly voice.

“Yes,” said Jason.

The hostess led them to a roomy table just off the bar. She handed each of them a menu and left. A moment later a man dropped off two glasses of water, chips and salsa. Jill and Jason both got busy.

“So good,” said Jill just before popping her fourth salsa-covered chip into her mouth.

Jason looked up and nodded. He didn’t want to talk with his mouth full. After awhile a waiter showed up, a young Latino man in a flowery shirt made of the same material as the skirt the woman who had brought them to the table was wearing. Jason and Jill both declined drinks, and Jill told the waiter they’d need a little more time.

“I’ll be right back,” said the young man, leaving Jason and Jill to look at the menu for the first time.

“What are you going to have?” asked Jason after a minute.

“I think I’ll have a taco and enchilada combo. What about you?”

“I’m going to go for a chicken burrito. The burrito especial.”

True to his word the waiter returned promptly and Jill and Jason repeated their orders to him. He wrote them down, picked up the menus and departed, a picture of friendly efficiency.

“I’m really glad you called,” said Jill.

“Me too,” said Jason. “It’s good to see you.”

They exchanged a little more about this and that and then Jill cracked open her Bible. “Can we start on the questions?”

“Go for it.”

Jill fired questions for the next fifteen minutes and Jason answered them the best he could, which wasn’t too bad for someone who hadn’t witnessed much in the last two years. Still, there were a few questions he had trouble with. He’d answered them all right but felt he could do better. He made a mental note to call Monica and ask her if she had any ideas or anything to read that would shed some light on some of Jill’s more probing questions. Jill could ask the questions, there was no doubt about that. *Then again, that’s what lawyers do*, thought Jason.

Their food came and the questions stopped while they ate. The chips and salsa had taken the edge off but the food still tasted great.

“How’s Lauren doing?” asked Jill.

“She’s been flying since Monday so I haven’t seen her, but she gets in tomorrow night so I’ll see her then. I’m going to pick her up at the airport.”

“Good for you.”

“Actually it was Woody’s idea. I went surfing this afternoon and saw him.”

“Woody’s a guy with a lot of good ideas.”

“Yeah, he’s a nice guy. Kind of a mystery to me, though. What does he do, besides surfing?”

“He’ll probably tell you sooner or later,” said Jill in an off-handed manner that seemed to convey that the information would have to come from Woody himself.

“Yeah.” Jason let his voice trail off, sorry he’d asked. He knew Jill was right, Woody would undoubtedly tell him what he did for a living. He felt like a bit of a weasel trying to get it out of Jill. “Hey, I’m sorry I asked you that about Woody. I asked him today and he told me he’d explain it to me the next time I see him. I guess my curiosity got the better of me.”

“Don’t worry, I’d be curious too. And I’d be happy to tell you but I can’t—it’s a legal thing.”

“No worries.”

“That’s a funny expression—‘no worries.’ I never heard anyone say that before.”

“My family lived with a number of Australians in India—that was one of their favorite expressions.”

“What was it like growing up in all those countries? It must have been interesting.”

“Yeah, it was. You get pretty used to it in one way, but there is always something new to surprise you. It seems like no matter how much you see, there’s always something new that you’ve never seen before. Or maybe you’ve seen it a thousand times before but it’s still fascinating.”

“Like what? Give me an example.”

“Like a guy riding an elephant full steam ahead down a busy street. Or maybe you go to meet someone at the train station and you’re on the platform but you can’t see them because there are so many people. So you stand on a bench and you look out across a sea of people, thousands of people, all on that narrow platform that separates one track from another. And maybe you see the person you’re supposed to meet way down the track and by a miracle they see you across all those thousands of people. You wave at each other, you make your connection, and—it’s kind of

hard to explain, but you get this feeling like ‘Hey, I could be flipping burgers in the States, or a million other things—maybe I could be studying to be a rocket scientist, but I’m not. I’m a missionary in India.’ It’s a good feeling.”

“How does that compare with what you’re doing now? Studying, working?”

“Good question. I’ve been working and studying for almost two years and I like it in a lot of ways. I haven’t thought much about missionary work. To be honest I tried not to think about it, because once I made the decision to stay here in the States I didn’t want to be double-minded about it. But in the last week, since this Slater thing, meeting Lauren, meeting you and Woody, I don’t know, it’s got me thinking about it a lot now.”

“What are you going to do about Slater?”

“I’m going to trust the Lord. It’s come to that.”

“That seems to be well advised. Trusting the Lord, that’s a good thing, right?”

“Right.”

Jill shifted in her seat and looked out across the restaurant. “Jason, there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“Sure,” said Jason as he searched her face looking for a clue to what it might be.

“Woody told me he was going to get in touch with you. I suppose he would have called you if he hadn’t run into you at the beach. Let me ask you something. Do you think Woody and I make a nice couple?”

“Yeah, sure. You seem like you get along great. You’re sure funny together.”

“Well, we like each other a lot. We’ve only known each other a couple of months but we hit it off great. But Woody’s got some legal problems that could get a lot worse and I’ve got problems worse than his.”

Jason was about to ask her what kind of problems but had a feeling he should wait.

“People who know me,” Jill went on, “but don’t know me real well—like some people I work with, or even work against, people in the D.A.’s office—they think I have it made. Smart, beautiful lawyer, good firm, lots of money, time off between cases. ‘How’s life on easy street?’ a judge asked me the other day. But there are some nights I don’t think I’ll make it through. I wouldn’t say I was suicidal, because I don’t think I’d ever kill myself, but the idea, the concept of ending it all, it appeals to me. And then I think why do I feel like this? Why am I unhappy? I prayed, like you told me, and that helped. It helped a lot, really.”

“Does it help when you read the Bible?”

“Yeah, that helps too.”

“So that’s progress, right?”

“That’s true. If you look at it that way it’s true. Still it’s pretty hard. And since I’ve been praying and reading the Bible, the depression seems to hit harder. It helps to pray and read the Bible, no doubt. Things seem better when I do that. But at the same time when I do get hit it’s pretty bad. Real bad actually.”

“It’s probably the Devil trying to make you quit. For a lot of people who get saved the biggest battles come right at the beginning because the Devil knows that if he can get you to quit, then you’ll do a lot less damage to him and his kingdom. So he comes on strong right at the beginning. If you keep fighting though, you’ll win. You’ve got to keep fighting. Rebuke the Devil and he’ll flee from you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Here, give me your Bible.”

Jill slid the Bible across the table and Jason picked it up and leafed through the pages until he got to James, chapter 4. “Here,” he said sliding the Bible back to Jill. “Read that—verse 7.”

Jill picked up the Bible and read. “Submit yourself therefore to God. Resist the Devil and he will flee from you.”

“That’s it,” said Jason.

“But what does it mean, to resist the Devil? How do you do that?”

“It means you don’t listen to him. It means you dwell on positive thoughts and not negative ones. Go to Philipians—it’s a few books back—chapter 4, verse 8.”

“Finally, brethren,” read Jill when she’d found the verse, “whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

“Now go a little further back, to second Corinthians chapter 10.”

“Okay, I got it.”

“All right, read verses four and five.”

“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.”

“There’s one more I want to read to you,” said Jason, taking the book and turning to Isaiah 59:19. “When the Enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him.”

“You really know your way around the Bible,” said Jill. “I’m impressed.”

“Scripture memorization and review,” said Jason. “Thirty minutes to an hour every day when I was a kid. Listen Jill, I could give you a lot more verses on resisting the Devil and thinking positively because the Bible has a lot to say on both those subjects, but are you getting the idea from what we just read?”

“Sure. You have to think positively and you have to resist negative thoughts that come primarily from the Devil.”

“That’s right. You catch on fast.”

“But how do you resist the Devil? What do you do—just tell him to get out?”

“Yes. You tell him to leave, in Jesus’ name specifically, and he has to do it. Martin Luther threw a bottle of ink at the Devil once. I think the stain from it is still on the wall of his house, which is now a museum. But the point is that if you resist the Devil he has to flee from you. The other thing is that if you turn on the light, by reading your Bible, God’s Word, then the darkness will flee of itself.”

“That all sounds good,” said Jill. “I’m definitely going to try it.”

“Don’t get discouraged if things don’t change drastically right away, because the Enemy will fight. But if you keep fighting you can’t lose. The only way the Devil can win is if you quit.”

“Amazing. I wish it was like that in my line of work. In court you can fight like mad, get all the facts, do a great job preparing your client, cross examining, and summing up, but that doesn’t mean you are going to win. You can still lose.”

“I guess it’s like that in just about every competitive endeavor except fighting the Devil, because in that case Jesus has promised to fight for you. There is a verse that says ‘stand back and see Me fight saith the Lord.’”

“Where is it?”

“I’m not sure really, but it’s there somewhere.”

Jill and Jason talked for awhile longer, split the bill, said good night and went their separate ways. It felt good to witness to Jill. Jason knew he’d been a help to her and was thankful he could be. Witnessing was quite a thrill, he had to admit. When he got home he cracked open the *Basic MOP* and read for about twenty minutes before dropping off to sleep. He knew tomorrow, Friday, would be a busy day.

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FRIDAY: TOGETHER AGAIN

Jason woke up close to an hour early and spent the time reading a few more sections of the *Basic MOP*. He could feel his spirit being strengthened as he read, the way a swig of Gatorade perked him up after a hard run. He got up, ate a quick breakfast and drove to class, parking almost in the exact spot where Slater had shot up his car a few days before.

“Lord,” he prayed as he got out of the car, “You’re going to have to take care of Slater. I don’t think You want me to get a gun, so You’re going to have to take care of things for me. Please do it, Lord.”

Between classes, Jason phoned Monica at the Activated Desk. “Jason, it’s good to hear from you,” she said when Jason identified himself. “Did you get the literature we sent you?”

“Not yet.”

“Really? Well, it will probably be there soon.”

“Monica, did I tell you about this lawyer I met? Jill?”

“Yes, you did. She got saved, right?”

“That’s right. I talked to her again last night and she’s quite a sheep, but she’s very cautious, somewhat skeptical even. She wants to believe, and for the most part I think she does, but she still has a lot of questions that nag her. I answered them the best I could, but

I wish there is something she could read that would bring it all together for her.”

“I’ve been reading something that I could print out and send you. It’s a condensation of a book called *The Case for Christ*. It’s by this guy who is a legal writer for the *New York Times*. He didn’t have anything to do with religion and he wanted to keep it that way but then his wife became a Christian. He was afraid she’d turn into an unpleasant prude, but when that didn’t happen and she actually became a happier, more fun-loving person he started investigating Jesus to see what was behind it. He interviews a lot of noted theologians and archaeologists and Bible scholars and comes up with a lot of very interesting things. It’s pretty inspiring actually—something your friend might relate to.”

“It sounds good. That would be great if you could send it to me.”

“I’ll do it as soon as I get off the phone. Do you have an e-mail address, or do you want me to print it and send it that way?”

“E-mail would be faster,” answered Jason, giving Monica an address she could send the document to. “Thanks, Monica, I really appreciate it.”



Class went by fast enough and Jason got back in his car and drove to work. He’d been on the same schedule for almost two years and it never bothered him before, but today it was getting on his nerves. After thinking about it for a few minutes he came to the conclusion that the routine was boring. The realization didn’t do much for the rest of the workday, which seemed to drag on forever. He started watching the clock, something he rarely did. Finally, with the little hand already on the five, the big hand made the last jump to twelve. Time to cut and run. Jason was out the door before the second hand could move half way around the clock.

A half an hour later he was making himself dinner and thinking about Lauren. The anticipation of seeing her, probably spending the night together, was calming and exhilarating at the same time.

Then he started to have some doubts. Maybe he was rushing things. *Maybe, now that Lauren’s had some time to think it over, she’ll want to cool things down and won’t be so happy about getting picked up at the airport. Maybe picking her up isn’t such a great idea after all. I sure want to though*, he thought. *I don’t want to rush things, but on the other hand I don’t want to miss an opportunity to see her as soon as possible.* “What should I do?” he whispered aloud.

And then, as clear as a gunshot, he heard the Lord. *Why not ask Me?*

He remembered how in the MO Letters Dad would often say, “And then, as clear as I ever heard the voice of the Lord, He told me...,” and he’d go on to say what the Lord had said to him.

“Well, Lord,” said Jason as he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, “I know that was You speaking so I am asking, Lord. Please tell me what I should do. Should I go to the airport and meet Lauren or not? Is she going to be happy I came or happier if I didn’t? I know what I’d like to do but I want to hear from You. What do You have to say?”

Jason waited, his eyes closed, his chair tilted slightly back from the table. He waited thirty seconds, then a minute, but the Lord didn’t speak. Then he remembered his micro-tape recorder. He retrieved it from the bedroom and was back at the table in no time. He waited a minute more before the Lord started to speak to him.

“Jason, I am so glad that you are using the gift of prophecy. It’s a wonderful gift, isn’t it? You can come to Me and ask whatever you want and I can tell you. Yes, you should go to meet Lauren. She will be glad to see you. She has been thinking of you just as you

have been thinking of her. It is no accident that you have met. I didn't bring her to the beach that day only to save you from a beating, although this was part of My plan. I brought her along so you could be a help to her and for her to help you. And this has happened, has it not?

"You have witnessed to her and she has received Me. You have loved each other and found fellowship in each other's arms, and this has benefited each of you. And this very night you will need each other again. This is why I have put it in your heart to meet her at the airport. This is why I put the idea in Woody's head and why he mentioned it. You and Lauren will need each other tonight, so go to her. You will also need Me so stay close to Me. As for the doubts, rebuke them. They are of the Enemy. Go and meet Lauren and I will be with you."

"Thank You, Jesus," Jason prayed. "Thank You for speaking to me."

Jason finished his dinner, did the dishes, cleaned up the kitchen and lay down on the couch for a catnap. Half an hour later he opened his eyes and looked at his watch. 7:15. Time for a small jolt of coffee for the drive ahead. He walked into the kitchen and poured half a cup of cold coffee into a mug he retrieved from the dish drainer. Sticking the cup into the microwave he closed the door and punched in 1:00. While the coffee heated up he grabbed a quick shave and added a little cologne to his neck and wrists. Then he went into his bedroom and put on a clean shirt. On the way back to the kitchen he paused to look at himself in the full-length mirror that hung on the door of the linen closet. His collar was slightly twisted on one side so he fixed it. "Now," he said as he struck a 'Saturday Night Fever' pose, "you're the man."

He laughed at his own joke as he retrieved his coffee from the microwave. He remembered an FGA he'd known in India who was famous for laughing at

his own jokes. He'd laugh so hard that to everyone else the laughing was funnier than the joke itself. But he'd always defend his position. "If a joke is funny you're going to laugh. If you can't laugh at your own jokes, you've got no business telling them."

The coffee finished, Jason headed out to the driveway, got into his Toyota, and backed into the street. A few minutes later he was on the onramp of the 405 and then merging into northbound traffic on his way to LAX—Los Angeles International Airport. Jason had been to LAX a number of times in his two years in the States. Almost every time he went he'd ask someone, "What does LAX stand for?"

The answer, which was sometimes accompanied with a how-can-you-ask-such-a-dumb-question look, was always the same, "Los Angeles International Airport."

"Right," he'd say. "LA stands for Los Angeles, but how does X stand for International Airport?"

"Good question," was often the answer he got, followed by, "I don't know."

Maybe he'd ask Lauren, although he doubted she'd know. Why would she when everyone he asked—ticket agents, cops, bartenders—always came up blank. Still, you never knew if the next person you asked might have the answer.

He drove past the junction of the 405 and the 22 and then past the 605. Then came the 710 and a few miles later the 110 and then finally the 105. If there was one thing Los Angeles and Southern California had a lot of it was freeways. Jason had read somewhere that in the early 1900s there was an extensive railway all throughout Southern California, connecting all the cities in the region. People used it to get to work and, on the weekends, to visit friends or get out into the country. General Motors recognized that there would be a tremendous population growth in the area and wanted all those people to buy cars. So

they bought the railway and let it rot. The result was that California buys more cars by far than any other state in the union.

Of course, General Motors was happy about this but there was a downside for them too. The state began to pass laws requiring the automotive industry to reduce the amount of smog that their cars were producing. His uncle had told Jason that in the seventies the smog would sometimes get so bad that the sky would turn brown and the schools would close. So every year the automotive manufacturers would have to add something, or improve something, to get the cars to produce less smog. Of course this cost a lot of money, but the automakers just passed it on to the consumers, so in reality there wasn't much of a downside for General Motors after all.

There were two ways to get to the entrance of the airport. You could stay on the 405 and exit Century Boulevard, which would take you past a long line of hotels, gas stations and strip joints until you got to the signs directing you into the airport, where you would choose which level you wanted to go to—"arrivals" on the lower level, "departures" on the upper. Or you could go north on the 105 and get off on Sepulveda Boulevard, which would take you through a tunnel under a runway and up into the airport where you'd be offered the same "arrivals" or "departures" option.

Jason chose the 105 route because it was faster, with only one light right before the tunnel. That meant he had to take the connector ramp, which was one of the highest elevated roads in the world, a huge sweeping affair that rose fifty feet into the air on giant concrete pillars. At its highest point it changed directions and fell back down to the left where it merged with the 105. Because of the way it turned you could see the whole road ahead of you as soon as you left the 405. You could see how high you'd climb and the angle you'd be driving at when you banked

to the left on your way down. Anywhere else in the world it would have been just another elevated road which, unless you were afraid of heights, wouldn't necessarily bother you.

But in California an earthquake could snap an elevated freeway like a pretzel, and if you were on one when it happened you'd most likely be a statistic on the nightly news. Dan Rather and Peter Jennings would have appropriately sad countenances when they announced the death toll, and the next day the bulldozers would start moving the rubble. The news would show the bodies being pulled out, and by a miracle there might be a survivor or two. Then, with a lot of fanfare, the rebuilding program would start. The state would take bids, the contracts would be handed out, and the work would begin amid promises of a quick completion. In ten or eleven months it would all be back together, and the politicians and contractors would be congratulating each other on how fast the job was completed even if it did go over the budget.

Jason's uncle had spent his whole life in California and seen a lot of earthquakes. He'd been on the fourteenth floor of a dorm at UCLA when one hit in the early seventies. He said it shook the whole building the way a baby shook a rattle. After that he'd become somewhat of an earthquake buff. He'd told Jason a lot of interesting things about earthquakes. One was about the Richter scale, the standard used to measure the severity of earthquakes. Each time the scale went up a point it meant the earthquake was ten times more powerful. In other words an earthquake measuring 7.2 on the Richter scale would be ten times as powerful as one measuring 6.2.

Another interesting and ominous fact was, that with very few exceptions, the seismologists were waiting for "the big one"—an earthquake bigger than the great San Francisco shaker that devastated the city in 1906. Jason's uncle had shown him pictures of the earthquake

in the Bay Area in 1989, where a stretch of elevated freeway in Oakland had fallen on the freeway below it, crushing the traffic below between tons of concrete. He'd also shown him pictures of the Northridge earthquake, which was probably only a thirty-minute drive from where he was now. He remembered the pillars that held the elevated freeway in place had stayed up but the freeway had fallen. In some places it totally collapsed; in others just one side gave way, the connected side hanging to a pillar by strands of twisted rebar. He tried not to think about it as he drove up the ramp and banked his car to the left. "Thank You, Jesus," he prayed as he merged onto the 105. "Thank You that earthquakes don't happen very often."

Soon he exited the freeway, went through the tunnel under the runway, and found a parking space in a covered lot. He glanced at his watch. It was 8:15—plenty of time to get to the gate before Lauren came in.

LAX is one of the world's largest and busiest airports. It has seven terminals laid out in a giant U shape so that you could drive down one side and out the other if you were dropping someone off, and even if you were picking them up if your timing was perfect. There were a lot of cops—the Airport Authority had their own police force—who kept the traffic moving, so you couldn't wait long at the curb. And if there wasn't a cop around a recorded message on the loud speaker let you know the score every couple of minutes. *"Passenger loading and unloading zones are for the loading and unloading of passengers only. Parking is not allowed. Violators will be ticketed and their vehicles towed away at the owners' expense."* Of course if there were no cops, the loudspeaker couldn't give you a ticket, so plenty of people hovered at the curb hoping their party would show up before the cops did.

Jason used the crosswalk to get across the street to the arrival level of Terminal Two, where Lauren's plane was going to come in. He walked by a line of

drivers, some who were loading passengers, others who were looking for their loved ones and watching for cops in the rear-view mirror. One driver had taken the ultimate risk and parked his car against the curb. *The odds are against you*, Jason thought as he stepped on to an escalator that brought him up to the ticketing and departure level.

Jason entered the ticketing area and went to the nearest monitor to check for Lauren's flight. Halfway down the screen he spotted it, complete with the flight number, arrival time, the gate number and the comment that it was "on time." Jason looked at his watch and when he looked back to the screen "landed" had replaced "on time." *Perfect timing*, he thought. Heading toward another escalator which would take him up to the gates, he noticed a slightly overweight middle-aged Indian woman dressed in the white uniform of a missionary society collecting donations. Just as Jason spotted her a message in an authoritative, almost stern voice, came across the loudspeaker: *"You are not obligated to give to solicitors. This airport does not support their activities."* A second later the voice intoned the same message in Spanish. It wouldn't do for a Spanish speaker to give a donation without being informed of the airport's position.

Jason stopped and retrieved a dollar from his wallet. Just before stepping onto the escalator he folded it in quarters and dropped it into the slot of the large can that the woman held out to him. "Thank you very much," she said. "God bless you."

"God bless you," said Jason with a nod as the escalator took him up to the next level. Jason didn't come to LAX very often, but whenever he did he gave a dollar or two to those collecting for the homeless or abused women or to the missionary folks who always dressed in white. He probably would have given to them anyway, but if he thought about it he'd have to admit

that the announcements on the loudspeakers insured that he would. He'd heard that the Krishna Conscious folks, who were pretty active solicitors themselves had taken the airport authority to court and won the right to give out their stuff and ask for donations. So the airport couldn't keep them out, nor any of the other charities. Of course they made them jump through a lot of hoops—registration, nametags, security checks. And the airport authority was faithful to let everyone know they didn't "have" to give, that the public wasn't required to do so and, more importantly, the airport did not support their activities.

Jason stepped off the escalator. Thirty yards ahead of him ticketed passengers waited in line to go through the security check. In the days before 9/11 you could pass through security and meet your party as they stepped out of the gate, but no more. Now you had to show a ticket to get through.

Jason walked to the left where he could see past security down the long wide hall with the gates on either side. It seemed like throngs of people were coming his way, most carrying coats and pulling carry-on bags behind them. After all the chapter elevens, lay-off's and big airlines going belly-up, there still seemed to be a lot of people flying. Most of the exiting passengers filed onto an escalator that dropped all the way to the baggage claim at street level. The flight crews walked through a guarded opening near security and walked right past Jason.

A moment later Jason noticed a flight crew coming down the wide hall, the pilots in front, looking a little less than sharp in their uniforms and hats after the long flight. Behind them came the flight attendants, all females. *They look a little tired*, Jason thought, *but still good*. He stood a little straighter as they drew near.

"Jason!" said Lauren, her voice loud with excitement. "You came!" She ran up and hugged him so hard he felt the air being squeezed out of his body.

"Yes," he gasped into her ear as the line of smiling airline personnel stopped to watch.

A redheaded flight attendant with a slight resemblance to Nicole Kidman asked what was on everyone's mind. "Does she have a ride home, or will she be taking the shuttle?"

"She has a ride," Jason said over Lauren's shoulder.

Lauren let go of Jason and turned around. "Oh, sorry guys. Yeah, I have a ride. Thanks!" The redhead and a couple of others waved and the line moved off.

"Thanks so much for coming to pick me up," said Lauren. "I wasn't expecting it."

"I would have let you know, but there was no way to get in touch with you."

"I like it better this way—an unexpected surprise. Hey, let's get out of here. I'm sick of airplanes and airports. I want to go home."

"Sure," said Jason, "let me help you with your bag."

Lauren handed him the handle of her tow-along bag, and Jason pulled it behind him as they walked toward the exit. They talked a little, but Jason didn't get into any of the major events of the week—plenty of time for that later.

"How was your trip?" Jason asked.

"Lot of miles, lots of coffee, tea and meals served. I got some good sleep in New York and Paris. That was the highlight of the trip."

Soon they were outside headed for a crosswalk that would take them to Jason's car. Just before they reached the crosswalk a tall, broad-shouldered man overtook them from behind, passing Jason on his right. He ran about ten yards ahead of them, stopped abruptly, and turned around long enough to pull his black trench coat away from his waist so they could get a good look at the gun stuck in his belt.

“Slater!” said Lauren, putting her hand to her mouth.

“Oh no, it’s not you again, is it Slater?” said Jason, who was more disgusted with the idea that his evening with Lauren was going to be ruined than he was afraid of the gun Slater was calling their attention to. “Yeah, yeah, Slater, we see you have a gun. The little boy gets sand thrown in his face so a thousand heads must roll.”

“Not a thousand, surfer boy, just two,” said Slater, moving around behind them. “Now get moving. If you try anything, I’ll drop you both and a few more for good measure. You two are dead, but if I have to do it here a couple more will go with you. You got that?”

“Yeah, Slater, we got it,” Jason said as they began walking.

As they covered the short distance to the crosswalk Jason mentally kicked himself for not being more alert. Slater had probably been following him since Huntington Beach and he’d led him right to Lauren. For a moment he almost felt bad that Slater hadn’t gotten him with one of his shots at the college. If he had, Lauren would probably be safe now because Slater might have felt that getting him was enough. Or he might be behind bars for shooting Jason, despite his ski mask and whatever alibi he had cooked up.

“Oh, Lord,” Jason whispered under his breath, “forgive me for not being more prayerful. Please help us, Lord.”

Jason wasn’t expecting the Lord to speak to him but the words popped clearly in his mind.

You could have been more careful but you were prayerful. Don’t you remember praying? I told you to come and meet Lauren and that you would need each other. So don’t worry—I will help you. Stand back and see Me fight.

About twenty people were waiting at the crosswalk, some talking to each other while others waited in

silence. Jason noticed two Japanese businessmen in dark suits talking away in Japanese. One of them was pushing a luggage cart piled high with suitcases and a bag of golf clubs. When the light turned green the Japanese were the first off the mark, pushing the cart out to the center of the crosswalk while the others filed in behind them.

The entrance to the parking lot was to the left of the crosswalk, so Jason and Lauren headed that way with Slater three feet behind them.

“To the elevators,” said Slater when they reached the entrance. Jason noticed the two Japanese were the only other people waiting for the elevator that would take them to one of the parking levels above.

Lord help us, Jason prayed as they moved closer to the Japanese. He was surprised at how calm he felt under the circumstances. He had no doubt that Slater planned to kill them, though it was hard for him to imagine anyone, even Slater, risking lethal injection or life in prison to get even because he’d been made to look bad at the beach.

They were just about even with the Japanese now and Slater hadn’t given any new directions. Lauren, who was on the side nearest the two businessmen, suddenly stopped in front of their luggage cart and began discreetly fingering the golf clubs. She chose a nine iron, pulled it out, and in a sudden movement swung it around towards Slater with all her might.

Slater jumped back as the club whizzed by his torso and caught him on his right hand. He let out a loud curse and grabbed for his gun with his left just as Lauren wound up for another swing. Lauren swung the club hard at Slater’s head, but Slater, who probably ducked a pool cue every third bar fight he was in, got under it easily.

He had his gun out now, bringing it up from his waist and across his chest. Jason noticed that it was unusually long. Something was extending from the

barrel. What was it? *A silencer*, Jason thought as he rushed forward and made a grab for the gun.

Slater, who sensed he'd be coming, stepped into him and brought the butt of the gun up hard against his forehead. Jason staggered back a couple of steps and then slumped to the ground, landing in a sitting position with both hands on his head.

Lauren had temporarily lost her balance at the end of her last swing, so Slater moved in and, grabbing her around the neck with his right arm, yanked her up until her feet were off the ground. Lauren dropped the golf club and grabbed at Slater's arm, her feet kicking wildly at his shins, just as the elevator arrived and the door opened.

The Japanese, who had been standing motionless since Lauren had taken her first swing, looked at the open elevator door and then at Slater. Slater pointed the gun at them while he decided what to do.

"Let 'em go," said Jason from the floor. "This is between us."

Slater watched the Japanese for a long second. The elevator doors started to close and one of the men, taking his eyes off Slater for only a second, reached back and put his hand between the doors, causing them to slide back open.

"All right," Slater finally said, "beat it." He motioned with his gun toward the elevator and the two men backed in, taking their luggage with them. A second later the door closed leaving the adversaries on the ground floor of the parking structure.

"What are you going to do now, Slater?" Lauren croaked as she fought for air. "Shoot us?"

Slater looked down at Lauren hanging from his arm, and in one quick move shifted his hip and swung his arm, sending Lauren flying toward Jason. She landed on top of him, which helped break her fall, even though it jarred Jason, who was still woozy from the blow to the head.

"That's right," said Slater, as Jason and Lauren untangled themselves and sat up. "Let me show you how it's going to work." Slater extended his arm, pointed the gun at the window of a parked Mercedes, and fired. Jason and Lauren watched as the bullet went through the car's passenger side window, out the driver's side and continued repeating the process through a line of seven or eight cars.

Slater touched the silencer on the barrel of the gun. "Nice and quiet, eh? It will be even quieter going through your heads. No broken glass."

Slater leveled the gun and pointed it at Jason who silently whispered what he was sure would be his last prayer on earth. "Thank You, Jesus, that I'm saved and going to Heaven and thank You that Lauren's saved too. Help it not to hurt too bad."

"Jason, my man! What are you doing sitting on the floor? And who is the young lady sitting next to you?"

Jason looked toward the direction the voice was coming from. Walking nonchalantly toward them, from near the row of cars that Slater had fired at, was a black man about Jason's age. He looked like someone Jason knew. Even his voice sounded familiar, but Jason couldn't place him.

"Who the hell are you?" Slater asked with a furtive glance in the man's direction. With his gun trained on Lauren and Jason, Slater turned his body slightly so that he could get a better look at the intruder, who didn't seem that interested in answering his question. The man kept walking in his nonchalant, almost swaggering way, like a celebrity going up the red carpet to a party held in his honor.

Slater turned the gun on the man now. "Freeze," he ordered, "or you'll be stopping a bullet."

"Eric!" Jason called, suddenly recognizing the hitchhiker who'd advised him to give drugs a miss. "I didn't recognize you at first. It's great to see you!"

“Shut up!” yelled Slater in Jason’s direction, his eyes and gun fixed on Eric, who was still walking and now only twenty yards off. “I told you to freeze, punk!” said Slater to Eric, but he wasn’t ordering him now, just letting him know that whatever came next he’d brought on himself. Squaring his feet and aiming the gun with two hands Slater squeezed off three shots that should have hit Eric in the head, chest and stomach.

Eric took a few more steps and stopped five yards from Slater who, with a look of wild disbelief on his face, was still in a firing position.

“Put the gun down, Slater,” Eric said in a soft voice. “It’s not going to be effective in this situation.”

For a second it looked like Slater might take his advice. Slowly he began lowering the gun, but suddenly he turned and fired two shots at Jason and Lauren.

Having already said his prayers, Jason closed his eyes. He waited, expecting to feel some pain, or maybe blood soaking through his clothes, but all he felt was the same cold cement on his backside which told him he probably wasn’t dead. He opened his eyes and looked over at Lauren, who was just opening hers. They looked up together to see Eric standing over Slater who was, judging from his sprawled out position, out cold. Eric reached down and, taking Slater by the lapels of his trench coat, lifted him into a sitting position. Moving around behind Slater, Eric grabbed him by the collar and pulled him along the cement until he could prop him up against the Mercedes with the blown out windows. That done, Eric walked over to where Slater’s gun lay on the ground. He bent over, picked it up, and pocketed it somewhere inside his own jacket. Then he walked over to Jason and Lauren.

“Thanks,” said Jason, who felt dazed and couldn’t think of anything else to say. He was standing now, and he and Eric reached down to help Lauren who took a hand from each of them.

“Yes, thanks,” she said when they’d pulled her up. “You saved us for sure.”

“What happened to the bullets he fired at us?” asked Jason. “There’s no way he could’ve missed at that range.”

“I caught ‘em,” said Eric reaching into his pocket and coming out with two ovals of lead.

“You can catch bullets?” Lauren asked, her eyes wide with wonder.

“Spiritual body,” said Eric, as he stepped back and spread his arms. “You can do all kinds of cool stuff with it.”

“And what happened to Slater?” asked Jason.

“A left cross and a right uppercut,” said Eric, as he launched into a five-second shadow boxing routine. “Did I mention that I used to be a sparring partner for Oscar de la Hoya?”

“No, you didn’t,” said Jason.

“Were you really?” asked Lauren.

“Naw, just kidding,” said Eric sheepishly. “Just kidding about knocking Slater out too, although I could have. He certainly deserves whatever he gets. He’s a major jerk I’d say.”

“You won’t get an argument from me,” said Jason. “But really, what did you do to him?”

“I zapped him,” said Eric, pointing a finger at Slater. “He’ll probably be out for a half hour.”

“What should we do with him?”

“That’s up to you. I’m just here to make sure he didn’t shoot you. By the way, a couple of guys told me to say hello to you.”

“Really? Who?”

“Herb and Hans.”

“Herb and Hans? Who are they? I never heard of them.”

“They’re the guys who helped you last time. The spies, World War II—one from England and one from Germany.”

"You know them?" asked Jason, surprised.

"Sure, I see them all the time. Actually, they're overseeing me on this job. This is the first rescue I've ever done."

"Really?" asked Lauren, with a surprised look. "You did a great job."

"Thanks, I appreciate that. Listen, I've got to go," said Eric backing away. "Take care of yourselves. And Jason..."

"Yeah?"

"...Prevaricate means to speak or act evasively."

"Ah," said Jason as Eric turned, took a step and disappeared before their eyes.

Jason and Lauren stood looking at the spot where Eric had been.

Lauren let out a gasp. "Did you ... he just ... what was that all about?"

"It's a long story," said Jason with a sigh. "Guess now I know for sure."

"Know what?" Lauren asked.

"That some have entertained angels unawares."

"And I'm supposed to get what that means?"

"He was an angel, Lauren ... first time I met him was about six months after I first came to the States. He was hitchhiking, going to San Diego to get in a rehabilitation program."

"An angel on drugs?"

"Or who made it look like he was, to get a point across. You see, he talked a lot on the drive down, all about drugs, and what they did to people. I was actually thinking about trying them at the time, but I never did, thanks to his advice. I always wondered about him, what happened to him and all, because I never saw him again until now. Now he's just confirmed his identity, I guess."

"You mean of being an angel?"

"Is that so difficult to believe, after what you've just seen him do?"

Lauren shrugged. "What about those other guys he was talking about? What were their names?"

"Herb and Hans, I think he said. They were spies in World War II. They helped me when Slater tried to shoot me before."

"He tried to shoot you before?" asked Lauren, her eyes wide with surprise and concern.

"A few days ago. He shot out all the windows of my car."

"Where?"

"At the community college. I heard this voice in my mind, as clear as anything, telling me exactly what to do. After the first shots through the windshield, I managed to get out of that car and hide under a pickup without Slater ever seeing me. He got so mad he shot out all the windows, threw the gun in the car, and then apparently ran off and called the cops. When they came, they found me, the gun, the car, and I had to go to the police station and answer a lot of questions."

"Slater is crazy. If he kills us now, the cops are going to know it was him."

"I guess he doesn't care."

Lauren looked over at Slater propped up against the car wheel. "What should we do about him?"

"Let's leave him and get out of here."

"What if the Japanese call the cops?"

"The cops will know what to do with Slater. What are we going to tell them if we wait? Eric took Slater's gun."

"Okay, I see your point. Let's go."

Jason's car was only a few rows over and they got there in under a minute. Jason opened the trunk and put Lauren's bag inside, then went and opened the passenger door for her. "Thanks," said Lauren sliding into the seat, "a true gentleman, even when making a getaway."

"You're welcome," said Jason, closing the door. He walked to the other side of the car, got in and backed

out. “We’re not really making a getaway though, since we didn’t do anything wrong. We’re just simplifying things.”

As they moved out into traffic Jason checked his rear-view mirror and saw a police car enter the parking lot. Lauren turned in time to see the tail end of the police car before it disappeared into the cement structure.

“What do you think Slater is going to tell them?” asked Lauren.

“To be honest, I don’t care what he tells them.”

Jason turned on to Century Boulevard and decided to take it directly to the 405 instead of making the transition from the 105. “Lauren, is it okay with you if we pull over and pray? I’m a little shook up after all that.”

“Good idea. I’m shook up too.”

Jason pulled into the twenty-four hour post office and found a parking spot facing the street. He turned off the engine and started to pray, thanking the Lord for His miraculous protection, for sending Eric to save them, and for allowing them to leave without becoming involved with the police. His head, where Slater had hit him with the butt of his gun, was hurting some, but it could have been a lot worse, so he thanked the Lord that it wasn’t. He thanked the Lord for His love and His mercy and finished by asking that He would protect them on the drive home.

Then Lauren prayed a short simple prayer, thanking the Lord that she had met Jason, and had entered a whole new world—a world where God did some pretty incredible things like having angels come out of nowhere to catch bullets and zap bad guys.

When Lauren finished praying, Jason asked the Lord if He had anything to say. He waited and soon the Lord began to speak.

“I am with you, Jason, because I love you and because I know you have a lot left to do for Me. I

know you are at a time of decision, and I know you want to make the right one and I know you will. Can you tell that we are at the gates of the Endtime? Not the Tribulation, not the last seven years, but close. This is why I am pulling out all the stops. This is why you are getting such tangible help from your spirit helpers. This is it, the most exciting time in world history. You can be a part of it, Jason, and I know that you will be.

“And you, Lauren, can also be a part. I have need of you also. You don’t need to understand it all now, but if you keep an open heart, then in time you will. It is not by happenstance that you met Jason at this pivotal time in his life. It is also a pivotal time for you. But again, you don’t have to understand it all now. Things will become clearer to you as time goes on.”

Jason waited a little longer but nothing more came. “Thank You Jesus, thank You Lord,” he whispered. He opened his eyes and looked over at Lauren, who was also just opening her eyes.

“So what was that?” Lauren asked. “It was you talking but it sounded like someone else.”

“It was a prophecy,” said Jason, “a personal message from Jesus.”

“How do you know it was from Him? Maybe it was just your own thoughts.”

“I know ... by faith.”

“Faith,” said Lauren, half-exasperated that Jason seemed able to accept things so easily. “It seems like a pretty amazing thing.”

“It is,” said Jason.

“And what was all that about the last seven years and gates of something? It sounded rather spooky.”

“That’s something else I learned about in missionary school,” said Jason. “The Bible has a lot to say about this time—the time of the End, or Endtime, man’s last days on earth—and in the Family we learned all sorts of things about it. For example, the

last seven years is going to be the final period of time before Jesus returns, and it's going to be preceded by a period of increased miracles, as well as wars, earthquakes, disasters and all. It says that the people who know their God shall be strong and do exploits. So I guess the Lord was saying that this time is drawing nearer, and because of that He intends for our faith to grow so we'll be ready for those things. I could show you some of the chapters to read in the Bible. There is a lot in Daniel and Revelations."

"Okay," said Lauren, "but can we go home now? I'm really tired."

"Sure," said Jason, and started the car.

Soon they were out on the 405, headed south toward Huntington Beach. They drove in silence for awhile and Lauren dropped off to sleep for fifteen or twenty minutes. When she woke up she looked over at Jason. "Have you ever seen anything like that before?"

"Huh? Like what?"

"Like that scene with Eric. How he came out of nowhere, caught bullets, flattened Slater, and disappeared? The whole deal. Have you ever seen anything like it before?"

"No, nothing like that. When I was growing up in the Family we had a lot of publications about the spirit world and spirit helpers, angels and all. There's a lot about them in the Bible as well. I've always believed it but I never really experienced it, at least not like that."

"What do you mean 'at least not like that?' If not like that, like what?"

"Well, you pray for things. You pray for protection and God protects you. You know that he uses angels and spirit helpers to do things for you, but you don't actually see them, right? Like the voices I heard when Slater was shooting my car. ... One guy I used to live with was pretty sure he'd seen an angel."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It was in New Delhi, we had a place there, and he walked down to this little market that was nearby. There was a guy standing outside the market holding a bunch of flowers like he was waiting for somebody. He started talking to Paul—that was the name of the guy I knew—and told him what a tremendous job we were doing there. He went on and on telling Paul that we couldn't realize what an impact we were having there. He said we might not see it, it might not look like we were doing much, but in reality we were making a tremendous difference. Paul came back all excited and was pretty sure the guy was an angel."

"But that's not the same as this. I mean this guy Eric actually disappeared. We saw him right?"

"Yeah, we did."

"How did Paul know he was an angel?"

"I don't think he knew for sure, he just thought he was because of the way he talked and what he was saying."

"What did you think?"

"I thought he probably was. Paul was a pretty solid guy, and I figured that if he thought he'd seen an angel he probably had. I know from the Bible that it happens so I thought it probably had."

"And what do you think of what just happened back at the airport?"

"Well, I think a lot's happened in the six days since I met you."

"That's for sure. But really, what do you think?"

Jason changed lanes to get around a slow-moving semi. "I think Eric is probably a spirit helper. But that's just a guess. He could be an angel."

"What's the difference?"

"Well, a spirit helper is like someone who has lived on earth, died, and then gone to Heaven. Their spirit comes back to help in situations, perhaps situations the person was familiar with during their life. An

angel is like a ‘permanent resident’ of Heaven, so to speak ... they’ve always been angels, spirits, and have never lived on earth as a human.”

“Hmm.” Lauren didn’t ask anything further. She was too tired to try comprehending all this stuff.

“What about Slater? What do you think his next move is going to be?” she finally asked.

“I think he’ll come after us again. Eric disappeared with his gun, so the cops won’t find that. And we’re not there to tell them anything, so he’ll probably talk his way out of it, make up some excuse, and without any evidence, the police will be forced to let him go again—unless perhaps those Japanese show up with a translator.”

“Which isn’t likely.”

“So he’ll probably walk,” Jason muttered, “and come after us again.”

“What can we do about it?”

“I wish I had the answer.”

“There’s got to be something we can do,” said Lauren, but nothing came to her as they rolled toward Huntington Beach with a string of red taillights in front of them, and of yellow headlights on their left.

It was after 10:30 by the time Jason pulled into Lauren’s driveway and carried her bag into the house. As soon as they were inside Lauren, revived from her nap, gave Jason a big kiss that promised more to come and headed for the shower. There was still plenty of hot water when Jason got his turn, so he let himself soak a little longer than he normally would.

Lauren was already in bed when he came into the bedroom with a towel wrapped around him. She pulled her arm out from under the covers and coyly beckoned him into bed. It was late and they were both tired from a long week, but the invisible force that powers two people falling in love gave them both enough steam for an intense and enjoyable evening.

SATURDAY: MOMENT OF TRUTH

Jason figured it to be about 6:30 AM when the soft morning light found its way into the bedroom window. He glanced at his watch on the bedside table, holding it up to the light ... 6:25, he still had the touch. He looked over at Lauren who was sleeping on her side, her hands under her head like a pillow, her back uncovered. *She’s so beautiful*, Jason thought. *Thank You, Jesus, for making our paths cross.*

He wished that was all he had to think about, but he knew the situation with Slater had to be resolved, and he didn’t have a clue how that could be done. Slater didn’t seem the type you could sit down with over a beer or two and work everything out. He’d probably use the beer bottle on your head as a prelude to shooting you with yet another handgun he’d manage to get from somewhere.

Jason got out of bed and quietly slipped on his pants. He walked out into the living room and found a pad of paper and a pen by the phone—the same place it had been a week ago. He sat at the dining room table and wrote the single question he was most desperate for an answer for.

Lord, what can I do about Slater?

He only had to wait a few seconds before the Lord started speaking to him. He wrote as fast as he could, determined to get it all down.

Don't worry about Slater. The best thing you can do is ask Me to take care of the situation and have faith that I will. He is a brute beast motivated almost entirely by pride. Nevertheless I have used him in your life to get you desperate with Me. Through him you have met Lauren and she is growing in faith. You've met Woody and Jill who have also received Me. I've sent Eric and Herb and Hans to protect you and you've had an eyewitness glimpse into the workings of the spirit world. So you see, much good has inadvertently come from the hand of Slater.

Did you ever wonder why you were reminded of the quote about the size of the fight in the dog? The logical course of action that day would have been to stay put and let Slater walk away, but I encouraged you to go after him because I had a plan. Going after him has set off a chain of events that are working out, and will continue to work together for good. So don't worry about Slater. Just pray for My protection. Think about this, that David of old spent a lot of time worrying about Saul. But did he die at the hand of Saul as he feared he would? No he didn't. So take a lesson from David and don't worry. I will keep you and protect you as you call out to Me.

Jason finished writing the last of the prophecy and then read it over. Encouraged, he tore the sheet from the pad and went back into the bedroom. Lauren was still asleep so Jason set the paper on the bedside table, pulled off his pants, and got back into bed. A little more sleep wouldn't hurt.

An hour later he woke up to see Lauren sitting in a chair in the corner of the room reading the Bible.

"Looks like a nice Bible," he said from the bed.

"It is," said Lauren holding up a medium-sized Harper & Row red-letter edition. "I got it in New York on the way back. This is the first chance I've had to read it."

"What are you reading?"

"The Gospel of John, just like you said."

"Can you read out loud for a little?"

"Sure. I'm just starting chapter three."

Lauren, Jason noticed right away, was a good reader. Her voice was clear, she had good intonation, and periodically she'd look up from the text and hold his eye as she finished the last phrase of a sentence. It was easy to imagine her teaching a class to kids, teens, or adults. *She'd be great*, Jason thought, *a total natural*.

Jason listened as she read how Jesus explained to Nicodemus that in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven a man had to be born again. She read John 3:16, probably the most famous and recognized verse in the Bible, the whole plan of salvation in 25 words: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." She read how Jesus met the woman of Samaria and how, after revealing things to her that only a prophet would know, told her that God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.

She read how Jesus healed a lame man on the Sabbath and how the Jews determined to kill Him because of it. And about how the scribes and Pharisees brought an adulteress to Him and reminded Him that the Law of Moses said she should be stoned. Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with a stick, pretending not to hear, until finally He got up and told them that whoever was without sin should throw

the first stone. When they all filed out and left Him alone with the woman He asked her where were her accusers? “Hath no man condemned thee?” When she said no, no man did, He said He wouldn’t either, gave her some good advice, and sent her on her way.

Then she read chapter nine about the man who was blind from birth. When Jesus saw the blind man He spat on the ground and made mud from the spit and clay. Then He rubbed the mud in the man’s eyes and told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. The man did and could see, and when people asked him how it was that now he could see, he told them what Jesus had done. Soon they brought him to the Pharisees and they asked him what happened so he told them.

Then the Pharisees sent for the man’s parents because they didn’t believe that the man was born blind. His parents told them that he was their son and confirmed that he was born blind, but if they wanted to know how it was that he could see they’d have to ask him.

So they called the man again and said, “Give God the praise, we know this Man is a sinner.”

He answered and said, “Whether He be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.”

So they asked him again how Jesus opened his eyes. This time the man let them have it. “I have told you already, and you did not hear. Wherefore would you hear it again? Will you also be his disciples?”

Jason laughed and Lauren stopped reading and looked up.

“Sorry,” said Jason. “That part always cracks me up. That guy really had their number.”

“Yeah, it sounds like it.”

“Keep reading, it gets better. He really gets them going.”

“Then they reviled him, and said, ‘Thou art His disciple; but we are Moses’ disciples. We know that

God spake unto Moses: as for this fellow, we know not from whence He is.’ The man answered and said unto them, ‘Why herein is a marvelous thing, that ye know not from whence He is, and yet He hath opened mine eyes. Now we know that God heareth not sinners: but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth His will, him He heareth. Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind. If this Man were not of God, He could do nothing.’

“They answered and said unto him, ‘Thou wast altogether born in sin, and dost thou teach us?’ And they cast him out.”

Lauren read the last few verses of the chapter, how Jesus found the man and told him that He was the Son of God, and how the man said that he believed and worshipped Him. Lauren set the Bible down and looked over at Jason who was sitting up in bed but looking down, his hand on his forehead.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Jason looking up. “Sorry. That story always affects me. I haven’t read it for a long time.”

“That blind guy did seem like quite a character.”

“He must have been. He really socked it to those Pharisees.”

“I guess he was thankful that Jesus gave him his sight.”

“For sure. But there were other people that Jesus healed that never came to thank Him, and sometimes He told them not to tell people but they went and did it anyway. But this guy really stood up for Him.”

“Good for him,” said Lauren. She looked at Jason who was looking down again, holding his forehead. “Jason what’s the matter? Come on, tell me.”

Jason stretched out on the bed, propping his head up with a pillow so he could see Lauren. “Did you ever see the movie *Jesus of Nazareth*?”

“Yes, a long time ago.”

“There’s one part, right after Peter meets Jesus, when he’s trying to decide what to do. Jesus has called him to be His disciple and Peter has to decide. He’s out with his fishing boat, it’s in this harbor, and he’s deciding what to do, and he’s really going through it. He really likes fishing, it’s his life and his livelihood, and he likes it and it’s a trial to give it up. But finally he decides and pushes the boat out into the water and tells the guy working for him to take it to Capernaum. Then he goes back to be with Jesus.”

Lauren waited for Jason to continue but he seemed to be lost in thought. Wrestling with his thoughts was more like it she thought. “So what happened then?” she finally asked.

“So the blind man and Peter made the right decision. The blind man stood up for the Lord and Peter left everything and followed Him. And now it’s easy to see they did the right thing. I mean, what’s a boat and a fishing business compared to all the good that Peter did? Nothing, right?”

“Yes, I guess that’s true,” said Lauren, not quite sure were Jason was headed with the conversation. “But what’s the matter? Why are you looking so sad?”

“Because I realize that I made a poor decision when I quit being a missionary. For the last two years I’ve been studying and working when I could have been in India or Africa helping to reach the world for Jesus. I quit because I was tired of the hardships. I wanted to try something new. I wanted things to be easier.”

“I wouldn’t feel too bad about it,” said Lauren. “To be honest it doesn’t sound so terrible to me. That’s what most of the world does, don’t they? You have to make a living so you try and get an education so you can get a good job. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, if that’s what you’re supposed to be doing.”

“Well, if you’re not supposed to be earning a living, what *are* you supposed to be doing?”

“It’s not a matter of earning a living—you have to do that one way or another. If you’re a missionary and you work hard and really put your heart into it, God will take care of you. He’ll inspire the people you minister to and they’ll help you, and He’ll inspire the people in your home country to support you if you are faithful to keep them informed of what the Lord is doing through you. Being a missionary is a lot of work, and the Lord will take care of you—pay your salary, in a manner of speaking—if you are faithful to do it. It’s called ‘living by faith’ because ultimately you are trusting God to take care of you and He doesn’t just issue a check every two weeks, but He does make sure you have what you need.”

“So,” asked Lauren, cutting right to the chase, “are you going back to being a missionary?”

Jason looked up at Lauren sitting in the corner of the room, her new Bible in her lap. He wondered what she’d think if he said he wasn’t sure, or he was thinking about it. She really couldn’t understand it all, so in a way it wouldn’t matter if he hedged his bets a bit. He knew that it would take some doing to get back into full-time service in the Family, but deep down he knew he could do it if he meant business.

Did he really mean business? That was the question. He knew that if he found a Home and got in, it would still be a hard road. He’d been away from the Family, communal living, and witnessing for two years. He was used to school and working, not outreach and living by faith. Despite what he’d just told Lauren, he knew living by faith was harder than working in many ways.

He’d been relatively happy the last couple of years. Perhaps it was more accurate to say he hadn’t been unhappy. He had to admit, when he was honest with himself, that he hadn’t been at peace. Maybe it was the Holy Spirit, the “Hound of Heaven” that chided him from time to time and got him thinking about

what he'd left behind, about his life of service that he'd forsaken. Sometimes it made him heart sick; he could actually feel a pain in his chest. It didn't usually last too long if he could get his mind on something else. He'd get busy with work and school and try not to think about it, but that wasn't always easy. That was before the events of last week. Before, when things were rocking along business as usual. But things were different now.

He looked at Lauren, sitting across from him waiting for his answer, and he realized that his first assessment was wrong and he wasn't going to be able to slide anything by her. Despite the fact that she didn't know much about the Family or discipleship or Matthew 4:19, she knew what his answer should be. She might not like it, she might be happier, at least for the moment, if he gave her the wrong answer or a watered-down one. But she'd know, one way or the other.

So here it was, the moment of truth. Was he going to keep going to work, going to school and hope he could get out of his predicament with Slater? Was he going to get a degree, a good job, maybe a wife and start working on trying to carve out a little financial security for his future? He knew a lot of people going that route, friends who had grown up in the Family but wanted a different life. But what did he want?

Did he want to rejoin the Family? After two years in the System with a pretty good feel of what it was like and how it might continue if things worked out, did he want to stick with it? Or did he want to be a missionary again?

All this, triggered by Lauren's question, went through his mind in a flash. And then something happened that he'd never experienced before. He'd heard how people who'd had a near brush with death sometimes had their whole life flash before them. As far as he knew he wasn't near death but suddenly,

like a fast-moving slide show, he started to see scenes from his life. He saw himself praying with a little Argentinean girl to receive Jesus when he was three or four, getting out posters in South Africa when he was ten, witnessing at the travelers' meeting in New Delhi when he was a JETT and teen. He saw himself at CTPs and Christmas shows, getting out tools, and picking up provisioning. He saw himself at fellowships and devotions and just sitting around relaxing with his brethren.

Then the scenes changed, as if they were jumping to the future. It seemed like there were two sets of alternating scenes now, based on the choice he would make. First he'd see himself in the System working, then in the Family witnessing. Then he'd be back in the System reading the newspaper about the necessity of receiving the mark of the beast. Then in the Family working in an underground print shop to get out the Word. Then he was at work, his boss telling him he'd made an appointment for him to go down and receive the mark. Then a soldier was shooting at him when he caught him secretly passing a tract to a young couple. But the bullets, instead of penetrating Jason, ricocheted off him and hit a garbage can next to the soldier and a streetlight over his head. The soldier turned and ran, the glass from the street light crunching under his boots, while Jason and the couple ran just as fast in the opposite direction.

Jason looked up and saw Lauren still sitting.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You look a little dazed."

"I'm fine," said Jason. "Sorry if I seemed a little spaced out for a minute."

"That's okay. What happened?"

"I was seeing visions of my life from when I was young until now. And then I was seeing ... I don't know what you'd call them except visions of the future. In one set I was in the Family witnessing, working,

running from the Antichrist forces, and in another I was stuck in the System trying to figure out what to do as things got tighter and tighter.”

“So what are you going to do? Are you going to go back to being a missionary?”

Jason slid down to the end of the bed so that he was sitting directly across from Lauren. He reached out and took her hands in his and looked into her eyes. “Yes, I am,” he said, his voice soft but full of conviction.

Lauren held his gaze for a moment longer and then looked away.

“I see,” she said as tears began to well in her eyes. “And you can make that kind of decision just like that?”

“Yes. Look up Matthew chapter 4, verse 19.”

“Jason,” said Lauren, a note of anger in her voice, “I really don’t feel like reading the Bible right now, while you’re making plans to leave for India or who knows where.”

“Just read it,” he said. “Please?”

Lauren found the verse and read: “And He said unto them—who’s He? Jesus?”

“Yes. Actually why don’t you start from verse 18.”

“And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And He saith unto them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ And they straightway left their nets, and followed Him.” Lauren looked up at Jason. “Should I keep reading?”

“Yes, read the next couple of verses.”

“And going on from thence, He saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets and He called them. And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed Him.”

“So there you go,” said Jason. “I wouldn’t be the first guy to make a quick decision to follow Jesus.”

“Jason, that was two thousand years ago. Jesus isn’t walking around picking out His twelve apostles any more.”

“That’s true, but He is gathering His Endtime army together and has been for the last thirty years. Remember I told you about how our group got started here in Huntington Beach? Well, a lot of those people, my parents’ generation, dropped out just like that. Do you know the band Fleetwood Mac?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, not long after the Family got started Fleetwood Mac was in Los Angeles on tour. One of the band members, Jeremy Spencer, was in a bookstore and met a couple of Family members who witnessed to him and got him saved and filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they challenged him to come with them to serve the Lord, and he did and has been doing it ever since. And that happened with a lot of people. I knew a guy in Switzerland who found a piece of our literature called ‘Come on Ma—Burn Your Bra.’ After he read it he tracked down the Family and joined.”

“Well, if you say so. But why you? Why are you deciding to do this all of a sudden?”

“To be honest it’s not that sudden. I’ve been thinking of it since this whole thing with Slater started. That got me praying, starting with the prayer that God used you to answer.”

“Maybe I should have let that kid keep his bucket of sand. I could have nursed you back to health after Slater bashed you.”

“I liked the way it worked out better. You don’t really mean that, do you?”

“No. I just don’t want you to take off. I know we’ve only known each other for a week, but I feel like things were going pretty good between us. I like you a lot and I was hoping you would stick around.”

"I feel the same. I like you a lot too—an incredible amount actually. I have to fight to keep my mind on things I'm supposed to when you're not around because I'd rather be thinking about you. And I want to stay with you. To be honest, it's crossed my mind that you would be a perfect partner to marry and have babies with. I probably shouldn't say that, but that's what I think."

"It's all right. I'm glad you said it."

"Why don't you come with me?"

"And be a missionary?"

"Yes."

"You're crazy, Jason. What do I know about being a missionary?"

"As much as Jeremy Spencer did when he started. Or practically anyone else the day they dropped out to follow Jesus. How much do you think Peter, James, John and Andrew knew on their first day?"

"Probably not much."

"Exactly. Listen Lauren, I know I was meant to be a missionary with the Family. I was born into it and did it all my life until I lost sight of what I was doing and decided to work and go to school. Well, I've been doing that for two years and I'm not happy. I have to get back to serving the Lord."

"And you think I should come with you?"

"Yes, I do. You are saved. You're filled with the Holy Spirit, and you can do it if you want. It's not an easy life and you have to do it because you want to serve the Lord and believe that the Family is the best place to do it. You can't do it just because we like being together, because that won't work. It's got to be because you want to be a disciple of Jesus." Jason stopped talking and looked into Lauren's face, which seemed to be a mix of excitement and confusion. "I know this is a lot to absorb," he said, "and, God help me, I don't want to be pushing you. You could be praying about it though."

"I will," said Lauren. "You can believe that."

Lauren and Jason spent another hour reading the Bible, and then Jason made breakfast for both of them while Lauren read a little more. When it was ready Lauren came out to the kitchen and Jason set a plate of eggs and toast in front of her.

"You want orange juice?" he asked.

"Please."

"And coffee?"

"Yes."

Jason poured a coffee and a glass of orange juice for each of them and set them on the table. Then he sat down with his plate. "Should we pray?" And then, before Lauren had a chance to answer, "How about you lead the prayer."

"All right," said Lauren as she held her hands on her lap and closed her eyes. "Jesus, I don't mind telling You this last week has been pretty crazy, but I'm thankful for it. That whole thing with Eric and Slater was wild and I wouldn't want to go through it again, but it was something to see Eric come out of nowhere to save us and then disappear right back into it. And now Jason wants me to give up everything and come with him to be Your disciple. I have to admit that's not something I would have ever thought up on my own, but I wouldn't say no categorically. I'd like to know more about it so I pray that You'll show me what I should do." Lauren opened her eyes and looked at Jason.

"Amen!" said Jason as he held her gaze, and then, closing his eyes for a moment more he prayed that the Lord would bless the food and their fellowship.

"Is that why you asked me to pray? For the Lord to bless the food?" asked Lauren.

"Yes, but I'm glad you prayed for the Lord to make things clear to you. I'm sure He will, Lauren. I know things will work out."

"I think you're right, Jason. I don't know how," she said as she raised her eyebrows and turned her

hands palms up, fingers spread, “but I do believe they will.”

Jason smiled from across the table. “There you go, babe. That’s faith. That’s what it takes and you’ve got it.”

“Thank You Jesus,” said Lauren, surprised that the phrase came out so naturally.

Breakfast was soon out of the way, and Jason was helping Lauren finish up putting things away in the kitchen when Lauren asked, “Do you want to go down to the beach and walk?”

“Sure,” said Jason. “I think I’ve got a pair of shorts and a T-shirt in the car. I’ll get ‘em.”



It was a beautiful day for walking and Jason and Lauren headed south along the water’s edge at a steady pace. Soon they passed Zack’s Too and a basketball court just to the south. Really it was less than a half court, just a spot where the asphalt from the path that ran parallel to the water’s edge widened out into a half circle. At the top of the circle, just where it met the sand, was a basket with a standard metal backboard and a chain net. Even from where they were, which was seventy yards across the sand toward the water, Jason could see that a serious game of three on three was going on. Three other players were waiting at the edge of the court ready to take on the winners and other players were milling around between the court and Zack’s Too’s.

Serious playground basketball, thought Jason as he watched a player drive the baseline and come under the basket for a reverse lay-up. Maybe they could stop and watch a little on the way back. They walked another half mile before deciding to turn around and head back. As they got closer to the court Jason asked Lauren if she’d mind if they stopped and watched for a little.

“Not if you buy me something to drink,” said Lauren.

“Deal. What do you want?”

“A Sobe. Orange and carrot.”

“Okay, but I’ll bet they won’t have that.”

“I’ll bet they will.”

Soon they were almost at the court and Jason watched as the same guy who had driven the baseline for the reverse lay-up took a pass at the free throw line extended, squared his shoulders and faked a drive to the middle. Then, with his man slightly off balance from the fake, he went up and drilled a perfect jumper.

“Nice J,” said Jason to himself.

“What’s a J?” asked Lauren.

“A jump shot.”

“Do you play basketball?”

“A little. I’m not too good at it, but I like it. How about you?”

“I played on the girls’ team in grade school, but I haven’t played much since then.”

Jason stepped to the window of Zack’s Too and asked for two orange/carrot Sobes.

“Told you they’d have them,” said Lauren as the counter guy, who looked a year or two younger than Jason, walked over to a cooler and pulled two bottles from the shelf, brought them over, and set them in front of Jason. He picked up the five-dollar bill Jason had left on the counter, went to the cash register, and returned with a few coins which he let roll off his fingers into Jason’s outstretched hand.

“Thanks,” said Jason as he pocketed the coins and took the drinks. The counter guy, who needed a shave and looked like he badly needed some sleep, nodded without making eye contact and then dropped into a chair just to the right of the service window where he could keep an eye on the basketball game while waiting for the next customer. Jason handed Lauren the Sobe and steered her toward a table just back from the walkway on the north side of the building

where they could watch the game from a comfortable distance. Jason settled into his chair and turned his eyes toward the court.

The guy who had hit the lay-up and jumper had the ball again, this time at the top of the key. Again he faked, but his man stayed with him, so he stepped back ready to pass to his teammate who was moving toward the ball from the right side. The defensive man guarding the guy coming for the ball positioned himself to deflect or even steal the pass by moving his right hand up, keeping it between his man and the ball. What happened next, a flawless execution of the back door, was a basic but subtle play that usually only worked when people had played a lot of basketball together.

The guy moving toward the ball kept coming, the defensive man on him like a cheap suit. The ball handler, his pivot foot planted, leaned toward him ready to snap a chest pass. He brought the ball up, snapped his wrists, but didn't let go—a perfect fake. At that instant the guy coming for the pass stopped on a dime, turned, and sprinted for the basket leaving the cheap suit at the dry cleaners. Taking a bounce pass from the ball handler he laid the ball softly against the backboard where it fell through the rim, rattling the chain net slightly as it fell to the asphalt below.

"Yes!" yelled the passer, throwing his fist in the air.

The third guy on the three-man team, who had moved to the corner to draw the defense away from the play, moved in and slapped hands with the shooter, and then went out and did the same with the passer. "Good game," he said to his teammates and anyone else that was interested.

Most of the six players moved off toward the drinking fountain while the next team, the challengers, took the court.

"Wow," said Jason as he watched the players warming up.

"What's the matter?" said Lauren, who hadn't been watching.

"I'll tell you in a minute, but move your chair around a bit so that your back is to the court."

The urgency in Jason's voice prompted Lauren to quickly comply with his request. Jason pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head and moved his chair so that he could see the court over her shoulder.

"What is it?" asked Lauren in a tense whisper.

"You won't believe this," said Jason. "The three guys warming up for the next game..."

"Yes. Come on, what?"

"One's a black guy I've never seen before. The other two are Woody and Slater."

"No! I can't believe it."

"Take a look for yourself. Just be careful."

Lauren moved her chair away from the table, bent over, and pretended to tie her shoe. With her head down near her knee she stole a glance at the court, spotted Woody and Slater, sat up and pulled her chair forward. "It's them all right. I still can't believe it. Maybe we ought to get out of here."

"Let's watch awhile. You never know, we might learn something."

"Such as what Woody and Slater are doing together?"

"That would be nice to know."

The winners, refreshed from a drink at a nearby water fountain, were back on the court now. They waited for the new team to finish warming up. Jason was impressed with Woody's shot. He seemed to be accurate from fifteen feet to the three-point line. The black guy, who Slater and Woody were calling Red, was as deadly from the same range. Slater looked like more of an inside player. He favored a hook with either hand and bank shots in and around the key. He did

take a few shots from the fifteen-foot range and most of them fell through.

“You guys ready,” called the passer after a few more minutes.

“Yeah,” said Woody, throwing him the ball.

“I’ll take him,” said Red moving toward the guy with the ball. “What’s your name, man?”

“Joe. What’s yours?”

“Red.”

Joe and Red lightly knocked their fists together twice, top and bottom, while the other players matched up and got each others’ names. Woody took Pete, the guy who had ended the last game with the perfect backdoor. Slater took the third guy, Sam, who was about six foot three to Slater’s six four. Woody and Pete were both about six one and Red looked to be about six feet even. Joe was about five ten, but everyone knew he could play. It looked to Jason like everyone was pretty evenly matched.

“This is probably going to be our last game,” said Joe. “You guys want to play ’till fifteen by ones, win by two?”

“Sure,” said Red.

“Sounds good,” said Woody.

“All right,” said Joe, and tossed the ball to Red. “Check.”

Red took the ball, checked behind him to make sure his team was ready and bounced it back to Joe who inbounded to Pete at the free-throw line extended. Joe ran down and set a screen on the left side of the lane. Sam brought Slater into the screen, left him there and took a pass from Pete.

“Switch,” yelled Slater, when he couldn’t fight through Joe’s screen. Red did with a vengeance, jumping hard just as Sam went up for the J. Red got up high—it amazed Jason how high he could jump—and Sam had to alter his shot, giving it a high arch to get over Red’s outstretched arm. The ball seemed

to go almost straight up until it finally started to fall toward the basket. It hit the front rim, just a little left of dead center, and bounced up off the backboard and dropped in.

“One zip,” said Sam, elated that he’d nailed the shot.

“All right, lucky bounce,” said Woody. “Let’s go.”

Joe threw it into Sam this time who tried to drive left on the baseline. He got the first step, but Slater recovered enough to force him under the basket where he had no shot. Woody sagged off Pete and tried to trap Sam, but Sam whipped a bounce pass to Pete in the corner. Pete squared for the shot, but Woody was back on him before he could get it off. Pete snapped the ball out to Joe who faked a pass to Sam who was now near the left corner of the court along the baseline. As the defense shifted toward the left, he swung the ball back to Pete who drilled an eighteen footer.

“My bad,” said Woody, mad at himself for leaving Pete alone even for a second.

“These guys are good,” said Jason.

“Who? I can’t see anything.”

“The team Woody and Slater are playing. They can really move the ball and they’re deadly shooters.”

“Good. I hope they trounce them. It would serve Woody right for playing basketball with Slater. I still can’t believe it.”

“It seems pretty weird all right, but maybe there is some explanation.”

“Maybe, but if he was on such friendly terms with Slater why didn’t he tell us that from the start?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

Woody, Slater, and Red played a hard, almost tenacious defense, but Joe and Pete each connected one more time—Joe on a long jumper from the right corner and Pete on a garbage shot underneath off a missed shot from Sam. Finally, Pete threw up a floating hook that didn’t fall, and Slater grabbed the rebound

and cleared to Red at the top of the key. Before you could say “faster than a New York second” Red jumped and fired a line-drive swish.

“All right!” yelled Woody as he took the ball past the top of the key and got ready to inbound. “Four-one, let’s go.” Woody snapped a pass to Red and stepped inbounds. Red looked for a shot, but Joe was on him tight so he passed back to Woody at the top of the key. Woody fired a pass to Slater who was cutting left across the key near the basket. Sam, anticipating a left hook, fought to take away the lane so Slater spun back to the right, drove hard toward the basket, went up and slammed it in.

“Wow! Slater’s a better basketball player than he is a surfer,” said Jason. “He just slam dunked on that guy which isn’t easy to do on an asphalt court.”

“That’s great,” said Lauren. “He’s probably good at baseball too and we know he’s a good fighter. Maybe we can arrange some kind of awards dinner for him and present him with a trophy—‘Thug Athlete of the Year’—something like that. Maybe Woody could be the Master of Ceremonies. He’d keep things moving.”

“Okay, okay, sorry. It was just a good move, that’s all.”

“Listen, I’ve got a good move for us. Let’s get out of here before this game ends and they see us here. I don’t think a conversation with Slater is what we need right now.”

“I agree. Let’s go.”

Jason stood up and reached out his hand to Lauren. She took it and he pulled her up just as Woody, in a replay of the move Joe had used to end the last game, drove left down the baseline and came up under the basket for a reverse lay-up. “Yes!” he yelled as the ball rattled through the chains. “All right, three to four. We’re rolling!”

Woody’s forward motion carried him to the edge of the court, thirty-five yards from where Lauren

and Jason were now standing. Woody looked up and caught Jason’s eye for a brief moment. Jason still had his hood on and was hidden up to his chin behind Lauren. There was no sign of recognition from Woody, so Jason couldn’t tell if he’d recognized him or not.

Jason grabbed the empty bottles and tossed them into the garbage can. “How about we jog out of here?”

“That’s fine with me,” said Lauren as they started their slow run.

“I think Woody might have recognized me just as we left. He looked right at me.”

“Well, if he did, it will give him time to work on his explanation. I’m so mad at him.”

“By the way, congratulations. You were right.”

“I’m right about so many things,” laughed Lauren. “Which one are you referring to?”

“The Sobes. They had them.”

“I knew they would.”



“Is it okay if I shower first?” asked Lauren when they got back to the house.

“Of course,” said Jason over his shoulder. He was already in the living room headed for the pen and pad of paper by the phone.

As Lauren stripped off her clothes and stepped into the shower, Jason pulled up a chair, made a mental note to start carrying his micro-tape recorder with him, set the pen and paper down on the table, and started to pray.

“Lord, this is such a strange turn of events. The day after Slater tries to kill us, and probably would have if You hadn’t used Eric to save us, Woody, who is saved and is therefore one of Your children, is playing basketball with him. I don’t really know Woody and maybe Lauren doesn’t know him that well, but he seems like a nice guy. He doesn’t seem like the type of guy who would be hanging around Slater. Whenever I

talked to him before it seemed like he couldn't stand Slater, but now it's like they've been chums all along. So Lord, please tell me what's happening. What's the connection here? Is there any way You'll use this to help the situation? Please, Lord, let me know."

In the few seconds it took before the Lord started to speak to him Jason remembered the quote from the letter "Faith": "Give what you've got and God will give you more." There had been times, before he'd left the Family, when he'd prayed and really had to fight to give the first sentence, especially in public. But whenever he went ahead it always worked out. He'd never been left hanging. The Lord always gave him more. One time he got something that he just didn't want to give so he didn't. A little while later someone else gave the same first line and went on to give a beautiful prophecy, which was an answer to the problem they were coming to the Lord for. So the Lord got said what He wanted said even if He had to find a new channel. This time, when the first words came, Jason didn't hesitate. He began to write.

What you told Lauren is right—there is some explanation as to why Woody was with Slater, and you will come to know what it is soon enough. Woody is a friend and you can trust him. He has made some bad choices in his life and he wants to correct them even though it is not easy. However, since he has made the right choice in choosing Me as his Savior, it is now easier for Me to work in his life. I can send My angels to protect him and I can tell Satan he is Mine and that he has no power over him unless he chooses the wrong path. Even then he is still Mine and I will not utterly forsake him.

So when you see Woody, listen to what he has to say and consider it, for he will have part of the solution for your predicament with Slater.

Believe what I'm telling you, for Satan will try to come in and convince you that Woody is not your friend, that he would sell you out to Slater, and because of the circumstances he will be able to make a convincing case. But believe him not, for Woody is on your side.

Jason set the pen down on the table, next to the pad of paper where he'd just written the prophecy. "Thank You, Jesus," he prayed. "Thank You for guiding me through this difficult time and thank You for the explanation about Woody. I'm glad to hear he is on our side. He's a good guy, and now that he's saved and going to Heaven it's good to know that when we are all there I won't have to forgive him for double-crossing us."

Lauren came out wearing her white terry cloth robe and drying her hair. "The shower's yours if you want it. What were you doing? It sounded like you were talking to someone."

"I was hearing from the Lord. And then I was praying."

"What did He say?"

"He said not to worry, that things will be all right."

A minute later Jason was in the shower, the soap and warm water washing the sweat and sand from his body. Jason tried not to stay too long in the shower, but he always enjoyed the time he had. Like sex and good food, showers were both necessary for survival and a true pleasure. Jason sometimes wondered how much credit people gave God for setting things up so that a lot of the things you had to do were a real joy. Not near enough, he suspected.

As nice as this shower was, however, he couldn't enjoy it to the full as he felt guilty for not fully answering Lauren's question. He hadn't lied—the Lord had said, or at least indicated that there was no need to

worry and things would be all right. But, of course, that wasn't all He'd said, and Jason felt guilty about holding back. Still he didn't feel at ease telling Lauren everything the Lord had said, at least not right when she'd asked.

"What should I do, Lord?" Jason prayed. "Should I tell her now, wait, or what?" Jason waited as the water beat down on him. He was happy when the Lord spoke to him simply and clearly.

If she asks you again you can tell her, but if she doesn't, don't worry, as she will find out soon enough. Don't worry, she will not be upset that you didn't tell her everything when she first asked.

Good, thought Jason. Part of the reason he hadn't wanted to reveal everything he'd gotten was because Lauren really seemed upset about Woody knowing Slater and not telling them about it. He believed Woody was all right—after all, that's what the Lord had said. But He'd also said that it would become clear to them soon enough and in this case, as far as Jason was concerned, soon enough would have to be real soon.

Jason finished his shower, dried off, and got dressed. He retrieved the prophecy from the pad of paper, stuffing it in his shirt pocket. He went into the bedroom to find Lauren sitting in her chair reading the Bible. "Good for you," he told her. "You're turning into quite the Word warrior."

"Is that a good thing?" she asked without looking up.

"A very good thing. Can I get something to eat?"

"Sure. Help yourself."

"Want anything?"

"No. Thanks, though."

Jason went into the kitchen, found some eggs and put them on to boil. He cut up an onion and a tomato and tossed them into some lettuce. When the eggs were hardboiled he added some cold water

so the shells wouldn't stick, peeled them and sliced them into the salad. He added some olive oil, a little vinegar, a touch of salt and voila. Not exactly a work of art but a nice salad anyway.

When he was done with the salad Jason went into the living room and found that the book on photography was in the same spot on the bookshelf that it had been last week. He took it down and stretched out on the couch. This time he leafed through it for a full five minutes before closing his eyes and falling asleep.

He woke up twenty minutes later, refreshed but slightly disappointed that he hadn't dreamed of Lauren. Just then Lauren came out of the bedroom dressed in tight jeans and a white bra. She went into the kitchen and rummaged around for a minute before coming out. She spotted Jason on the couch. "You haven't seen an iron anywhere, have you?"

"No. Why don't you come over here and look?"

"I don't think it's going to be over here," said Lauren, as she walked toward Jason. "I think you might have an ulterior motive."

"You might be right," said Jason, who was now sitting up. He took her hand and pulled her down onto his lap. "It's hard not to when you walk around looking like that."

"Are you complaining?" she asked with a coy smile.

"No," he said, kissing her lightly. "Just explaining."

They kissed and caressed for a few minutes and then Lauren, her arms still around Jason's neck, leaned back. "Jason, do you think it's safe for us to be here? Do you think Slater might show up here? It wouldn't be that hard to find out where I live. I hate to say it, but Woody might even tell him."

"I don't think Woody would tell him, and even if Slater knew I don't think he'd come here. I think he

wants to get us in some public place like LAX or the college. It's not like he's going to great lengths to cover his tracks but he does put some effort into it. When he shot up my car at the college he had an alibi."

"Well, he could shoot us here and have an alibi."

"That's true. I don't know for sure what he's planning, but I don't think he'll come here. It's something to pray about though."

"Well, I hope you're right."

"Me too. I have a feeling that this thing is going to be over soon. I don't know why but I think it's going to come to an end. I hope so anyway."

"So do I. It's nerve-racking living like this, never knowing when that creep is gonna show up again."

"Why don't we pray that the Lord protects us and that He ends this thing, one way or another. We can pray that we won't get hurt and that the Lord takes Slater out of the picture, or changes his mind so that he's not bent on trying to shoot us or whatever else he might have planned."

"All right, let's do it."

"Do you want to pray?"

"Sure."

Lauren prayed a sincere prayer asking for deliverance from any fear of Slater, and for protection from any harm. She asked the Lord to take Slater out of the way, or change his heart, one or the other. She went on to say that she recommended taking him out of the way as, in her opinion, that would be easier then changing his heart, but of course the Lord could handle it however He saw fit. She finished by asking the Lord to bless the next couple of days and give them a good time together, and then she told Jason that praying had been a good idea. "It feels good," she said, "like you've put it into God's hands and don't have to worry about it anymore."

"Yeah, prayer is a great thing. It's been known to cause some big changes."

"Hey, let's do something different tonight."

"Like what? Get a video?"

"That's not different. We did that last week."

"Well, we could get a video and some beer."

"Now that's really walking on the wild side."

"All right miss tight jeans and sexy bra, what do you suggest?"

"Let's go dancing."

"Really? That's what you want to do?"

"Yes. Do you have any cowboy clothes?"

"Sure, in the closet at home, hanging right next to my astronaut suit."

"I take it that means you don't have any?"

"I have jeans and a T-shirt."

"No boots or hat?"

"No. Come to think of it, my uncle has some cowboy boots."

"Could you borrow them?"

"I suppose. He probably wouldn't mind. But why do I need to look like a cowboy? This is Huntington Beach, babe. I think there's a city ordinance against cowboys."

"I don't think that's true, but in any case we won't be dancing in Huntington Beach. We'll be dancing in Anaheim."

"Hey, I've been to Anaheim and I've never seen a cowboy there. Musketeers sometimes, out on a pass from Disneyland, but no cowboys."

"You just stick with me. You'll see."

They spent the rest of the day taking it easy around the house. Lauren put on a T-shirt, planned out a simple dinner, and walked to the store to pick up a few things. Jason read the Bible for an hour and took another short nap. When Lauren got back she found the iron and ironed a white blouse, which she then hung up for later. About 6:00 PM she cooked dinner and she and Jason ate. By the time they finished eating and doing the dishes it was 7:45.

“Are you ready to go dancing?” Lauren asked.

“If that’s what you want to do.”

“Absolutely.”

“And you really want me to try and look like a cowboy?”

“Definitely.”

“All right. We’ll have to go over to my place so I can make an attempt.”

“Let’s go.”

Before long they pulled into the driveway of Jason’s aunt and uncle’s.

“Nice place,” said Lauren.

“Yeah, my aunt and uncle like it.”

Once inside Jason lost no time getting into his jeans and white T-shirt. He retrieved his uncle’s cowboy boots and tried them on. They fit well enough, maybe a tad on the big side, but nothing you’d notice.

Jason walked out into the hallway and struck a cowboy pose in front of the full-length mirror while Lauren peeked over his shoulder. “What do you think?” he asked. “Cowboy wannabe?”

“I don’t know if you quite reach that level.”

“Yeah, I agree. More of a trying-to-look-like-a-cowboy wannabe.”

“If you had a hat I think you’d make it. But don’t worry, you look fine.”

A few minutes later they were on the Interstate 5 headed toward Anaheim. Lauren told Jason to exit on Katella Avenue and take a left back over the freeway. As the overpass dropped back, Jason could see their destination set back in a parking lot. A large one story gray windowless building with a large sign reading “The Cowboy Boogie.”

Jason pulled into the parking lot and rolled into a spot. He got out and opened the door for Lauren who stepped out into the night air. “It’s a little cold,” she said and then reached back into the car for a sweater. “Did you bring a jacket or anything?”

“I’ve got a sweatshirt,” said Jason, opening the trunk. He pulled out a gray pullover sweat shirt and threw it over his shoulders. “It kind of screws up my cowboy look but what can you do?”

The door was on the opposite side of the building, and when they rounded the corner they saw that there was already a line of twenty or so people. Right away Jason got a feeling that he wouldn’t get in.

“They’re checking ID’s,” he said, “I’m not going to make it.”

“Sure you will. They might stamp your hand so that you won’t be served alcohol, but you’ll get in.”

“We’ll see, I guess.”

The line kept growing longer behind them as it moved forward slowly. When they were six or eight people back from the front of the line a woman behind them called Lauren’s name.

Lauren turned around. “Hi Julie, how are you? Hi Candy.”

“Hi,” called Julie and Candy in unison. “Who’s your friend?” asked Candy with a smile.

“I’ll introduce you inside,” said Lauren turning around.

“Who are they?” asked Jason.

“They’re flight attendants I work with. Julie was on the flight back from New York with me so you probably saw her at the airport last night.”

“And that other girl’s name is Candy?”

“Yes. Short for Candice. She told me her mom named her after Candice Bergen, the actress.”

“Interesting.”

A moment later they were at the table that had been set up just outside the entrance, and a woman in her early twenties with long blonde hair was asking for their identification. Next to her sat a man about the same age. He was wearing a large cowboy hat and held a rubber stamp in his hand. In front of him was a large ink pad filled with yellow florescent ink. Behind

them, leaning against the door, were two muscular guys in their mid twenties. They wore cowboy hats, jeans and black T-shirts with “security” printed across the chest and back.

Jason was the first to show his ID. The women took it, gave it a practiced glance, and handed it back to Jason. “Sorry, it’s twenty-one and older to get in.”

“I thought that was just to drink,” said Lauren, her voice raising an octave. Both of the bouncers looked their way and one of them pushed himself away from the wall while Lauren continued talking. “I’ve been here before and it was eighteen or older to get in.”

“It’s eighteen or older every day but Saturday,” said the women. “Sorry.”

“Bummer,” said Lauren as they moved to the side.

“Life can be tough on the range,” laughed Jason as he hooked his thumbs in his belt.

“Very funny,” said Lauren as they moved away from the table. “I really wanted to dance. It would have been fun.”

“What happened?” asked Julie from the line. “Aren’t you going in?”

“I’m only twenty,” said Jason. “They said you have to be twenty-one to get in on Saturday.”

“That’s a bummer,” said Julie.

“My exact words,” said Lauren. “By the way, Julie, Candy, this is Jason, my friend.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Jason.

“You too,” said Candy.

“Yeah,” said Julie. “Nice to meet you. Were you at the airport last night?”

“I was. I went to pick up Lauren.”

“I thought so,” said Julie with a knowing smile. “You made quite an impression on the flight crew, you know. Everyone thought it was so romantic that you showed up to meet Lauren.”

Lauren squeezed Jason’s arm. “He’s a romantic

guy, there’s no doubt about it. I’m just so bummed that he can’t get in. I really wanted to dance tonight.”

“Why don’t you go in with Julie and Candy for awhile. I can wait in the car or get something to eat in the restaurant out front.”

“Really? You wouldn’t mind?”

“No, go ahead,” said Jason. “How long would you want to stay?”

“Not more than an hour.”

“Go for it.”

“Is that all right with you guys?” Lauren asked.

“Sure,” said Julie.

“Yeah, it will be fun,” said Candy. “Jason, you are a romantic guy, willing to wait for Lauren so she can go dancing. I’m impressed.”

“Thank you very much,” said Jason with an exaggerated bow. He gave Lauren a quick hug. “I’ll see you in an hour. If I’m not in the car, I’ll be in the restaurant.”

“Ok,” said Lauren.

“Ladies, once again, it was nice to meet you. Keep an eye on Lauren for me. Don’t let her run off with a cowboy.”

“Don’t worry,” said Julie, “she’ll be safe with us.”

Jason turned and walked back the way they’d come in. At the corner of the building he turned and waved and all three girls waved back at him. More people were arriving and Jason passed by a few couples as he walked toward the parking lot. Small clusters of single men and women, usually in groups of two or three, were heading in. Some of the women wore jeans but many were in skirts and dresses. The men all dressed casually, about every third one in jeans and boots, some with cowboy hats that seemed a size too big. A lot of the cowboys looked under twenty-one to Jason. *See you boys in the parking lot*, he thought to himself.

Looking up ahead Jason saw a tall, broad-shouldered guy coming toward him wearing a huge black cowboy hat, black jeans, black boots, a beaded belt with a large silver and turquoise buckle and a purple cowboy shirt trimmed in white piping and fringe that flapped as he moved. The man had a determined walk, his boots clicking on the pavement, his thumbs hooked in his belt, a glowing cigarette, probably a Marlboro, dangling from his lips. As he drew near one wise crack after another flooded Jason's mind, but it wasn't hard to suppress them. The last thing he needed was a hostile response from an urban cowboy who didn't appreciate his sense of humor.

As he made his way towards his car Jason looked up at the restaurant that shared the parking lot with the Cowboy Boogie. The restaurant, Flaky Jake's, was closer to the street than The Boogie which was set way back in the parking lot. Jason thought about going in but really wasn't hungry. *Still, maybe a decaf or a hot chocolate would be nice.* It was getting a little cold so he took his sweatshirt from his shoulders, plunged his left and right arms into the sleeves, and pulled the rest over his head. Using a tinted rear window on a SUV for a mirror Jason adjusted the sweatshirt at the waist and gave his hair a quick comb. He'd just dropped his comb back into his pocket when a figure appeared behind him, reflected in the tinted glass.

"How are you doing?" asked Jason casually as he turned around to find a waif of a girl standing ten feet away. The girl looked him up and down in an instant. He must have passed the test because she got right down to business.

"You looking to get high tonight? I got some good stuff if you are."

It was Jason's turn to give the girl the once over. She wore a black Grateful Dead T-shirt, probably a large or extra-large when a small might have been too

big. It hung almost to the knees of her faded jeans. Her tennis shoes, white once upon a time, were scruffy and tattered now and as gray as a prison wall. Her hair was blonde and long, hanging to her elbows and surprisingly healthy looking, considering the rest of her appearance. Her skin was a sickly white, like she never saw the sun. Jason wondered if maybe she crashed all day and just came out at night to sell drugs. She wasn't much over five feet tall, was painfully thin and couldn't be more than fifteen years old.

"How old are you?" asked Jason with his best look of disapproval.

"What's it to you?" said the girl. "You a cop? A narc maybe?"

"Do I look like a narc?"

"Narcs don't look like narcs—that's how they catch people. So I'm asking you again, are you a cop?"

"Nope."

"You mean no."

"That's right, I mean no. I'm not a narcotics cop or a traffic cop or a cop of any kind."

"Good, because if you are and you tell me that you're not, that's entrapment."

"Right. Is that the case even if I'm combing my hair in a parking lot and you come up and offer to sell me drugs?"

"I didn't offer to sell you drugs. I asked you if you were looking to get high."

"And that if I was looking to get high you had some good stuff. Now in my mind that good stuff, which you are going to want money for, is probably drugs, so that sounds to me like an offer to buy drugs."

Jason waited for the girl's reaction. He didn't know what he expected but she wasn't giving it to him. She stood silently, her eyes locked on his, waiting for his next move.

"You're pretty good at this, aren't you?" he said. "I mean, you know what you're doing."

The girl didn't say anything. Her eyes didn't move. Jason felt like he was watching an alert, focused animal ready to react to danger, using her every sense to determine if danger really existed.

"Well, like I told you, I'm not a cop so you don't have to worry. I'm not looking to get high either. I could do with getting warm though—it's getting cold out here. You want to go into Flaky Jake's and get something hot to drink?"

The question seemed to shake the girl up more than anything that had happened so far. She narrowed her eyes slightly and her hands closed into fists and then straightened out again. She seemed to look up, like she was looking over Jason's shoulder at someone or something behind him. It made Jason a little nervous and he had an urge to look himself but before he could the girl spoke once again.

"Are you sure you're not a cop?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

"And you want to go in for something to drink?"

"That's right," said Jason, spreading out his arms. "There's nothing more to it than that. Honest."

The girl stared at him for what seemed like a long time. Finally she raised her eyebrows ever so slightly. "Can I bring my friend?"

"Sure, where is she?"

"It's not a she. He's behind you." She looked over Jason's shoulder again. "Hey Billy, come on."

Jason turned and saw a skinny kid, who couldn't be more than a year older than the girl, come out from between a couple of parked cars. He was holding a cane, a gnarled wooden affair, which he used to support his left leg. He could move, though, hobbling along faster than most men walk. He flew around Jason, giving him a wide berth Jason noticed, and pulled up next to the girl. He said something to her in a quick muffled tone and then turned back toward Jason,

eyeing him up and down while the girl whispered something in his ear.

"She says she wants to go in to the restaurant with you but you better not try anything funny or you'll wish you hadn't."

"Listen Billy, that's your name, right? You got nothing to worry about from me. I've got an hour to kill and I'm going to go in for something to drink. I'd be happy to have your company if you want. You look like you might have an interesting story to tell. But if you're worried, then forget it, you won't hurt my feelings."

The girl was holding Billy's arm and Jason thought he could detect a slight tug that might be interpreted that she wanted to go in. "You guys talk it over and I'll meet you inside. If you want to," he said with a nod toward Billy as he turned and headed toward Flaky Jake's.

The sign said to seat yourself so Jason found a booth about halfway back. In a minute a waitress came over and handed him a menu. "Just you tonight?" she asked.

"Some friends might come in a minute."

"Okay, I'll be back."

"Thanks," said Jason as the waitress turned and sped off. He looked at the menu but put it down after a moment. He'd already decided to get a hot chocolate, something he rarely drank but that seemed like a good idea tonight. He wondered if the kids would come in. They weren't really kids—only four or five years younger than he was—but they seemed so young. Maybe because they were both small and thin and sickly looking. Jason closed his eyes and prayed a silent prayer asking the Lord to send them in if it was His will. When he finished praying and opened his eyes they were standing beside his booth, looking a little uneasy, partly because they were drug dealers (a job that makes you uneasy by its very nature) and partly because they knew they were interrupting something.

“Sit down, sit down,” said Jason enthusiastically. “I’m glad you came in. I was just praying that you would.”

The girl slid into the booth first and the boy sat down next to her. His dull green eyes fixed on Jason in a stare that wasn’t hostile, just suspicious. “She’s the one who wanted to come in,” he said. “If it was up to me we wouldn’t be here.”

“Well, I’m glad she talked you into it, then,” said Jason with a smile just as the waitress approached with her hands full of menus. “I’m going to have a hot chocolate,” said Jason. “What about you?”

“I’ll have that to,” said the girl.

“Me too,” said the boy.

“Three hot chocolates,” said Jason holding up three fingers.

“Will that be it?” asked the waitress.

“I think so. For now anyway.”

Jason turned back to his guests. “Mind if I ask you a question?” and then, without waiting for an answer, “Why do you carry that cane? You were limping in the parking lot, although you were moving pretty fast. Is it something that will get better, or is it permanent?”

“The cane’s a whacker,” said the girl. “We’ve had some problems that Billy had to whack his way out of. His limp is just a cover.”

“I can’t believe you, Chris,” said Billy who was clearly exasperated. “Why do you need to be telling that to a perfect stranger?”

“Come on, Billy, chill out. The guy’s not a cop or a crack head so quit worrying.”

“He’s a stranger and we know nothin’ about him. We shouldn’t be in here.” Billy looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. “Stuff like this is going to get us in jail.”

There was a long silence as Billy continued to look at the ceiling and Chris turned her face toward the window. Finally Jason spoke. “Hey guys, sorry. I didn’t

mean to cause any problems. I just had some time to kill and figured I could use the company. But I can see how it could worry you, sitting down with someone you don’t know—especially someone who isn’t interested in buying what you’re selling but still wants to talk.”

Billy brought his gaze down from the ceiling. “See Chris, that’s what I’m saying. This guy gets it better than you do.”

“Excuse me for living,” said Chris, still looking out the window.

Just then the waitress returned with the hot chocolates, set them on the table, and left again.

“What’s your name?” asked Billy.

“Jason.”

“What do you do for money?”

“I work in an office part time and I go to school.”

“What are you doing around here?”

Jason explained how Lauren wanted to go dancing and how he couldn’t get in because he was under twenty-one. Billy asked a few more questions and the next thing Jason knew he was telling a shortened version of his life story. He ended up with a short version of the Slater incident, meeting Lauren, and Eric saving them at the airport.

“And all of that happened in just the last week? Meeting your girlfriend and having this guy after you?” asked Chris.

“That’s right.”

“It’s been quite a week, then.”

“Yeah, it has,” said Jason, taking a sip of his chocolate. “How about you guys—what’s your story?”

Chris glanced over at Billy who still had his street-wise, tight-lipped, tough-kid look. Jason’s openness must have gotten to him though because he told Chris to go ahead.

“We’re runaways,” she said with a flare that made it sound like she was riding with the James gang or Bonnie and Clyde.

"You're a runaway," said Billy, "I just left. I didn't have to run."

"Right," said Chris sarcastically. "And they gave you a letter of recommendation and a little money to help you on your way."

Billy rolled his eyes and looked up at the ceiling again.

"How long ago did you run away?" Jason asked Chris.

"About two months ago. I went to San Francisco first for a couple of weeks and then I hitched down here."

"Where do your folks live?"

"Seattle."

"Did you hitchhike from Seattle?"

"No, I took a bus. I typed a letter saying I was going there to visit my aunt and signed my mom's name. Then when I got to the bus station I asked a guy to buy the ticket for me. Nobody even asked to see the letter, but I thought it was a good idea to have it."

"Yeah," said Jason, "since you're a minor. How old are you anyway?"

"Six ... fourteen, actually."

"How about you, Billy."

"Almost sixteen."

"Fifteen and a half," said Chris.

"So why did you run away?"

"Sick of school. Tired of my parents bugging me. Bored."

"Ever think about going back?"

"Nah."

"She does too," said Billy. "She thinks about it all the time."

"I do not," said Chris with a dagger look in Billy's direction. Then, a little softer, she said, "I don't think about it all the time, but I do think about it. I worry about my parents because I know they are probably worried sick about me."

"Yeah, I can imagine," said Jason.

The three of them sat in silence for a few moments, all thinking of Chris's parents. Finally Jason spoke. "How about you, Billy? How'd you get here?"

"My mom got a new boyfriend and he didn't like me. I couldn't stand him, so I guess we were even. I always wanted to come out west so I took off. I rode freight trains all the way here from St. Paul. It took four days—pretty good time, a bum told me. I hung out in Hollywood for awhile but that place is full of weirdoes so I came to Anaheim. Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of weirdoes here too but not as many as Hollywood, the weirdo capital of the world. Hollywood is not a good place to deal drugs either. It's dangerous. Deadly actually." Billy stopped talking for a minute as if remembering an acquaintance's drug deal gone bad. "Here you have to watch out for the cops, but you're less likely to get killed by your customers or rivals as long as you stay out of gang turf."

"Sounds like a tough business," said Jason shaking his head. "How long you been at it?"

"About a year."

"A year and two months," said Chris.

"Yeah, a year and two months," said Billy. "And in all that time I've never talked to a stranger about it."

"Why did you this time?"

"I guess I trusted you. You having been a missionary and all."

"I'm not one now but I'm going to get back into it as soon as I can. As soon as I take care of this other business."

"You mean the guy who's after you? I thought your angel buddy was working that out for you?"

"He did last night, but it wasn't a permanent solution. Slater, that's the guy, will keep coming until he's dead or in jail. And if he's in jail he'll start again as soon as he gets out." Jason shook his head.

Thinking too much about Slater wasn't good for his general outlook.

"We can pray for you," said Chris.

"I didn't know you prayed," said Billy.

"Well, I do. Every night before I go to sleep."

"Thanks," said Jason. "I can use it! Hey, I have an idea for you guys. Why don't you take Chris home to Seattle, Billy? Her folks might appreciate it so much they'd help you get set up in some kind of program or job or school or something."

"That's a great idea," said Chris. "What do you think about it, Billy?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Think about it," said Jason. "Personally, I think it's a great idea."

No one said anything for the next few minutes, each churning Jason's proposal over in their minds. Finally Billy spoke. "We've got to go."

"Yeah," said Chris, "sad to say, we do."

"Before you go," said Jason, "can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," said Billy. Chris nodded.

"When this life is over do you think you'll go to Heaven?"

"Doubtful," said Billy.

"I hope so," said Chris, "but I don't know for sure."

"If you had a chance to know for sure would you take it?"

"Sure," said Chris.

"Yeah, I'd take it," said Billy. "No reason not to."

"Okay, here's how it works. Jesus really loves you. He loves all of us and He died for us. He took the punishment for everybody's sins."

"I've heard that before," said Chris.

"So because He died for us and washed all of our sins away, He's able to offer us the free gift of eternal life—Heaven—if we pray and receive Him. So if you

want we can say the prayer now. It takes about fifteen seconds and after that you'll know you'll be going to Heaven when this life is over."

"Sure, I'll do it," said Chris.

"Yeah, sounds like a deal," said Billy.

"It's definitely a deal," said Jason. "Now if we were in a park somewhere we could hold hands and close our eyes but maybe in here we don't have to do that."

"We can do it here," said Chris, not wanting anything less than the full experience.

"Yeah," said Billy, "we're dope-dealing street kids. We don't care what anyone thinks."

"Okay," said Jason, "let's do it." They all joined hands and Jason closed his eyes and started to pray. "Lord, thank You so much for bringing us together. We know it wasn't by coincidence, Lord. We know You arranged it, it was one of Your perfect setups. So as Billy and Chris pray to ask You into their hearts, we pray that You will really start to work in their lives, that You will speak to them and that You will really guide them from now on. All right, you guys just repeat this after me: Jesus, come into my heart."

"Jesus, come into my heart," chorused Billy and Chris.

"And forgive me for all my sins."

"And forgive me for all my sins."

"Give me Your free gift of everlasting life."

"Give me Your free gift of everlasting life."

"And fill me with Your Holy Spirit so that I can tell others about You."

"And fill me with Your Holy Spirit so that I can tell others about You."

Jason opened his eyes and saw that Chris and Billy still had their eyes closed, waiting for what might come next. "In Jesus' name, amen," finished Jason.

"In Jesus' name, amen," echoed the two new converts.

“All right,” said Jason. “You did it! You asked Jesus to give you eternal life and He did.”

“I feel happy,” said Chris.

“I don’t feel too much of anything,” said Billy, “but I’m glad I did it.”

“I’ve talked to a lot of people about what they experience when they ask Jesus into their heart,” said Jason, “and there are vast differences in the way people feel—everything from euphoria to no feeling whatsoever. The cool part is that it doesn’t matter, because you’re saved one way or another. How you feel doesn’t affect that at all.”

Jason spent the next fifteen minutes talking about salvation. He quoted John 3:16 and John 3:36 over and over so that there was no way they would forget. It amazed him how the Lord could still use him to witness even though he’d hardly done it in over two years. Chris and Billy asked him a few questions and he answered them. By the end of their conversation he felt they had a fairly good grasp of what they had done.

“Thanks,” said Billy. “Thanks for taking the time to tell us all that.”

“You’re welcome,” said Jason. “To be honest it was a real rush for me. It’s quite a thrill to lead someone to Jesus and know that you’ll see them in Heaven.”

“Yeah,” said Chris, “I’ll bet it is.”

“Hey, you guys can do it too. That’s what receiving the Holy Spirit does for you—it gives you the power to witness. Listen, do you have some address where I can reach you?”

“Not really,” said Billy.

“We move around a lot,” said Chris.

“Well, here’s my number. It’s my aunt and uncle’s place and if I’ve moved out by the time you call, ask them for my new number. If you get set up in Seattle I could probably get you in touch with some folks there that could teach you a lot about the Bible. I could get

you on a mailing list and you’ll get stuff every month, you know, once you get set up. So keep in touch.”

“Ok,” said Chris.

“We’ve got to go,” said Billy.

“Yeah, we do. Jason, thank you so much again for telling us all that. For telling us about Jesus.”

“You’re welcome,” said Jason just as the waitress came with the check. Billy scooped it up like a loose ball in a playoff game.

“I can take care of that,” said Jason.

“We got it,” said Billy. “We want to pay.”

“Yeah,” Chris nodded.

The three of them stood up together and Chris gave Jason a hug. Billy and Jason shook hands and then hugged. “Keep in touch,” Jason admonished as they headed for the cash register where Billy paid the bill.

Jason watched as Billy held the door for a woman entering the restaurant. Then he and Chris exited and the door closed behind them. The woman took a few steps forward, stopped and began scanning the tables looking for someone.

“Lauren,” Jason said to himself when he spotted her. He stood up and waved her over.

“Hi,” said Lauren as she approached the table. She gave Jason a quick kiss and slipped into a seat. “Were you talking to those two kids that just left?”

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“They were talking about you. Saying what a nice guy you were.”

“We had a great talk. They both prayed and asked Jesus into their hearts.”

“Great.”

“What did you do? Are your friends still inside?”

“We danced. They’re still dancing. Some wild-looking cowboy dude is sweeping them off their feet. You should see him—huge cowboy hat, a belt with a buckle the size of a serving plate and a purple shirt

with white fringe. The only thing missing is chaps and a horse.”

“I think I did see him.”

“Well, despite the way he looks he seems like a nice guy. Candy and Julie sure like him.”

“I’m glad you had fun. Sorry I couldn’t make it in, but I’m glad I got to meet Billy and Chris.”

“Why don’t you tell me about them on the way home. I suddenly have a desire for pleasures best enjoyed in a private setting.”

“Mmm. Let’s go.”

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SUNDAY: THE MEETING

When the phone rang the next morning Jason automatically reached for his watch on the bedside table. He slipped it over his hand and brought his wrist up until it was eighteen inches from his eyes. Then he lifted his eyelids just enough to catch the time: 9:10 AM. He would have closed them immediately but Lauren rolled out of bed with a groan, and walked naked to the front room, massaging her head as she went.

“I’ve got to get a phone in here,” she mumbled to herself.

That would be good, Jason thought as he watched her go, *but I’d sure miss the view*. Stretching out under the blankets he put his hands behind his head and spent a few minutes thinking about the night before and Lauren’s sudden desire for pleasures best enjoyed in a private setting. When she returned Lauren found him in the same position—eyes closed, hands behind his head, a big smile on his face.

“You look happy,” she said as she climbed on top of him and kissed him lightly. “What are you thinking about?”

“You. Last night.”

“I’m glad it makes you smile.”

“I’m glad I survived to smile. For awhile I thought I’d died and gone to Heaven.”

“Aren’t you a sweet-talking man,” said Lauren with a smile of her own.

“Who was that?”

“Jill. She wants to know if we’d like to go to her place for dinner tonight. I told her I’d talk to you and get back to her.”

“Do you want to go?”

“Sure. Do you?”

“Yeah, it would be nice to see her. Maybe she could shed a little light on what Woody is up to.”

“Maybe. I’ll go call her back and tell her we’re coming. You want a cup of coffee?”

“That would be great. Thanks.”

Lauren got up, put on her terry cloth robe, and walked back out to the front room. Jason could hear her punching in the numbers and could almost make out her words as she talked to Jill. He dozed off for a few minutes and awoke as Lauren entered the room with two cups of coffee.

“Thanks,” said Jason as he sat up and took the coffee. “You’re so sweet.”

“You’re welcome,” said Lauren. “You’re an easy guy to be sweet to.”

They drank their coffee in silence for a minute or two.

“So it’s all set to go to Jill’s?” asked Jason.

“Yeah. She said to come at seven. She said there would be a few other friends there.”

“Oh, really? Did she say who?”

“No.”

“Did she mention Woody?”

“Nope.”

“I wonder if she knows what the story is with him.”

“I guess we’ll find out.”



Lauren had to take her flight uniforms to the dry cleaners and do a few errands, so Jason spent the

morning reading her Bible. When she returned they had lunch and then went for a long walk on the beach. They passed the basketball court at the end of Beach Boulevard, but Woody and Slater weren’t playing there. A younger, less-skilled group was playing three on three. Despite their lack of skills they seemed to be having fun in the warm California sun.

Jason and Lauren watched for a few minutes and then headed back to Lauren’s place where Jason took a short nap while Lauren showered. Half an hour later Jason woke up and made himself a coffee. While it was brewing he went out and got a bag he’d put in his car with clean underwear and clothes. After his coffee he stepped into the shower and let the hot water beat down on the back of his neck. It felt good, relaxing. As the hot water loosened his muscles he realized how tense he was. This Slater thing was a stress magnet, there was no doubt about it. “Lord,” he prayed, “help it to be over soon.”

Jason wasn’t really expecting an answer but when the phrase “it won’t be long now” floated into his mind he knew it was the Lord. “Thank You, Jesus,” said Jason. He knew all along that the Lord was going to take care of the situation, but knowing that it would be soon was a definite comfort.



At quarter to seven Lauren and Jason piled into Jason’s car and headed toward Jill’s place. A few minutes later they were there. Jason pulled up to the curb behind an old but well-kept Mercedes, got out and moved to the other side of the car in time to hold the door open for Lauren.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile as they moved up a narrow sidewalk that led to the front door. Lauren reached out and rang the bell and a minute later Jill answered.

“Hi, guys,” said Jill, stepping out onto the porch to give Lauren a hug. “I’m so glad you could make it.”

"It's good to see you," said Lauren as she returned Jill's hug.

When Jill was done hugging Lauren, Jason reached out and touched her arm. "Thanks for having us over, Jill," he said.

"I'm glad you could make it on such short notice." She looked deeply into Jason's eyes as if searching for a clue that might indicate what her next move should be. After a second she let out an almost inaudible sigh. "Come on in," she said as she stepped back into the living room and held open the door.

Lauren and Jason stepped into the nicely laid-out living room. Through the double doors that led into the dining room Jason could see a table set for five. Just to the left of the double doors stood Woody. Next to him was Red.

Jason and Lauren stopped in the center of the room. Jason held his hands out from his body, palms up. He raised his eyebrows slightly. Woody looked at him and then looked over at Jill who by now had moved off to the side between the two groups so that she could talk to them both by looking from one side to the other.

"You guys know I'm a lawyer, right?"

Jason and Lauren both nodded.

"Well, Woody has a legal problem that might inadvertently help you with your problem with Slater. Do you want to hear about it?"

"Sure," said Jason with a shrug. "I'd like to hear about it. I'd also like to hear why Woody and Slater and Red—that's your name, right?"

"Mark Redfield is my name. But people do call me Red."

"Nice to meet you," said Jason with a nod in Red's direction. "I'd like to hear why you guys and Slater are spending your Saturday playing B-ball together like you've been doing it since high school."

"Because we have," said Woody. "We played together for Huntington Beach High eight years ago

and we still play together, especially when Red's in town."

"That's right," said Red. "Slater is a definite head case, but he's still a good basketball player."

"Yeah," said Jason, "I could see that. But what's the deal, Woody? How come you didn't tell me, somewhere in the last week that Slater's been trying to waste me, that you and he were old friends?"

"I would have if we were just friends but we're not. Sit down and I'll tell you about it."

"Does anyone want something to drink?" asked Jill. Jason wondered if she was just being polite or if she wanted to change the subject just long enough for everyone to take a deep breath.

"I'll have a Diet Coke if you have one," said Lauren.

"Beer," said Woody.

"Me too," said Red.

"A beer would be great," said Jason. "Thanks."

Jill disappeared into the kitchen but not before instructing everyone to sit down. They all found seats and Woody started to tell his story.

"The other day you asked me what I did for a living, Jason, and I didn't answer. Do you know why?"

"Not really. I could give it a guess but I don't know."

"Well, I have a couple of jobs, actually. My sister's husband and I own a small Beechcraft and we have a charter business. Most of our customers are businessmen in Newport Beach. It's pretty easy stuff—flying their friends and clients to San Francisco, maybe Las Vegas once in awhile. One of the businessmen has interests in Mexico and has a meeting in Mazatlan on the first Tuesday of every month. I fly him down there and while he's in the meeting I go surfing.

"I take my board with me on the plane, take a taxi to the beach, and surf for a couple of hours. Then I stretch out my towel and catch some rays. Usually

about that time one of the few black surfers you'll find on the west coast of California or Mexico shows up and lays out his towel next to mine. We shoot the breeze for awhile—relive the glory days when we were B-ball stars at Huntington Beach High—and then I get up to go. I take my surfboard, only it's not the one I came with..."

"It's the one I brought," Red piped in.

"I head back to the airport, meet my client, and fly him home," said Woody.

No one spoke for the next two minutes until Lauren broke the silence by asking the question everyone knew the answer to. "The surfboard you bring back ... what's in it?"

"The entire board is made of marijuana," said Red. "It's packed tight and covered with a thin layer of fiberglass and resin. It's almost a perfect match to the board Woody brings down."

"And Slater sells it?" asked Jason.

"That's right," said Woody. "He's got two or three people that he wholesales big chunks of it to. He keeps some for himself and sells small bags to a few regular customers. That's the way we work it—Red buys it and packages it, I transport it and Slater sells it—division of labor. And we don't get greedy. One board a month, no more under any circumstances."

Jill came in from the kitchen and passed out the drinks. There was a slight pause as Lauren popped open the Diet Coke and Jason, Woody, and Red twisted the caps off long-neck bottles of Original Coors. Lauren took a sip, Jason and Red each took a swig, and Woody took a long pull before continuing.

"Every four months Red drives up with the four surfboards that I've left there and we start over. We usually play some b-ball and go out whenever that happens. We also have a meeting to go over things, see if everything is working out all right, make sure everyone is happy."

"So Red is here and you had your basketball game. You saw us there, didn't you?" asked Jason.

"Yeah, I saw you but Slater didn't."

"That I know. If he had, he'd have been on me like a bad rash."

"True."

"So did you have your meeting?"

"No, not yet. But Red and I have talked things over and we're not happy. We want out."

"Oh," said Jason. "Why is that?"

"I can't say for sure, but if I had to put it in twenty-five words or less I'd say I was getting nervous and my conscience is bothering me."

"With me it's an odds thing," said Red. "We've been doing this for twenty months. That's twenty marijuana surfboards bought, made, shipped and sold. A lot of people know about it. It's a relatively small operation in the big bad world of dope dealing, but if we get busted it's jail time. I don't want to go to jail in Mazatlan or here either, but I think the odds are we all will if we don't cut and run soon."

"So what does all this have to do with us?" asked Lauren.

"I'm about to get to that," said Woody. "I just need to give you a little more background first. We haven't talked to Slater about our desire to get out because we know he won't like it. He wants to start doing two runs a month, something we agreed never to do when we first got started. We don't know why he wants to do it. We can't figure it out because he doesn't really need more money. All he does is surf, fight, and play basketball—all fairly inexpensive undertakings. But he's pushing us hard to do it."

"We also know that he means to kill you, Jason. He's always been a bit of a head case and he's mean, but I've never seen him like this. He hasn't said anything to us about going after you at the college or even mentioned that he knows your name. But he

talks all the time about how he's going to mess you up for what happened at the beach."

"I guess he hadn't mentioned that he tried to kill both of us at the airport Friday night."

"Really?"

"Yeah. We're sitting here by the grace of God."

"Good Lord," said Jill, her voice at least an octave higher than normal. "He's got to be stopped."

"Well, that's why we asked you here, Jason and Lauren. We have a plan." Woody tilted his bottle back and finished his beer. "Why don't you tell them, Jill?"

"It's simple really. You should know it was Woody's idea. Woody and Red agree to start making an extra run, but only if Slater comes with Woody to pick it up. Woody tells him that he can't fly down alone as it blows his cover. Everyone knows him as a commercial pilot who flies down with a client. He can't fly down or return by himself. So Slater goes with him, they both make the pickup, fly back, and when they land at John Wayne Airport the DEA¹ is waiting for them."

"How do they know about it?" asked Jason. "An anonymous tip?"

"That's right," said Red. "A simple phone call. Maybe from here, maybe from Mexico. We haven't decided yet."

"Slater's got a record," said Woody. "He did a year in state prison for busting a cop's jaw in a bar just up the road. Jill thinks he'll get fifteen years and with a prior conviction he'll probably have to serve it all."

"And what about you, Woody?" ask Lauren. "What will happen to you?"

Every eye in the room was on Woody, the wild and crazy surfer, the pilot, the smuggler, the joker. Woody looked at Jason, then Red, then Jill, and finally Lauren, letting the suspense build. At last he answered the question with a nonchalant shrug of his

shoulders. "It will be two in the Big House," he said out of the side of his mouth. "A walk in the park for a stand-up guy like me."

"You're pretty cavalier about it," said Jason. "Where have I heard that voice?"

"It's his Johnny Depp imitation from *Donnie Brasco*," said Jill. "He's been practicing it ever since he thought up this plan."

"Forget about it," said Woody.

"Woody, please!" Jill mockingly pleaded.

"Seriously Woody, you're going to do two years to get Slater off our backs?" asked Jason.

"It's not just that, although I'd deem that a worthy enough cause on its own. It's the whole thing. Part of it is that we can't figure a way to get Slater busted on his own without him figuring out that we, or at least I, set him up. He's got enough money to raise bail, and if he thinks I'm involved he'd try to whack me as soon as he hits the street. We've got to get busted together for it to work."

"Couldn't you just hide out until the trial?"

"No, he'd jump bail and come after me if he thought I'd crossed him. And then it would be him or me. I know I told you that if he was trying to kill me, I'd kill him first, but when it gets right down to it I really wouldn't want to kill anyone, not even Slater. And even if I did, I'd be in prison for a long, long time. It would be a drug-related killing and I'd probably get life."

Jason looked over at Jill who nodded her head. "He's right, Jason. We've crunched the numbers and two years isn't bad. In reality the sentence will probably be five but he'll be out on parole in two."

"And I'll finally be out of the drug business," said Woody.

"How did you get into it in the first place?" asked Lauren. "And how did you get hooked up with Slater? I know you knew him in high school, but why go into an illegal business with a guy like him?"

¹ DEA: Drug Enforcement Administration

"I guess you could call it a bad career move," said Woody.

"We've known Slater for a long time," said Red. "Since we were freshmen in high school. He wasn't such a bad guy then. Even when we were seniors and all starting on the basketball team he was all right. In college he started taking a lot of speed so he could study. Then he was doing downers so he could sleep. He was lifting weights so started taking steroids, which is one of the reasons he's so violent, I think. He was doing acid, coke, crack, pretty much everything. He always had a short fuse but in high school he could control it. Not now though. Not since he let drugs twist him up."

"And the smuggling," said Woody, "we just sort of fell into. I know that sounds dumb but it's true. My brother-in-law was into flying and wanted to do it for a living. He arranged for me to take some lessons, I got my license, and we started up our business out of John Wayne Airport. At first we weren't really making ends meet. He owned the plane and was having to make payments on it and after that there wasn't enough money for us to live on. There wasn't that much work, so I told him to just fly himself and use me as a back-up until we got more business.

"Since there wasn't that much going on, I decided to go down to Mazatlan to visit Red who'd been living there for six months or so. He had a great set-up but he was having a cash flow problem himself. We spent a week surfing and talking and came up with the idea. I went out to the Mazatlan Airport and looked into the requirements to fly in there. I came back and told my brother-in-law that we should expand into Mexico, that if we got any business I'd do the Mexico flying. We advertised and found this guy who was flying down once a month, and he hooked up with us.

"I flew him down twice and brought my own surfboard back. On the third trip we switched boards and

I flew back in no problem. We've been doing it ever since." Woody paused for a minute and Jason wondered if he was going to continue. Finally Woody took a deep breath and went on. "You might be wondering how we could rationalize the whole operation. To be honest, it never bothered me that we were breaking the law. We were bringing in an illegal substance, but I figured it wasn't that different from what whiskey or cigarettes will do to you, which are not only legal but are a huge source of tax revenue. So I didn't sweat that, except that I knew if we got caught it would be jail time.

"We agreed from the start to keep it small. The drug trade is highly competitive and people get killed all the time, mostly for moving into other dealers' territory. Slater handles that side of things and, given his history and personality, is remarkably restrained. He sells to the same people all the time, and whatever his relationship with them is, it seemed to work. We never had a problem with anyone, which is cool. Still, as time went on, I started to get less and less happy about what we were doing and Red felt the same."

"That's right," said Red. "You need money to live, but the way you get it can have a profound effect on you. I didn't really think that when we started out, but I've come to realize it's true."

"Did you see the movie *Traffic*?" asked Woody.

"Yes," said Jason. Lauren nodded.

"Well, it's pretty easy to adopt the attitude of the guy who got caught and later was poisoned. His philosophy was that whether people got their dope from him or from someone else they were going to get high either way, so what difference did it make? That's the attitude we embraced when we got started. We figured it was true, if people want to get loaded they're going to find a way so we might as well bring it over and make some money. We even thought we were providing a good service because we had a high quality product and we kept the price competitive.

“So what changed your minds?” asked Lauren.

“Partly Slater pressing us to make more trips,” said Red. “If we bring in more stuff the odds of getting busted or noticed by bigger, meaner, drug dealers go way up. And lately we’re getting, in the parlance of the religious community, convicted.”

“I didn’t know you were religious,” said Jill.

“I come from a religious family, but I wouldn’t consider myself religious,” answered Red.

“Religious enough to get convicted though,” smiled Jason.

“Yeah, religious enough for that.”

“To tell you the truth we don’t know why all of a sudden we’re feeling guilty about the whole deal,” said Woody, “but we know we both want out. I don’t know much about how God does things, but if you’re planning to get back into your missionary work, my guess is He doesn’t want Slater screwing things up by killing you. We want out of the drug business, we want Slater off our backs, we don’t want him after you and Lauren, and we figure our plan takes care of all of that.”

“Have you figured what can go wrong? What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

“He could get an unsympathetic judge who could sentence him to ten years,” said Jill. “It’s unlikely but possible.”

“And you’re willing to take that chance?”

“Yeah,” said Woody, “I am. It’s better then seeing you or Lauren get shot. How do you think I’d feel if I let that happen?”

“I’m sure you’d feel bad but it wouldn’t be your fault. This thing between us and Slater doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“True, but look at it this way. Red and I really can’t get out of our arrangement with Slater unless he’s out of the way. In trying to help you we’ve come up with a plan that helps us almost as much. It’s pretty much the only way out for us so we’d have to go for

it anyway. Helping you sweetens the pot but we’re in the game either way.”

Woody stopped talking and looked around the room like a lawyer ready to congratulate himself for his compelling closing argument. When no one objected, Woody, pleased with his air-tight case, broke into a big grin.

“What are you smiling at?” ask Lauren.

“The last word, kid. It feels so good!”

“You’re the man, Woody,” said Jill.

“Right you are, baby. Right you are. Hey, let’s eat! All this scheming, planning, talking and persuading is making me hungry.”

For the next hour and a half no one talked about Slater, the plan to bring him down, or the drug business. They ate and drank and talked about a dozen subjects from current events to favorite movies. Red asked Jason what missionary work Woody had referred to and Jason gave him a condensed version of his life story in the Family. Red said he’d been raised in church but had dropped out as a teenager.

“It sticks with you though,” he said. “I know I’m saved and going to Heaven. I’m not exactly expecting a window seat after some of the things I’ve done, but I’ll be there.”

Toward the end of the evening Lauren asked the question that was on everyone’s mind. “So when is this sting going to be?”

“Soon,” said Woody. “It could be as soon as Wednesday. We’re going to meet with Slater tomorrow night and work out the details. I’ll let you know when we decide.”

“Thanks,” said Jason. “We’d appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad we can help you. It’s a great situation really—a win/win/lose. You and Lauren win, Red and I win, and Slater loses.”

“You do lose some, though, right? A couple of years behind bars.”

“That’s true, but it’s worth it. I’ll be out of the drug business and I won’t have to be looking over my shoulder. It’s no life smuggling drugs. There are so many things that can go wrong. You can make a lot of money, but you can’t make even one mistake.”

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MONDAY: WAITING

Lauren was off for the week so she slept in. Flight attendants are only allowed to fly so many hours a month and she was almost to the limit so her airline scheduled her off for a week. Jason decided to cut the two classes he had that morning and went to work in the afternoon. He told his boss that he might be quitting soon because he wanted to get back into missionary work.

His boss tried to dissuade him, but when he saw Jason meant business he confessed he was glad to see someone who wanted to do something worthwhile for others. He told Jason he could work as long as he wanted and to let him know when he wanted to quit. Jason was glad because at this point he didn’t know how it was going to work for him to get back into the Family, and in the meantime he could use the money.

When he got back to Lauren’s that evening they ate dinner, talked, and turned in early.

TUESDAY: RESOLVED

The next morning, at 7:15, the phone rang. Lauren turned her head toward Jason but didn't open her eyes. "Can you get it?"

"Sure," said Jason, as he rolled out of bed and headed for the living room. "Hello," he said into the phone.

"Jason, this is Woody. How you doing?"

"Okay."

"Sorry to call so early. I wanted to catch you before you left for the day."

"It's all right. What's happening?"

"Well, we had our meeting last night and Slater's happy we agreed to start making an extra run each month. But he can't go down this time. I'll have to make the trip on my own. Red's already driving back."

"That screws up your plan, doesn't it?"

"Not really. I told him that it pissed me off that he's the one pushing for an extra run but he's not willing to help out, so he promised to meet me at the airport when I come in, and he'll reimburse all the costs of the flight, since there won't be a passenger. Red is going to make the call from Mexico and he'll be sure to tell them to wait for the pickup before making the bust."

“Yeah. It would be a bummer if they busted you and missed Slater.”

“A major bummer, but it won’t happen. If the narcs know there is going to be a drop, they’ll usually wait to catch the client as well as the delivery boy. I’ll stay with the plane till Slater gets there.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Don’t worry, he’ll show up. It’s his idea and he won’t want to give Red and me an excuse to back out now. We both let him know we’re not too happy about it.”

“When’s it going to happen?”

“Tomorrow. I fly down in the morning. Red should have the board ready for me when I get there. Then I fly back in the afternoon. It should be wrapped up by four or so.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. It’s kind of hard for me to imagine but it’s a go. Tomorrow’s the day.”

“I’ll be praying for you.”

“Thanks. I’m sure it will help. Take care.”

“You too, Woody.”

Jason hung up the phone and walked back into the bedroom. “Who was that?” asked Lauren.

“It was Woody. He’ll be flying down to Mazatlan for the pickup alone. Slater’s promised to meet him at John Wayne, and that’s where the bust will happen.”

“Slater’s not flying down with Woody?”

“He said he can’t this time, but apparently there’s no putting the trip off, so Woody’s going it alone.”

Lauren was silent for a moment before responding, “I think Woody wants to hurry it up so Slater will be out of the way and won’t be able to come after us again. He may not have said it, but I think that’s probably why he agreed to go through with it instead of postponing.”

“Could be,” said Jason. “Let’s pray for him.”

“Yes,” said Lauren and started right in. “Jesus, we pray for Woody. We know he is going out of his way

to help us and is going to have to pay quite a price to do it. We pray, Lord, that You will protect him. It’s a dangerous business he’s in and you couldn’t have a much more dangerous partner than Slater. When he flies in tomorrow the DEA will be waiting for him and they’re dangerous too. They could shoot him if someone gets nervous or something goes wrong. He could end up in prison for a long time. He could get shot by Slater. There are so many things that could go wrong and even if they go according to plan he’s going to be in prison—another dangerous situation. So Lord, we pray that You take care of him, You watch over him, You help him and guide him through the whole ordeal.”

“In Jesus’ name, amen,” said Jason.

“Oh, Jason, I feel so bad for him.”

“Keep praying for him. That’s the best thing we can do.”

They did pray, on and off throughout the day and at night before they went to bed.

WEDNESDAY: THE BUST

The next morning they slept in and took a walk on the beach. It was after ten when they sat down together for a late breakfast. About halfway through the phone rang. Lauren got up to answer it.

“Hello.”

“May I speak to Jason, please?”

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“Officer Miguel Alvarez, Fountain Valley Police Department.”

“Just a second,” said Lauren. She put her hand over the phone’s mouthpiece and told Jason who it was. He took the phone and Lauren swung back into her chair, her eyes locked on Jason.

“This is Jason,” he said into the mouthpiece.

“Hello Jason, this is Miguel Alvarez from the Fountain Valley P.D.”

“Yes, hello. How are you?” Jason asked, not knowing what else to say.

“I’m fine, thanks. How about yourself?”

“I’m doing all right. I had a little trouble at LAX the other night. Slater came after me again. This time he didn’t wear a mask.”

“Well, you won’t be having any more trouble with him. He’s dead.”

“He’s dead?”

“Who’s dead?” asked Lauren.

“Slater,” said Jason, his hand over the mouth-piece.

“That’s right,” said Miguel. “It happened last night. It looks like Slater picked one fight too many. Witnesses said he started whaling on this guy about half his size. The guy went down twice but when he came up the second time he put a knife in Slater’s stomach. Slater died right there on the barroom floor, less than a mile from where he shot up your car.”

“Wow,” said Jason. “What happened to the guy that killed him?”

“He waited until we got to the scene and turned himself in. We questioned him and let him go on his own recognizance¹. The D.A. will go over the case but they probably won’t charge him. He has a black eye and a busted nose so it looks like a clear-cut case of self-defense.”

“Wow,” said Jason again. “It’s a shock. It’s a relief too, if you know what I mean.”

“Sure. I know I’d be relieved if someone who was trying to kill me was permanently out of the picture. I wouldn’t feel bad about it if I were you.”

“No, I don’t feel bad. It’s just a shock. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Yeah, I figured you’d want that piece of information. Take it easy.”

“You too.”

Jason hung up the phone and turned to Lauren. “What happened?” she asked.

“It looks like Slater got into a barroom fight and someone killed him. He died last night from a knife wound to the stomach.”

“Amazing,” said Lauren. “We should call Woody right away and let him know. I hope he hasn’t left for Mazatlan.”

“Yeah,” said Jason, looking at his watch. “He’s got to be gone by now, but we should definitely try.”

Lauren opened a drawer below the phone and pulled out a Huntington Beach phone book. She found Woody’s number, dialed it, and let it ring a dozen times before conceding that he wasn’t home.

“Call Jill,” Jason suggested.

Lauren found her number on the notebook she kept near the phone. She dialed and after a few rings a recording of Jill’s voice said she wasn’t available to answer the phone but to leave a message. Then she gave a pager number in case of an emergency. “This is definitely an emergency,” Lauren said to herself as she dialed the number and then punched in her number. She hung up the phone and said a quick prayer. “Lord, help her to call right back.”

A moment later the phone rang. “You take it,” Lauren said, “I’m too nervous.”

Jason picked up the phone. “Jill, is that you?”

“Yes,” said Jill. “What is it, Jason?”

“I just got a call from the Fountain Valley P.D. They said Slater was killed in a barroom fight last night.”

“Oh my God,” said Jill. “That means...”

“Woody’s going to be flying into John Wayne Airport and Slater’s not going to meet him,” Jason finished the sentence for him. “I guess he’s already gone.”

“Yes, he left early this morning.”

“Is there any possible way we can get in touch with him?”

“I don’t think so. He left his cell with me. He didn’t want it floating around once he landed and...”

“What about Red? Do you have his number?”

“No. Even if I did I doubt I could get ahold of him. Red is going to be making his own pickup and Woody is going to be surfing until Red meets him. There’s no way to get in touch with either one of them.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“Oh my God, Jason. What can we do?”

¹*recognizance*: a formal agreement made before a judge or magistrate to do something, for example, to appear in court at a set date

“Are you at work?”

“Yes.”

“Well, we are going to pray and you can too, whenever you get a break.”

“I will.”

“Was he going to call you later or what?”

“Yes. He’s scheduled to land about four and figured he’d be able to call by seven at the latest.”

“What time are you going to be home?”

“About five fifteen.”

“Maybe we could come over then and we could pray together.”

“Great. There’s a key under the middle flower pot on the right if you get there before I do.”

“Ok,” said Jason, “we’ll see you then. Hey Jill, do you think we should go out to the airport when he comes in?”

“No, bad idea. You wouldn’t be able to see anything unless you went right out on the airfield where they keep the small planes, and if you got out there you’d stick out like a sore thumb. They might arrest you as an accessory.”

“Yeah. I thought so. We’ll be praying, and if there’s one thing I learned growing up as a missionary, it’s that prayer really works and can change things.”

“Let’s hope it does. I’ll see you tonight.”

Jason hung up the phone and looked over at Lauren. “Let’s pray,” he said. Almost automatically he walked into the living room, knelt down on the rug, put his face in his hands and rested his hands and his head on the coffee table. Lauren knelt down across from him and did the same. She’d never done it, or even seen anyone pray in that position before, but it seemed natural to follow Jason’s lead.

Jason started by praising the Lord and thanking Him for all He had done. He thanked Him that He’d worked it out for him to meet Lauren and for the change that He’d worked in his heart. He thanked

Him that his desire to get back to being a missionary hadn’t been snuffed out, that the Lord had given him the faith to make the right decision. He thanked Him that even though Slater had tried twice to get him, that he hadn’t been able to and that the Lord had delivered both him and Lauren out of his hand. He stopped short of thanking the Lord that Slater was dead because he wasn’t sure how big a part the Lord had played in that. He might have had a hand in it, Jason figured, in the timing maybe, but he reasoned that in reality Slater had done it to himself. When you make street fighting and bar fighting a way of life, the odds of reaching retirement age have got to be against you.

Nevertheless, Jason even found himself praying for Slater, praying that if he hadn’t found the Lord in this life—which didn’t seem likely, but one could never know—that he would get the chance in the spirit world and make the right choice. Then, after praising the Lord some more, he started to pray for Woody.

“Lord, I really want to pray for Woody. Thank You so much for him. Thank You that he is willing to really lay down his life for Lauren and me, that he is willing to go to jail to help us out of this situation. Lord, now that Slater is out of the way, and the situation is changed, he can get out of the drug smuggling business and doesn’t have to worry about Slater. He can change his life without having to go to jail. If somehow You can get through to him that he should not land the plane with that marijuana surfboard in it ... Lord, we can’t get in touch with him. He didn’t take his phone, and we don’t know how to get in touch with Red. There is no way we can warn him, but You can, Lord, so we ask You, in Jesus name, to do it. Let him know that he shouldn’t bring that board back, or somehow stop it in whatever way You know best. We claim it, Lord, in Your name.”

“Amen, Lord,” added Lauren. “Woody is such a nice guy and he’s really had a change of heart. He doesn’t want to smuggle marijuana anymore and is willing to make a big sacrifice to get out of it and to help us. So now that the sacrifice isn’t necessary, please work it out so that he doesn’t have to do it. We know You can do it, so please do the miracle for him. Thanks for saving him from prison. Thanks in advance.”

Jason and Lauren stayed around the house for most of the day, getting in the Word. They continued to pray for Woody, imploring the Lord to get through to him. A few minutes before noon, Jason decided to drive over to his aunt and uncle’s and check the mail. He was back in half an hour with two envelopes, one containing an *Activated* magazine and the other a *Wine Press*. He and Lauren read them straight through.

At 3:00 PM they realized they hadn’t eaten since breakfast, so Lauren made a couple of sandwiches. Later they took a short walk on the beach where they again prayed for Woody. By the time they got back and showered it was time to head to Jill’s. They rolled to a stop in front of her place at exactly 5:15. Jason shut off the engine just as Jill’s Camry pulled into the driveway.

“Hi,” she called to them as they climbed out of the Toyota. “Come on in.”

Jill fished for a key and opened the door. She marched in with Jason and Lauren in her wake. “Make yourself at home,” she called behind her, “I’ll be right with you.” She opened a door to her bedroom, tossed her purse on the bed, and disappeared inside for a moment. When she came out her black business suit was gone and she was wearing capris, a T-shirt and sandals. “Being a lawyer has its good points and bad points. Having to dress up every day, that’s a bad point.”

Lauren nodded. “Sounds like the airline business.”

Jill and Lauren talked back and forth about dress codes in corporate America for a minute or two. Jason nodded once in awhile, happy that in his world neat and casual was usually the highest standard he needed to adhere to. When the warm-up conversation came to a close, Jason told Jill that they had spent a good part of the day praying for Woody.

“Good,” she said. “I know it’s going to help. I prayed too, whenever I got a chance.”

“He must have landed already,” said Lauren. “Whatever’s going to happen most likely has happened by now.”

Jill was about to say something when the doorbell rang. Jason looked toward the front window in time to see a cab pull away from the curb. Jill headed for the front door and looked through the spy hole. Then she let out a shriek, gave the dead bolt a quick twist, and swung the door open.

“I can’t believe it,” she yelled as she jumped into Woody’s arms.

Woody and Jill hugged long and hard. Finally Woody opened his eyes, looked over Jill’s shoulder, and greeted Lauren and Jason who had followed Jill’s scream to the door. “You guys were praying for me, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Jason as Lauren nodded.

Jill and Woody finally separated and Jill straightened her clothes and hair. “Come in and talk to us,” she said. “You look like a man with a story to tell.”

“Oh yeah,” said Woody. “You got that right.”

Once they were all settled, Woody began. “Well, you know the plan. I got up early and took a cab to the airport. I didn’t take my car because I didn’t want to have it out in the airport parking lot racking up fees while I was a guest of the government.

“When we got to Mazatlan, I went to the beach and surfed. It was intense, really. Thinking it was my last time for a couple of years made each ride a real

rush. Anyway, I surfed and waited for Red to show up with the board. He showed up, we talked awhile, said our farewell's, exchanged boards, and off I went back to the airfield.

"I take off, I'm headed back, good weather, a nice little tail wind. I'm cruising. But I can't relax. I feel like something's wrong. I start trying to figure it out, but all I can attribute it to is that I know I'll soon be handcuffed in the back of a DEA car next to Slater, and I'll have to convince him that I'm as surprised as he is. Then I start worrying that somehow he'll know, or that he'll sense something is wrong and won't show up, or that a DEA guy with an itchy trigger finger will put a slug in my head. My mind was cranking out worst-case scenarios faster than smoke from the exhaust of an overworked diesel and, I don't mind telling you, I was losing it big time."

"I knew I had to get ahold of myself so I started to pray and right away I felt better. And somehow I knew you guys were praying for me. Your prayers got me praying, I guess. It was a good feeling and suddenly I had a peace that God was going to work it out, like I was doing this to help you, so He was gonna do something to help me."

"Then, some 70 miles from the airport, over the gulf, I had the strongest feeling that I should dump the board. It was like a voice in my head said 'Get rid of it!' I kind of argued, 'Hey, the whole plan depends on the board. Without the board there's no evidence. Slater will be free to shoot whoever he wants.' But the voice kept going: 'Forget about Slater, forget the plan, get rid of the board.' Then, 'It's up to you, it's your choice, but if you don't do it, you'll do a couple of years for no reason.'"

Ever the showman, Woody stopped talking and looked around the room, letting the suspense build. Jill wasn't having it.

"So?" she intoned.

"So I did it," said Woody with a sheepish smile. "I contacted control, canceled my flight plan, and said I was going visual to do a little sightseeing. I scanned the area for ships or other aircraft, didn't see anything, so slowed my speed, descended to a couple thousand feet, put her on autopilot, and tossed the board into the Santa Catalina waters. Forty minutes later I landed, secured the plane and waited inside it for Slater. He never showed."

Jason stole a quick look at Lauren and then Jill, hoping one or the other would relate the news of Slater's last fight on the planet, but neither one did and Woody took up his narrative.

"I looked around for signs of the Federales, but I didn't see any. I saw no point in hanging around waiting for Slater so I started walking, figuring I'd catch a taxi in front of the terminal. I walked a couple of hundred yards before the DEA descended on me. It was just like the movies—three unmarked cars from three different directions, the full-screaming half-turn halts, everyone out of the cars, guns drawn, the lead guy wearing a suit and barking orders. The team uniform for the rest of them was Levi's and black windbreakers with DEA in big white letters across the back.

"They put the cuffs on me and drove me back to the plane. They had a dog, a real sniffer, that went right to work. The dog and his handler were all over the plane but they didn't find anything so they took the cuffs off. The main guy—the suit—who looked like Guy Pierce in *L.A. Confidential*—apologized, after telling one of his boys to take off the cuffs. He said they'd heard someone was flying in from Mazatlan with a surfboard made of hard-packed marijuana. 'A bad tip,' he said. 'It happens all the time.' Then he asked me if I had any idea who might have called something like that in.

"What did you say to that?" asked Jill.

"I asked where the call came from, and he said Mexico. So I said, 'Yeah, Mexico, a lot of drugs moving into California from Mexico. It could have been anybody, you know, maybe somebody trying to create a diversion while they moved their stuff across.' The agent agreed—could have been a diversion, a practical joke, or a hundred other reasons. False alarms were as common as pigeon poop on a park bench in the drug enforcement business. Anyway he was sorry for the trouble." Woody paused for a moment before continuing. "I didn't want to lie to the guy, but I couldn't tell him that Red made the call, right? So I guess I misled him, although technically it's true, it could have been anybody."

"I wouldn't worry about it," said Jill.

"Yeah, anyway, while all this was going on I was wondering what happened to Slater. Maybe he got wind that there was going to be a bust or whatever. I don't know, but he never showed. Not that it would have done much good, since there was no dope."

"Slater's dead," said Jason. "Died in a fight last night."

"No sh- ... really? What happened?"

"He picked a fight with the wrong dude. The guy came up with a knife and stabbed him in the stomach. Apparently he died right on the barroom floor."

"Wow," said Woody his voice almost a whisper, "that's something. The end of an era."

"Yeah, I guess so," said Jason.

"I'm glad he's out of the way, I guess, but I didn't expect him to be dead." Woody shook his head. "You know, I knew the guy for a long time. Even though he was a pill most of the time, it's weird that he's dead."

"Look, Woody," said Jill, "I don't mean to be insensitive but the guy was dangerous. He was out to kill Jason and Lauren and he would have killed you—friend from first grade or not—if he found out you were setting him up."

"Sure," said Woody. "It's just weird, that's all. I'm not going into therapy over it but it takes a little getting used to."

Things were quiet for a minute or two while Jill, Lauren, and Jason pondered Woody's reply. "Yeah, I guess it does," said Jill nodding her head in agreement. "I didn't really think of it that way."

"Anyway," Woody continued, "after the DEA left I felt a little shaky so I got back in the plane and sat there for a few minutes. I prayed and thanked the Lord that I listened to the voice, which I guess was Him or someone He sent. If I hadn't I'd have been busted for sure and to get busted when you set yourself up to accomplish a greater good and the greater good gets done another way so you didn't need to get busted but you were anyway ... well, it could have been depressing. Then I got a feeling I should check around the plane one last time and so I did and found a fin from the surfboard. I figured it probably broke off when I dumped it. It isn't easy to get a surfboard out the door of a flying aircraft, even when it's going slow. Still, I'm no expert on dogs, but there's no way a dog trained to sniff out dope was going to miss that fin."

"Maybe the Lord let it happen to show He's in control," said Jason. "I'd say, in your case, that's an answer about as dramatic as a bolt of lightning."

That brought a chuckle from Lauren, and as Jason looked from one to another he noticed that everyone was smiling—big smiles, happy, spontaneous smiles on the verge of laughter.

"What's everybody so happy about? Why is everyone smiling?" he asked.

"Why are you smiling?" asked Woody. "You look like you just won the super-lotto."

"Really? I thought I was the only composed one here."

"No," said Lauren. "You're grinning ear to ear, just like the rest of us."

“I guess it’s relief,” said Jason, after thinking for a moment. “It feels good to know no one is out to shoot us and Woody isn’t going to jail. I know it hasn’t been that long, but it seems like I’ve been thinking about that stuff forever.”

“Lauren, how long has it been since you and Jason met?” asked Jill.

“We met on a Saturday, so about a week and a half. Twelve days to be exact.”

“Its amazing how much can happen in twelve days,” said Jill.

No one argued.

EPILOGUE

Through the Activated Desk, Jason got in touch with a Home in Orange County, and he and Lauren began visiting. Two months later he wrapped up his affairs and went to visit his family in India, where he rejoined shortly after. He now lives in another Home in Bangalore.

Lauren became an Active member and began spending a lot of time with the Orange County Home. A few months later she quit her job with the airlines and joined as a CM disciple. She and Jason keep in touch by e-mail, and she has written for clearance to join a Home in her native but never-before-seen Vietnam. She has asked Jason if he’d be interested in coming with her.

Woody and Jill both became Active members and still attend Bible studies with the Home in Orange County. They fellowship with other Family members in Southern California who they’ve met at various get-togethers. Woody continues to fly small planes, a bit more frequently now to make up for the loss of income he suffered after quitting the smuggling business. Jill still works as an attorney and helps the Family with legal matters when the need arises. They both help support Jason in India and have promised to help Lauren when she goes to Vietnam. They are planning to get married but haven’t set a date.

Red bought half-interest in a small restaurant in Mazatlan. He keeps the mornings free for surfing and is in touch with the Family there.

A week after meeting Jason at Flakey Jake's, Chris was busted when she tried to sell drugs to a female undercover agent. Because she was a minor, she was held until her parents were contacted and made arrangements to fly from Seattle and pick her up. Happy to have her back, they arranged for her to enroll in school again and to enter an outpatient drug rehabilitation program. Tired of where drugs were taking her, she applied herself and was able to break her dependence on drugs.

Billy, who had watched Chris's bust from behind a parked car, decided on the spot that he had to get out of the drug business. The next day he got a haircut, bought himself a new set of casual clothes, a squeegee, and a bottle of Windex. Concentrating on parking lots in front of supermarkets and department stores, he explained to people that he was trying to raise money for a trip to Seattle and would wash their car windows for any donation. Two weeks later he took a Greyhound bus to Seattle and, having obtained Chris's parents' phone number from a phone book, gave a call and asked for Chris. Glad to hear from him, Chris talked to her folks about helping him get established. And so Billy came into the care of kind foster parents, and was enrolled in the same high school as Chris. Right before Jason left for India, Billy called him and got the Family address and signed up for the first three *Activated* magazines.

Hans and Herb continue to help people in trouble who cry out to the Lord, and train new recruits—including Family members who have graduated to new heavenly ministries—in the job of assisting God's children from the spirit world.

Eric, having completed his training, put in a request to be assigned to Jason, with whom he felt

a special bond and connection. Jason hasn't seen Eric since the airport parking lot incident, but that's because Eric's task at the moment is a quieter one, preparing Jason in heart and spirit for the greater works and ministries that are awaiting him just around the corner.