

**The Day**  
**Jesus**  
**Moved Next Door**

by

**Sean Elliot Russell**

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Kindle Edition.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

*One name in this novel, however, is used to honor my godson, Rhyle!  
Thank you, Rhyss & Jorelie!*

*And the epilogue scene between the boy and Moses is based on an actual  
discussion that took place between Sam, my godson, & his father, Billy.  
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#### **Author's Notes:**

Jesus' words in this novel are based on how I believe the Lord Jesus would act, speak, and teach if he moved in next door. I have sought to keep within the spirit of the Scriptures, the Holy Bible, at all times, and not go beyond the parameters established there. I hope, most of all, that I have been faithful to convey the King's heart toward us, both sinner and saint. I request readers to use the Bible as their source for truth and ultimate knowledge regarding any subject matters within this novel. Please allow me grace if I have erred in any way regarding our Lord's actions or words.

This Spirit-Filled Fiction novel is written to entertain, make us reflect, and impact us on how we might be better ambassadors to the world with the Holy Spirit's empowerment and leading. My intention is to write a meaningful novel for the Body of Christ, and those about to enter the Body of Christ.

**We are on a journey to the Fountainhead of Joy!**

Check back for X-ray notes to be added very soon!

Other books by Sean Elliot Russell—

(Fiction)

*Shiloh's Rising*

*The Jesus Boy*

*Should the Oaks Fall: 11 Short Stories to Enliven the Heart*

(Non-fiction/Devotional)

*The Journey Home*

*30 Selah Moments with the Holy Spirit: God on the Move*  
(Book of Acts Ch 1–12, Vol 1)

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Follow me on TikTok for excerpts of my books & short stories, and to be exhorted:  
@seanrussell\_inspires

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## Do you sense the need to get control of your spiritual life today?

Check out a journal that will be a tool in your arsenal and help you get focused on the essentials in the Christ-led life.

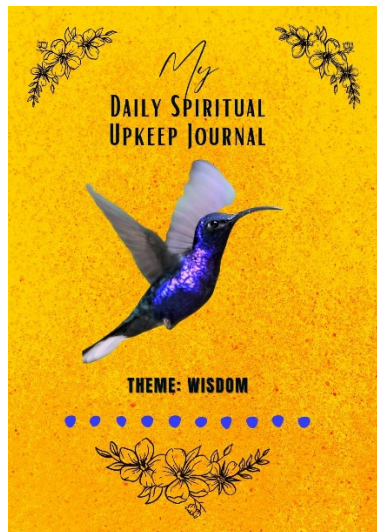
**My Daily Spiritual Upkeep Journal**  
is now available on Amazon.

This is a Hidden Nation Publication.

Minimalist covers; A4 Size (8.25" x 11" / 210x297mm);  
200 pages—84 daily sessions /each day spread over 2 pages);  
weekly goals & gratitude assessments; weekly exhortations on Wisdom  
(focusing on Proverbs 3:1–10, & other parts of Scripture).

Go to: [mybook.to/SpiritualUpkeepJournal](http://mybook.to/SpiritualUpkeepJournal)

Or visit the author's website to get more information.



This cover is one of several released or about to be released!

## Praise for “The Day Jesus Moved Next Door”

*"One of the most moving novels I have ever read!"*

**Callie Kennedy, reader**

*“The wonderful result is a book that will have you in worship and in tears. The impossibility of completely showing Jesus gives way to the reality of Truth. And Jesus is truth.  
A wonderful book, and a fun read.”*

**David Bergsland, reader**

## Praise for “The Jesus Boy”

*"This is a novel that you don't forget in a hurry and it lingers with you! I will remember it fondly and with great respect and admiration! It is now in the category of one of my favourite novels out of the hundreds I have read (Goodreads says 1377)."*

**Peter Younghusband, Perspective by Peter (Top 50 Christian Book Blogger)**

*“The style of script is almost lyrical and flows. It's such eloquent writing that it was enjoyable. A feast for the eyes and mind. Supernatural elements, glimpses into the spirit realm battling over Joshua and his actions, gave the book added depth. Also, building intrigue and romance enhanced the already interesting staple.”*

**WriteReadFred, Book Blog Reviewer**

*“'The Jesus boy' by Sean Elliot Russell gives us a wonder. This spirit-filled superhero Jesus boy presents an urban fantasy as an extension of true reality. The wondrous events ring true even though we know this is fiction. ... Several times I found myself reexamining my relationship with the Lord. It satisfied me deeply. I believe it is an exceptional book... Rarely do we find a book this well done with such spiritual strength. This shows us how much can be done with Spirit-Filled fiction.”*

**David Bergsland, RadiqX Press**

*"I have not read a story like this in a very long time, brings to mind the Screwtape Letters. The way the author brings the enemy to life and shows how influential he can be, focused and fixed on our destruction, while at the same time showing the love and desire for our souls by the One.*

*It was captivating!"*

**Nicole Thomas, author of the "Tales of Elhaanai Series"**

*"This is an exceptional book, filled with interesting characters that you end up caring about, a storyline that took me from fear to tears to laughter, and inspiration..."*

**Glen Robinson, author of "The Champion," "Elijah," & other fine books**

*"... a gripping tale..."*

**C.S. Wachter, author of "The Sorcerer's Bane" & other fine novels**

*"... a moving and delightful story..."*

**Steve Pillinger, author of the "Mindruler Series"**

*"Parts of the novel had me trembling in fear to the point of using a nightlight, while other parts had me searching for a box of tissues."*

**Sharon Strickland, reader**

*"This book was delicious! It reminded me of 'This Present Darkness' by Frank Peretti, only more expansive in knowing God personally. My new favorite book!"*

**Marie Taylor, reader**

*"The writing was almost lyrical, and it went where few books go: the spiritual realm.*

*The story made me cry and shudder in turn."*

**Jes Drew, reader**

*“I love how deep into the characters that the author takes us. Some so-called Christian books are simply romance novels where the characters occasionally say, ‘I’m going to pray about it’. Not this one. We get a real glimpse of deep prayer and obedience to the Lord, along with a good look at spiritual warfare behind it all. Very refreshing.*

*The storyline was exciting & kept my interest.”*

**TrulyJen**

## Praise for “Shiloh’s Rising”

*“Loved reading this book, have yet to see anything like it! Really liked to see things written from Jesus point of view as well!”*

**Mike Castillo, reader**

*“...touches your heart.”*

**Peter Voicu, reader**

*“I could not stop reading with tears of joy and sadness...”*

**Mark Broadhurst, reader**

*“It’s a heavy subject but once you start, you won’t want to put it down.*

*Highly recommend this book.”*

**P. Pintek, reader**

## Story Progression

The Neighborhood

Dedication

Prologue: The Visit

Day One: Saturday

Day Two: Sunday

Day Three: Monday

Day Four: Tuesday

Day Five: Wednesday

Day Six: Thursday

Day Seven: Friday

Day Eight: Saturday

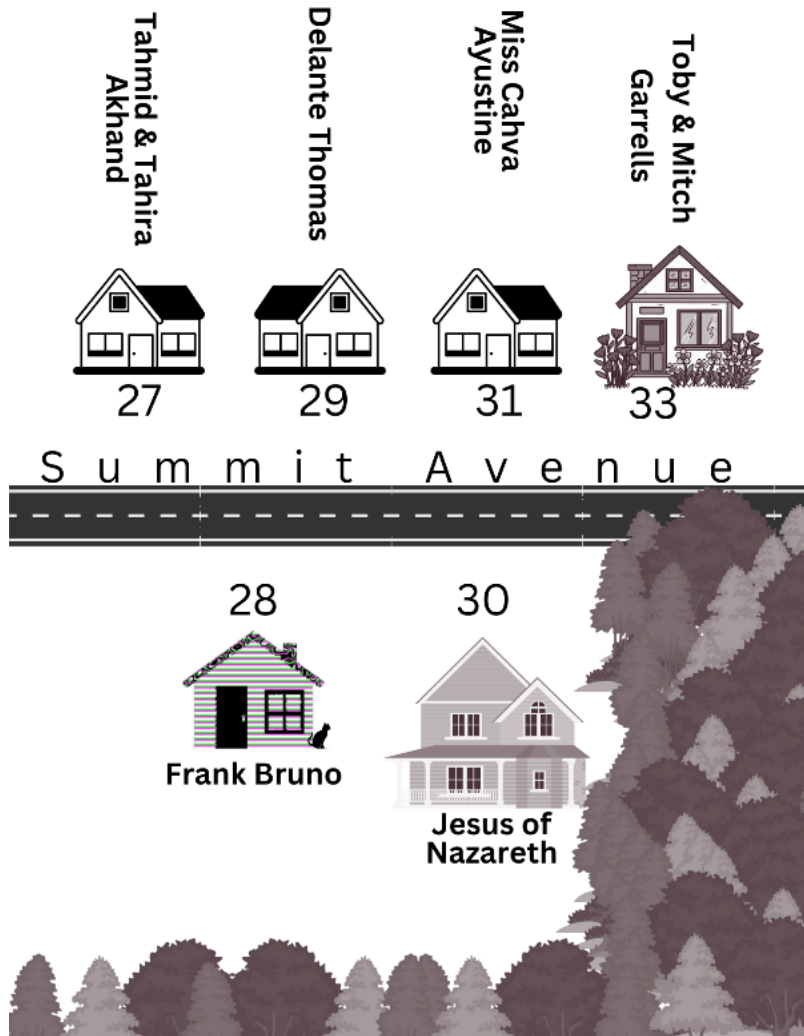
Day Nine: Sunday

Epilogue: The Visitors

From the Author



# The Neighborhood



- Tahmid Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue  
with wife, Tahira, and sons, Nadir (8), Mazhar (5)
- Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue  
with A.C. (Attack Cat)
- Delante Thomas, 29 Summit Avenue
- Jesus of Nazareth, 30 Summit Avenue
- Ms. Cahva Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue
- Toby Garrells (17), 33 Summit Avenue  
with brother Mitch Garrells (22)

Other visitors to Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue:

- Bryan Silverson
- Alyssia Long and son, Michael (10)
- Jarrett Blackman
- Patrick Miles
- Theodora Alexander

# Dedication

To Mom,  
During the best times and the hardest times,  
you've always been by my side.  
I love you!

## Prologue: The Visit

The derelict, two-story farmhouse stood at 30 Summit Avenue seemingly upheld only by thick-trunked, looming trees and overgrown bushes on all sides. Its window shingles lopsided or missing, its windows shattered or gutted, and a sagging roof at midpoint all suggested the structure would deteriorate and suffer the effects of wind, rain, and gravity until time finally had its way and pulled it to the ground.

Rees Barclay had built the house some 140 years before, an honest, hardworking man of his community. Few except those closest to him knew of the years he'd spent in prayer and fasting over the region from that farmhouse.

At the turn of the 19th century, Browns' great-great-great-grandfather, given the name Clive Barclay, arrived in America barely a man, brought to Savannah, Georgia, in the cavernous belly of an overcrowded slave ship. Within a decade, having looked to the plantation's northern horizon every day with a deep yearning for freedom, he escaped north, finding work for a pittance but eventually settling down in a Chicago suburb. Although he battled oppression and bigotry all his life, he fought to keep faith and improve the quality of life for his family. While serving as a deacon at Evangel Temple, he met and eventually married Margaret Cline. Together, they raised seven children.

Clive's grandson, Rees Barclay, an army veteran who served during the entirety of the Civil War, shaped the quarter mile square of Iowan land given to him by the U.S. government, along with a mule, Ol' Clarice, until it yielded all that he and his family could ever need. It was on that land that he set the foundation for the family's farmhouse.

Decades later, Clive's eldest son, Browns, with his wife, Sarah, along with eleven children—seven sons and four daughters—took ownership of the farmhouse and added to its structure until it took on a rather disjointed, but sturdy, character. With the abrupt onslaught of the Great Depression late 1929 and the harsh winter that followed, Browns galvanized all his resources—his land's crops and livestock—to supply local food banks, churches, and individuals as they came to him in need. Although he owned the land, he knew himself to be a steward, a manager set in place to make a difference for his community and those who crossed paths with him.

The Barclay family understood the importance of spiritual foundations and legacy despite feverish attempts by the darkness to obliterate all traces of such.

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*Paul Matthew Barclay, at Country Club Hills, Chicago, Illinois*

*11:49 p.m.*

The luminescent Chicago skyline glows golden in the distance against the starless night sky, a panoramic view from my home office window. I'm pleased for the quiet—my wife, Debra, and our older teenage children away visiting relatives. On the fourth week of an extended sabbatical as principal of Booker T. Washington High School, I yearn to get back to work despite Doc Jenson's warning that stress, if I don't manage it, will eventually kill me.

*Better a man die doing what he loves!*

My doorbell buzzes from downstairs. My heirloom grandfather clock, ticking in the stillness, shows almost midnight.

*Who can it be at this hour?*

I hurry down and open my door to a tall, bearded man, wearing unusual garb—a layered robe in mother-of-pearl white. I'm drawn to his face which exudes a relaxed and friendly demeanor, and to his dark eyes which display an unhurried authority—yet I don't in the least feel threatened or uncomfortable. His open, caramel face studies me as a gentle smile appears beneath his black beard. I stand there dumbfounded, and even more in awe when I see tall figures behind him, standing easily seven foot tall, their faces shadowed beneath thick hoods.

"You are?" But even before he's answered, I realize we've met before—as if an old friend has come for a visit.

Another smile plays at his lips as he speaks, his voice calm. "Paul, it's so good to see you. I am Yeshua, but if you prefer, you can call me Jesus."

His words hit me, and I recall the vivid dreams I've had the past three nights—a blazing man coming to me, touching my chest above my heart, then piercing light igniting and pouring out through the pores of my skin. I'm scared until a gentle voice tells me to be at peace. The dream had left me with a feeling of well-being when I awakened. In fact, I hadn't felt so alive in years.

“May I come in? I have come to ask for your assistance, Paul.”

“Yes, yes.” I gesture for him to step into my home. The two figures turn and face outward like statues. I slip the door closed behind him. I find it hard to believe this is happening to me.

“Your family is away this weekend, yet what will take place today in your home will impact countless lives, including you and your family.”

I’m still astonished that *he’s* in my foyer. I’m trying to fathom what’s happening to me. I finally find my voice. “Yes, Lord, they’re away visiting an ill family member.”

I motion for him to follow me past our living room into our dining area to our long, oak table. As we enter the room, I wince and turn away as a shaft of pain hits my eyes. I’m mesmerized by his reflection in our landscape mirror behind him—like looking at the sun in its full strength. My eyes adjusting, the room’s bathed with white light reflecting off the mirror. I’m taken aback! Finally, I tear my gaze from the mirror back to the Lord’s face and gesture to a chair. He chuckles lightly at my reaction to all this and takes a seat.

“What is it you need from me, Lord?” I ask, my hands in my lap. Then, I realize I’ve forgotten my manners. I leap up. “Forgive me, Lord. Would you care for a drink...or something to eat?”

“Whatever drink you have to offer, I welcome!” A broad smile pushes out the corners of his medium-length beard.

I dash to the kitchen, retrieve a glass, fill it with ice cubes, then water from my refrigerator door, and hurry to bring it to my guest.

“Thank you, Paul.” He lifts the glass, the ice clinking gently, and drinks deeply. Finishing, he releases a breath in delight giving a satisfied look. Setting the glass on the table, he leans toward me as if to share a secret. He speaks nearly in a whisper. “Perfect peace is yours if you keep your eyes fixed on me. If you choose to live this way, your heart will be free and less hampered by the stresses of life.” He lifts his eyes to the top of my head. “True wisdom isn’t just a head of silver. It’s a head and heart filled and led by my Spirit, even while busy with life.”

A glance at my reflection past the blazing form of Jesus—my black hair increasingly showing silver-white. I nod in full agreement. “Yes, Lord. Thank you for the reminder.”

He beams at me before reaching and resting a hand on my knee. “I need something from you, Paul.”

“Anything, Lord. Just tell me what I can do for you.”

“You own a plot of land in Sterling City, Iowa, on Summit Avenue.”

“I haven’t thought about that property for years. There’s an old, rundown farmhouse there, which we’ve not used for generations.”

“My Father seeks this house for His purposes.”

“It’s dilapidated, Lord.”

“What’s forgotten, I will regenerate. What’s discarded, I draw out its true value and potential. What’s in decline, I invigorate with life to honor the prayers of the saints before, including your ancestors.”

Cherished childhood memories of my great-grandfather, grandfather, and father in prayer, sometimes for hours on their knees and faces, floods my mind. Of late, I’ve been so busy with my secular job that I’ve allowed it to intrude on my prayer watch. I feel my lips upturn briefly at the memories. “My family has always been prayer inclined.” *The Lord is here with me, in my house!*

Jesus nods, reflecting my smile. “Indeed, your family has understood the power of intercessory prayer.”

“Thank you for reminding me what’s most important, Lord.” I shift in my seat, my chair creaking under my weight. “Lord, if you want the Summit Avenue house, it’s all yours. And I will pay for the work that’s needed to make it livable.”

Jesus tilts his head in appreciation. “Thank you, Paul.”

“With all the additions my grandfather and his father added, the farmhouse ended up being quite sizeable. And we own the house next door to it, as well.”

A knowing look appears on Jesus’ face. “Yes, Mr. Frank Bruno has lived there a long time. I look forward to meeting him.”

“I don’t recall the tenant’s name, Lord, but I trust you would know. As I recall, he’s lived there over three decades.”

“Very good, Paul. From this day, plans will move forward.” He stands and steps to me, resting a hand against my heart. “When you pray, make sure to hang all your burdens on me, just as you hang your hat at the end of a day. I care about your life, Paul. You don’t have to do any part of life on your own.”

The look of concern and strength from his eyes causes tears to brim my eyes. I can barely speak. “Thank you, Lord. And I am honored you’d use anything of mine for your Kingdom.”

“What is coming to Summit Avenue, and the surrounding region, is going to be wonderful!  
But not without change and some danger.”



Day One: Saturday

*Six Months Later*



Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue

7:43 a.m.

Ignoring the layer of dust coating my wooden blinds, I stare dumbfounded out my bedroom window at the crashing and shouting coming from the curb edge in front of next door. My window ajar, the simmering July heat assaults my face until sweat coats my forehead. I grind my teeth at the scene unfolding before me. A weight of tiredness clings to me from having arrived from nightshift an hour before.

I throw fleeting glances at Attack Cat, my Siamese, sitting in the corner. “How can they do this to me? Can I not have one last comfort in this world?” A.C.’s blue eyes flicker open before closing drowsily. “Well, at least one of us can sleep!”

Their arrival had come moments ago—at 7:34 a.m. I had just sunk into my bed about to doze off when *it* came. Something enormous roared to a halt on our quiet street. Too-loud *beeps* followed, whatever it was, reversing. With a groan, I snatch my thick pillow and yank it down over my head and ears. Finally, the beeping ceases. Dread collects in my gut as vehicle doors open and slam shut followed by shouts filling the street. A door scrapes and creaks open followed by silence. A crash against the asphalt jolts me out of my skin—a heavy metal object rumbling across its surface.

Boiling with rage, hands clenched, I leap up to see what’s going on. My pulse thumps against the sides of my neck. *It’s not even 8 a.m.!*

Half a dozen guys dressed in blue t-shirts stand around staring at the opened back of a moving truck—the length of three cars. Packed to the edge with ropes securing the load, I see what looks to be a full day’s unload—big and small boxes, broken down bed parts, mattresses, chests, sofas, and kitchen appliances. The two-story eyesore of a farmhouse to my right had remained abandoned since I’d moved here decades ago. Five months ago, construction and engineering teams had arrived and rejuvenated the old structure and grounds. Every day since its completion a month ago, I’d wondered what my new neighbor would be like. Would I get along with whoever moved in there, or would I find myself next to a nightmare neighbor from hell? Then again, what did it really matter with recent events in my life?

Yanking on my bathrobe, I make a quick stop at the bathroom to relieve myself before storming downstairs in my canary-yellow slippers. I heave open my front door and half-trot outside toward the gathered men. “It's not even *eight* in the morning...on a Saturday!”

An unshaven, taller man turns to face me. “Top of the morning to you!” His eyes are preoccupied, moving from the clipboard in his hands to the men, finally landing on me. *Bryan* is in white cursive script against a black label on his t-shirt's chest pocket. “Just here to do my job!” He speaks to a young man on his right—probably his first job by the looks of him. “Take care of all boxes marked ‘fragile!’”

I step to the man not happy and not in the mood to wait. “Did you hear what I just said?” The laser-like rays of the sun singe the front of my legs as I stand there. “I just got in an hour ago from nightshift! Sleep's my *only* comfort in this miserable world!”

The men stop their movements and gawk at me. They've finally got something exciting in their job to take notice of—an overweight, balding man talking to their boss, dressed in a white bathrobe and bright yellow slippers. I study their faces—the snickers playing at their lips suggest they're in on a joke I don't know about. I block them out, not in the mood. “Bryan” avoids looking at me, his mouth hinting a smirk, his eyes glancing at his wretched clipboard.

Finally, he responds. “Sorry about that, sir. Early bird and all that.” He points at the back of the truck. “I've got a lot to do today, and not a lot of time.”

I suck in a gulp of air and squeeze my eyes shut, my patience wearing thin. “Look Bryan... Can you *please* take the guys for breakfast for a couple hours?”

All the guys roar their approval at my suggestion.

He locks eyes with me. “Sorry sir. I can't afford to do that. Besides, the owner made the request we start early so we can finish early.”

I grind my teeth. “*Where* is the homeowner so I can sort him out?”

The foreman's voice betrays impatience. “I can't divulge that information. But if you want to talk to him, he should be here about noon.”

A cramp rummages around my right foot's toes. “Well, can you *please* get your men to minimize their noise? It's not even eight—”

“You've already said that. I'll do my best...”

A metallic *crash* muffles his words, again jolting me out of my skin. A metal trolley has tumbled over backwards scraping down the truck's wooden ramp.

Bryan turns to bemoan the worker before stopping himself with a sigh of resignation. He faces me. “You are—?”

“Bruno, Frank Bruno.” He offers his hand. I hesitate but finally grasp it. “I’ll be back to talk to the owner later, then! This is outrageous!” With a huff, I march back to my house. Entering, I climb halfway up my stairway when I see it—baby-blue toilet paper, the length of my forearm, clinging to the bottom of my slippers. I groan aloud. It had trailed behind me from and to my house. No wonder those guys had been holding back laughter.

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*Delante Thomas, 29 Summit Avenue*

*10:55 a.m.*

It’s cold to the touch and weighty, fitting perfect in my hand. Sitting on the edge of my bed, I point the sleek-black 9mm Beretta at my bedroom window toward the huge, blue moving truck parked across the street. Busy men wheel boxes and furniture pieces into the old house. Adrenaline rushes through me—the gun an extension of my will. I feel the right side of my lip curl up at the thought that I have the power to end someone’s life right now. People respond differently when they know I have this in my hand. My boss, Snake Eyes, aka Urkel Johnson pressed it into my hands last night. (I’d use a nickname too if I had a name like that!) He seems happy with what I’ve been doing for him the past months but now expects more from me. Soon, I’ll escape this dump and this little city where nothing ever happens.

I wait to see if I can see the new neighbor. *What kind of neighbor you gonna be? Don’t be like Bruno, that stuck up moron! Will you be interested in what I sell? I lose patience. I’ll see you when I see you!*

I tuck the gun under my pillow. I lean forward, gripping my thumping head in my hands, wishing I’d gone easier on the drinking at last night’s party. I catch my reflection in the mirror—my face drawn inward and my cheekbones protruding. My brown skin’s pale gray in the room’s dim light. A dull glint reflects off my shiny scalp and the gold piercing in my right ear.

The odor of cigarette smoke, spilled beer, and old pizza lingers. My life is like the ashtray on the dresser—full of ash and burnt, twisted stubs. Piled up pizza boxes and empty beer and liquor

bottles litter the rest of the dresser. I've lived in this house and in this state for as long as I can remember. My life's treading water, I know, but soon I'll get what's owed to me.

The bed shudders and shakes as my partner shoots up behind me. I turn to see her clutch her head with both hands, her black locs skirting her shoulders. She groans as if in pain. "Delante, get me water and something for my headache."

With a sigh, I go to the kitchen, grab a glass and fill it with tepid tap water. I return to the bedroom, giving her the glass along with two tablets. She pops them into her mouth, takes a sip, then gives me the evil eye. Whenever *that* look is given, it means all peace and quiet's out the window.

I give her the look back. "What?"

"You know exactly what!"

"*What?*" I stare at her, not in the mood for guessing games.

"Did you forget what I told you last night, not to let me drink more than a couple drinks?"

"Alyssia, you're grown up. Did I force you to get plastered?"

"I'm tryin' to get my life together, Delante. Does that matter to you?"

I swear under my breath, wishing she'd shut up. "I got my own life to worry about."

"Um, what kind of answer's that?"

"It's truth." I gesture to the door. "And there's the door if you don't like it!" The headache intensifies, the pain thumping against the front of my skull.

Without a word, she jumps up, pulls on her track pants, and throws on her brown leather jacket. Storming to the door, she flings it open, the handle smashing against the plasterboard behind it.

"What the—" I jump up to look at the caved in plasterboard.

Without looking at me, she collects Michael, her ten-year-old, asleep on the sofa. The poor kid rises, his eyes half-shut as he's forced into a walking state. Then, they're out the door and gone.

Disgusted, I slam the door shut and plop down on the edge of the bed. I don't feel any loss that she's left.

I lean forward flipping open one of the pizza boxes. I pull away a slice from a half-eaten pizza and chomp down; it's cold and dry but tasty. "Brunch," I say to myself noting the time on the wall clock—11:03 a.m.

I'm on my second bite, almost half through the slice, when my cellphone rings. "Yeah?"

"Can we meet at two?" a familiar man's voice pleads. *The guy on the same street as me, becoming a regular lately.*

"Sure, no problem. Will hook you up..."

"I'm just a tad short. Can I get a discount? I'll make up the difference next time."

I roll my eyes. "What am I, Wal-Mart? Don't even ask me! We all got bills."

"H-How much, then?"

"The usual."

"But I'm short."

"Do you want my services or not?" I hate time wasters. I'm about to end the call when he speaks.

"Two o' clock at our spot?"

"See you!" I end the call, then groan when I realize I have less than three hours to sleep. My brain's pressing against my skull. I grab the headache tablets but see I've given the last two to Alyssia.

I shout profanities at the ceiling and collapse onto my bed, burying my throbbing head in pillows. I hope sleep will numb the pain.

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*Ms. Cahva Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue*

*11:45 a.m.*

My cellphone flashlight on, I go to my hands and knees, not as nimble as I used to be, searching for the missing puzzle piece. No sign of it, I groan in frustration, straightening up and scanning the scene. Two women in early 20<sup>th</sup> century ice-skate on an ice-covered lake, intermittent people to their rear and along the sides against a soft snow backdrop. *Days of pleasure ruined by a thousand-piece-puzzle-minus-one—that of the upper torso of the woman wearing the long burgundy dress!*

A draining dissatisfaction coils in me at the incomplete scene. I bend over and scan the shiny, planked floor again hoping to notice it. “You must be here somewhere!” No luck, I pick up my chair and shift it from the table before sitting down, my eyes drawn to the incomplete scene.

I draw in a deep breath before deciding to look for the piece later. I get up and go to my adjacent living room and slump down in my armchair, turning on my television with my remote. *Family Feud* appears on the screen. I picture what it’d be like if it were my family on the show. I have a son and two daughters—each of them off making their careers and families. It’s been so long since I heard children running around the house or had more than myself at the kitchen table. Oh, I don't blame them. It’s not something to fight against. I stopped working last year as my grown children insist on taking care of me—probably the result of a bit of guilt they feel about living on the other side of the world. Now, I sit at my dining table working jigsaw puzzles, painting at my easel, reading books, or going for a walk at the local park. Once a year, the family visits all the way from Asia—usually around Christmas. Last winter, though, was the first without my family—their busy careers not allowing them to journey so far from home.

I scan the faces of my children and grandchildren mounted on my living room wall. The youngest, my son Tyo, is just months away from completing his Doctorate in Mathematics while teaching at a fabulous university. My two daughters are both married to successful men in their prospective areas of expertise. One husband is an engineer at a prestigious firm while the other’s a lawyer for one of the biggest entertainment conglomerates of Southeast Asia. My eyes fix on Henry’s portrait, my husband’s handsome face. Twenty years is a long time to be without my soulmate. He died much too young! And remarriage never entered my mind. But I do miss sharing things with a significant other.

I keep my curtains drawn, trapping the darkness—but also keeping the room cooler versus the July scorch. Repeated noises and voices from outside, though, drew my attention from early this morning. Diagonal from me across the street sits a mammoth blue moving truck. A trail of workers, like ants, move household furniture and boxes into the recently renovated house after decades of neglect. *But why should I care? Nothing worthwhile can happen just from new neighbors moving across the street from me.*

I watch the gameshow just as a third strike blares, causing a flurry of activity, the audience going wild. This is the height of my existence—watching others being together sharing laughter.



Moments later, despite my growing agitation, my eyes drift back toward the window. But I ignore my curiosity. The mounted coo-coo clock comes to life, the bright-yellow canary popping out repeatedly, *coo-cooing* twelve noon.

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*Jarrett Blackman, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*12:50 p.m.*

There I am, face down to the ground, sobbing like a baby. Even as so much erupted out of me, I replay the events of the day—and the last three days. Incredible fails to describe it.

I'd pictured the name on the manifest in my mind's eye all weekend—*Jesus Ben Joseph, of Nazareth*.

It had to be a prank or a celebrity taking that name to stay anonymous. But why would any celebrity choose a run-down two-story house on 30 Summit Avenue? Just yesterday, Friday, we'd moved a large storage unit's goods into a moving truck in preparation for this morning. From when I went home and even overnight, I couldn't get that name out of my mind. Probably a company prank concocted by Bryan to make sure I came in to work.

Getting to work has become something of a challenge for me, especially weekend work—probably due to my buddies, Jack, Wisk, or Ol' Vod—not to mention some other bad habits that Nancy Reagan, if she were alive today, wouldn't like to hear about. Everyone in town knows about me. I hear whispers in the grocery stores. I catch the sharp stares from mothers pushing their strollers, and the way they pull their children closer to their sides as if I'm contagious or something.

I do consider myself fortunate; my co-workers keep quiet about what they see, hear, and occasionally take a whiff from me—especially from about mid-day on Fridays when I slip out to get my first nip. By 3 o' clock, I'm usually slurring and smelling of drink, though I try my best to keep it under wraps. When this happens, the crew keep me in the back of the truck handing them items so clients don't find out and file a complaint.

Bryan knows about my habits but finding people to lug an entire household of goods into and out of properties on pittance pay is nigh impossible. And I suppose he feels sorry for me. I hear

his mother struggled with a similar problem years before. Oh, but now we don't call it a problem; it's a disease. But in my mind, it's something of a problem-solver—a means to forget and escape—to numb the soul.

So, there I am getting out of the moving truck at a godless hour only to find the client not even there! Bryan hadn't told me the real estate agent, Mitch, a young guy I've run into now and then, would meet to give him the house key. Envy fills me at seeing the young man in a suit and tie; he looks to make way too much money for his age. This surprise made me regret coming—especially on a blistering-hot Saturday morning.

I stood in front of Bryan, scrunched up my face, and reached down clutching my right leg. “My knee. I think I need to go—”

Without even looking me in the eye, he waved me off. “Get to work, Jarrett!”

That put me in an even lousier mood. My right knee *did* hurt. Maybe not to the point that I needed to go home, but still...

Then, when he, that is “Jesus,” showed up, I thought I was seeing things. All of us thought we were seeing things. It'd been enough to make us slow down or stop completely what we were doing. I'm not joking. I thought he'd stepped out from a Hollywood Biblical epic. From the top of his head past his wide shoulders draped a white robe. When I got close enough, I noticed the intricate weave of the cloth—something not seen except on expensive Italian sofas. I know, 'coz I've carried enough of them! He wore ivory-white sandals on his feet.

As soon as he showed up, I forgot about the ache in my right knee from too many stairways, too many sofas and sideboards and boxes packed with books. I also forgot about my best friends Jack and Wisk. I forgot what day it was, or the time when I'd finally get to go home. All those things fell away around this man. I don't know what it was, but there was something about him. Mysterious. Interesting. Outwardly, he looked out of place. But in the first minute of being next to him, I started to believe. But not before an inner scream shouted, *Fraud! Scam! Can't be real!*

When he arrived, it had been after four hours of demanding work—the moving truck half empty. We were eyeing our watches waiting for 12:30 p.m. when we'd get the all-clear to break for lunch. When he showed up an hour early, however, he came with a silver tray full of overstuffed sandwiches, cold soft drinks, lemonade, coffee, and fresh fruit—a nice touch—something we don't usually get from customers. Foreman Bryan wanted to keep the guys

working but Jesus took him aside and convinced him to let us take our break early. So, we began lunch at 11:45 a.m.

As we took sandwiches from the silver tray, this Jesus character talked to us—really showing interest in us. Within the first few minutes of our being together, he seemed to understand us in our job, and how hard it can be. He assured us cold drinks would be kept on hand throughout the day.

Now aside from the uncommon way he looked out for us, he really got my attention. But also suspicious. I'd always seen the Guy in the Sky as an old prune, over-the-top angry, and only seeing us with all our faults. So, I decided to peel the onion, so to speak.

I began with his clothing choice. Call me shameful, call me rude, but I had to ask him about that. "What's with your clothes?"

The others' eyes shot to me. Hey, I was asking what everyone was thinking. They looked on, the sudden urge to burst out laughing almost too much to keep under wraps. Jesus' bearded face showed no offense. I thought he was going to admit that this was all a big prank, or that he was an actor or weird Messiah-wannabe—an impersonator of Jesus like those guys who impersonate that other king, Elvis.

His face turned all-too serious, which frightened me. "This *is* my attire, Jarrett. I *am* Jesus." There was no hint of him pranking us. He scanned Bryan and the others before his eyes fixed on me.

When he'd said those words, "I am Jesus," something plowed through me. My mouth went dry. Maybe I was missing my little buddies too much. Maybe it was due to his self-belief, or the quiet authority by which he spoke. There was no messing with this man's conviction. He believed. And maybe we could've stopped there and gone about our business. But that wasn't good enough for me. I wasn't in the mood to believe.

After a second of still awkwardness, I roared with laughter, not hiding my mockery. I can't stand religious nuts. Now, anyone on the receiving end of my laughter might've been offended, but not this man. He remained pleasant, composed, nothing whatsoever changed on his face.

Bryan threw me a look of warning, which I ignored. Oh, I don't blame him. For him, this "Jesus," crackpot or deluded, was still a paying customer.

Call me ruthless, but I continued. "Okay, tell me this: why would the Big J.C. move into a decrepit house in a small city in the middle of Nowhere, USA?"

“How else would he find *you*?”

“Me? Why do I need to be found?” I scoffed, shifting where I stood.

“So I can save you.” The corners of his mouth curled up in a friendly grin even as his eyes bore into me.

Awkwardly, I shot the guys standing around a look, a grin planted on my face. “Glad someone's out looking for me!” But I turn away, sickened by the man's words.

He doesn't back down at all. “You'll see, Mr. Jarrett Blackman. I am here to make a difference on Summit Avenue, and beyond.”

“Is that so?” I didn't look at him as a flash of anger shot through me. I forgot my hunger and employee status. Disgust rose out of me like infected bile. I clenched my tattooed fist, the half-eaten sandwich in my hand mushing into indistinguishable pulp. I threw a hardened stare at the man, ready to walk off the job.

He nodded to me with a pleasant grin as if daring me to accept his offer. His determined eyes stayed fixed on me. It scared the hell out of me. Yet, despite the anger and disgust I displayed, his facial expression remained unoffended.

I threw down the sandwich at the feet of Jesus. Wanting to help people is noble—but that hardly made someone God's only begotten Son. My revulsion rummaged within me not allowing me to back down. I heard Bryan call out to me and reach to pull me away, but I brushed him off as if cemented to the ground. I raised the plastic bottle in front of this “Jesus.” “If you're the Big J.C., turn this bottle of water to wine.”

Immediately, the other guys laughed which released the tension in the air.

He gave a carefree grin, unaffected by my challenge. “A magic trick is the last thing you need. I once changed water to wine. But now I've moved to changing much bigger and better things.”

“Is that right? And what will you change this time?”

“I will change *you*.”

And it began with one step followed by one touch from him. His hand thudded against my chest. He spoke, almost in a whisper. “You'll be the first to experience what I've come to do!”

When he said this, when I felt the pressure and strange heat from his hand probe my heart, I wanted to run away from him, to escape.

“How?” I pleaded while everyone stood there. Lunch came to a standstill. It was as if I was alone—as if it was him and I at the top of a mountain sharing a panoramic view of the ten-car pile-up that was my life. It was me allowed to unpack all my life—or what I considered my pathetic excuse for existence. I saw myself of less significance than a slug on a sunlit sidewalk being slowly cooked. I could’ve sworn tears moistened his eyes.

He spoke. “I’m here *for you*.”

I swallowed a lump. I looked down even as my whole body shook and heaved. I glanced down at his hand. Scars grooved into his wrists and the tops of his feet. I fought to stop it...but it all rose out of me—propelled by an unknown pressure deep within. I felt worn out—yet strangely relieved, at ease, and, in some way, safe. I couldn’t help it—I slipped to my knees and then bowed down with my forehead slamming against the browned grass, my balled-up sandwich beside my face. Finally, I looked up and searched his face. “W-What’s happening to me?”

He threw me a smile of understanding. “I will give you tools to help you overcome. You will no longer walk a life full of dead ends. The atrophy of the enemy in you begins to end today! I wish to give you a heart transplant, Jarrett.”

At that, the sobs, perhaps from a lifetime, poured out of me inches from his feet.

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*Tahmid Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue  
12:15 p.m.*

I’m glad to be inside my air-conditioned home on this blistering July afternoon. Weeks of unrelenting, oppressive heat has made my shifts at work extra hard and sapped my strength. On top of that, my wife’s eight months pregnant, and my in-laws will be arriving next Friday to stay until our son is born next month, and to help us take care of our two young sons.

Within the hour, I’ll prepare for my time of afternoon prayer. I look out my living room window and notice nonstop movements of blue-clad men carrying items from the *Sterling Moving Company’s* behemoth blue truck. And then I see a man standing there seemingly out of place. He’s not dressed as a westerner but in garb not seen in these parts—a white robe running

head to sandaled feet. He has medium-length hair and a dark beard. He's talking to one of the workers. I squint at what looks like a pitcher of lemonade and a pot of coffee on the silver tray he holds.

*Curious scene! Great! A strange hippie born out of time moving into the house across from me.*

My wife and children have gone to the local park. I look at my watch and count the hours I can rest before heading to work. It'll be a busy night being a Saturday. If I get home by two in the morning, I'll be pleasantly surprised. As the evening manager, I complete my responsibilities, often stressful, each evening with thanks to Allah. I've only been there two years but look forward to the day when I'll launch my own restaurant. Every extra penny goes toward that eventuality.

I move away from the window to get a glass of ice water. I think to look at my online investment portfolio before finding myself unwittingly returning to the front living room window where I peek again at the strange man in the strange garb. *Perhaps it's a gag or he's dressed for a costume party?*

He steps away from the group of huddled men, their glasses filled with iced lemonade or mugs filled with coffee. Suddenly, he faces my direction. Before I can pull away from the window, he thrusts one arm upward and waves at me.

*He saw me? How?* I pull back as if bitten by a snake, though I also feel silly. This is *my* window. I am the man of the house—I can look out my window as I please!

I dare to look again with renewed courage. He's still there, holding the tray. He motions it toward me as if offering. I pull away again, feeling foolish with equal parts anger. And then, to my chagrin, I look a third time. But he's no longer in the same place. Instead, he's stepping onto the road headed toward my front door! *What?*

Within seconds, the doorbell chimes. I pace within my living room, visibly disturbed by this strange action by this strange man in the strange garb now standing at my front door.

The doorbell comes a second time. I stop to check myself in my hallway mirror. I rake my fingers down through my medium black beard and across my straight black hair unsure why it's so important how I look. Well, I am a respectable man. I choose to be presentable to any visitor—no matter who they are or how strange they may be.

The doorbell sounds a third time. *Persistent, I'll say that for him!* I stand in front of the door, straighten my t-shirt before peering through the peep hole. A hand waves at me backed by a warm smile planted on his bearded, open face. A square silver tray is in his hands. *How'd he know I was looking at him?*

"Hello!" His muffled voice sounds through my door. "Sweltering day, isn't it?"

I open the door half a foot. "Yes, it is," I say in an even tone. "How can I help you?"

"I thought you might like a glass of chilled lemonade on a day like today." He lifts the silver tray toward me. "If you would provide a glass? I'm afraid the moving men took all the glasses and cups."

I'm about to reject his offer, but there's something about him, something I can't quite wrap my head around. There's an altogether pleasant quality about him—something I've rarely seen in people. There's no hint of stress, worry, or scandal on his face—and he's at ease and normal despite my first impression. Yes, he wears the strange white robe. I find myself more focused on his voice, his manner, and the steady look in his eyes.

"Sure," I offer, not quite believing my own words. "Come in." And there he is stepping into my foyer—my head having a double take that he's now *inside* my home.

I direct him toward my kitchen straight ahead and point him toward the island counter, three barstools against it. "Have a seat and be at rest."

With another smile, he nods, placing the tray on the island. Then, he extends a hand to me. I take hold of his hand just as he says, "I'm your new neighbor, Jesus."

I'm taken aback. "*Je*-sus, eh?" I can't hide the scrutiny in my voice.

At my reaction, a big grin spreads across his face as if a magician who's been challenged. "And *you* are Mr. Tahmid Akhand."

"How did you—"

"I have the gift to know such things."

"Is that right?" I'm growing increasingly curious, and concerned, about this man. "And you are Jesus?"

He nods.

I don't see any hint that he's joking. "Your surname?"

"Ben Yosef of the village Nazareth, in the local vernacular, son of Joseph."

“A bit of a coincidence—your name and your father’s name mirrored in the Bible? And here today you seem to be dressed like a first century Jew.”

“That would be because I am *him*.”

I balk and lean forward to catch his reply. “Who?”

“The historical Jesus recorded in the New Testament.”

It’s then I realize I have a nutcase in front of me, *in* my house. “Thank you for the offer of the drink, sir.” I avoid looking the man in the eyes and gesture toward the front door, hoping to lead him out of my house as quickly as possible. “This conversation needs to end now.”

“Tahmid Akhand, born in Khulna, Bangladesh. Your family migrated to this land thirty years ago. You were born three years later. You have five brothers and two sisters, all younger than you. Your wife, Tahira, soon to give birth, works at the Littlehampton Elementary School where your boys, Mazhar, 5, and Nadir, 8, attend.”

At the mention of my sons’ names, I am troubled. I face the stranger, challenge in my voice. “How do you know about my family? *What* is going on here?”

He steps to me and gently takes the two empty glasses from me. He returns to the island counter where he pours us both lemonade before offering the glass back to me. I find myself staring at the ice cubes at the top of the glass. When I hesitate, he lifts it nearer to me. The fragrant, tangy, lemony scent fills my nose and throat.

“Please, have a glass. Lemonade has a way of refreshing the body and the mind!”

I’m tempted to smack the glass out of his hands. Instead, I take the wet glass, cold to the touch. I hesitate before raising the glass to my lips and taking a sip, the chilled, tangy drink slipping down my throat. The stranger drinks from his glass. I’m without words. However, my repressed fury and confusion overflow like an angry river. I’m about to blurt out my feelings when he speaks first.

“Ask anything of me. I expect healthy skepticism to discover truth.”

I hesitate to continue in this conversation. But to prove him a nutcase and satisfy my curiosity, I go on. I will then demand he leave my home. I clear my throat. “If you know so much about me, what is my greatest desire?”

“You desire to know only truth, and to have a living relationship with God. Yet despite your religious actions, you remain empty.”



His words strike my heart. I find myself fighting back tears. And despite all the pleasantries of this man, fury surfaces—this man having trespassed onto something sacred and private. A burning heat ignites behind my eyes, and my throat tightens. I'm about to order him to leave. My words come out, but not what I expected. "And what else do you see about me?"

"You loved your father, but you struggled to live under his strict standards. Though you did your absolute best to please him, he broke your spirit many times with harsh beatings." His face is somber, but then brightens, his voice lifting. "You, on the other hand, treat your children with a special love and exceptional care—an example observed and praised by my Father."

I give a subtle nod, and again fight back tears. I lower my gaze, and try to figure out what's happening to me. "I don't want them to experience the pain and heartache I experienced."

"Here Tahmid, have some more lemonade." He lifts and tilts the glass pitcher toward me.

I draw back at first, before his eyes catch mine and I concede, offering my glass, which he tops up. I change the subject. I reason that this could be a charlatan whose done his research about me to prey on me and my family. Afterall, any true Muslim seeks truth and seeks the acceptance of Allah. And one could say that most Asian parents are strict and sometimes distant due to traditional formality.

"What do you do for a living?" I avoid speaking out his supposed name. Somehow, I'd feel like a fool to do so.

He takes a seat on the barstool. He appears to pause, digesting my question. "I am here to do...construction."

For a second, I take him perhaps too literally. He is a big man, and I see the outline of solid biceps beneath his robe. "Construction?"

"I specialize in demolishing and rebuilding."

"How long will you be here?" I'm bemused by him, but my patience is at its limit.

"This project will last until the foundation is completed, Tahmid. Then my workers will continue the work. It will be a worthwhile project!"

I place my glass back on the man's tray. "Have you met any of our other neighbors, yet?"

"No, you are the first. And I am excited at what will soon happen here on Summit Avenue!"

"Oh really? And what will happen?"

"Wait and see. I know this is all so abrupt and strange to you. I'm not expecting you to believe in me yet."

“Look, you may be sincere to believe you are the Jesus of the Bible. And I may look like a fool for standing here discussing such things with you. But I assure you I am not a fool, or naïve.”

Jesus looks down at his glass, sadness clouding his face. “I knew you when you was a seven-year-old child. I saw you at the edge of the river, helpless, when your treasured puppy fell into the water and was swept away. But I didn't just *see* you, Tahmid. I was *with* you. I know this loss affected you deeply.”

For the second time in minutes, his words smash against me—landing heavy inside me. In shock, I step backwards until my back presses against the refrigerator, causing magnets to fall and slap against the white-marbled floor. Embarrassed and without looking at the man, I lower myself to pick up the magnets while hiding the impact of his words.

He jumps up and before I can stop him, he's lowered himself too, retrieving magnets.

“I have *my* faith.” I avoid his eyes. “It is enough.”

He hands me pieces which I gently take from him. I reach for one more when his hand rests on my shoulder. He speaks, almost in a whisper. “I *am* Truth, Tahmid.” He continues, his voice becoming more pronounced. “And I *am* the Door to the Eternal Good Father.”

I manage to stand to my feet, replace the undamaged, souvenir magnets on the fridge. The Maine magnet, in the shape of the state, though, is broken in three pieces in my hand. Tahira will not be happy as she bought this on our recent family trip there a year ago. I look from the magnet in my hand to the still-lowered man, his eyes fixed on me. With patience, he traces the white tiles with a forefinger.

I respond from the core of my heart. “I don't know what to think or believe about any of this!”

Jesus smiles. “Construction often involves demolishing, which can be painful. It results in chaos, disruption, and fear. And the darkness is never pleased.”

“If you want a worthwhile construction project, go to the guy at 29!”

“You speak of Delante who is in a place that no man should envy. But,” and he lingers on that word, “one cannot measure one's emptiness versus another's. They are equally devastating.”

I stab the air with my finger, pointing to the wall with my family's portraits. “Do I *look* empty? I have a wonderful family and life—I am *not* empty. And I don't *need* to be saved, Jesus.” I regret using that name.

He glances at the photos before standing. His penetrating, dark eyes seem to look through me. “Even the most ornate mansion, without a solid, proper foundation, will collapse into ruin!”

“Thank you for your concern, but I've got things to do the rest of today. Thank you for the lemonade.”

I step to the doorway of the kitchen and await him to follow. Finally, he steps past me into the foyer, then stops, facing me. Before he can say anything, I reach and yank the front door open, remaining resolute but respectful. A barrage of scorching heat fills the foyer. The man, however, isn't fazed whatsoever. He just stands there for all of three seconds, his eyes fastened on me—not of anger or hurt—but with a look of concern. I wonder why he's stopped.

His hand grasps mine and squeezes for a long second, and he flashes a smile. “Good day, Tahmid!” He steps out into the bright sunshine. He walks across the street, stopping to talk to a worker. I want to close the door, but I cannot. And then I realize I *must* shut it to properly end this conversation. I slam the door.

My phone rings drawing me out of the replay of the last few minutes. I answer it and hear my wife's voice. I'm concerned something might be wrong. “Everything all right?”

Nothing amiss, she tells me about Mazhar, my youngest, falling and scraping his hands on the basketball court. I make sure not to mention my encounter with that man.

But it's then that I notice the Maine magnet in my hand—no longer broken. It had clearly been three pieces before that man gripped my hand.

“Tahmid?”

“Yes?”

“Did you hear what I just said?”

“Hm, so sorry, honey. Can you repeat?”

“Are you all right, Tahmid?”

I feign all is well. I end our call moments later. My mind revisits the last thirty minutes. I step to the front window and find myself searching for my new neighbor.

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*Toby Garrells, 33 Summit Avenue*

*1:03 p.m.*

I can't help it but glance at my watch—just after 1 p.m. It's been eight minutes since I started praying which feels like one hour. I turn my attention back to the ceiling and feel guilty for having looked at my watch. As a Christ follower, I'm supposed to enjoy prayer, not exercise it like a begrudging chore.

I go back to talking to the Lord. "I pray for Jennifer, my friend at school under stress lately. She's retaking...why am I telling you this? You know these things. Anyway, I lift her up and ask You to help her adjust where needed, to find courage, and the ability to learn the subject. And, most importantly, that she'd find her peace in You."

"And now I pray for those on my street—the people I see all the time. But I forget their names." Guilt lifts its ugly head within me again. "Sorry, Lord. I should probably know their names if I really care about their eternal destiny."

I describe each one and lift them up before him. I pray for them to know His peace and find salvation through relationship with Jesus. Then, I pray for my own heart to be a heart more like His, to replicate His life in the world around me, beginning with my neighbors.

"Show me, Lord. How will I reach them? How can I get this done? How should I start? Who should I target first? Is *targeting* even a good idea?" I let out a heavy sigh, frustrated. A glance at my watch. Just forty-five minutes to go to meet my prayer-quota. Even as I think that, a wave of drowsiness tugs at me. I glance at my bed, drawn to collapse on it and take a power nap before my work shift in a few hours. To fight this sleep demon, I stand up and pace my living room.

Seconds later, I kneel and recommit to pray. However, just as I speak the third sentence, another bout of heavy eyelids assaults me. I groan and punch the carpet even as I leap up to pace again.

Every now and then I steal a glance out the window. And then I see the moving truck. It isn't my imagination; across the street, diagonal from my place, stands a man dressed like Jesus, holding a tray with a heap of sandwiches and drinks. Half a dozen men, dressed in moving uniforms, stand around him.

*This must be someone's idea of a joke? Someone dressed as Jesus?* I step to my window to get a better look. He's quite tall, dressed in a long, white robe, with a kind face and dark beard, and looks to be in his 30s. He's quick to smile and laugh with the men standing next to him.

*So strange.* The men are talking to him as if nothing's out of the ordinary. Perhaps the hospitality has made them forget the guy's costume? I decide to go investigate for myself.

I run downstairs, slip on my flip flops before stepping outside which is oven-like hot. Just as the door slams behind me, dread shoots through me. *My keys!*

I picture them next to my wallet on my bedroom desk! I scramble around the house to see if I've left the back door open or a window. But my house is sealed up due to the roaring air conditioning.

I pull out my cellphone, glad I didn't also leave that in my room, and text my older brother who shares the house with me.

*"Mitch, what time you home from work? I'm locked out of house."*

I lean against the door. I have a few hours before I'll need to panic. But the July heat is relentless, even standing here in my porch shade. Almost at once, Mitch, likely sitting in his lush chair in his real estate office, replies.

*"I'm showing a house at 3 o' clock. Figure it out on your own!"*

Not knowing what else to do, I saunter over to the moving truck. The one who looks like Jesus still stands there. His robe is intricately woven and the brightest white I've ever seen. An off-white head covering rests upon wide shoulders.

As I near, he lifts the silver tray toward me. "Hungry, Toby?"

Caught off guard by his incredible warmth first, and the use of my name, second, I'm perplexed. Yet, I also feel completely at ease. "Thank you." I take a sandwich, the cold-cut meats piled high, topped with lettuce and tomato.

He scans into the distance, then returns his gaze to me. "We'll be neighbors as of today, Toby."

I nod, feigning gladness. But I can't hold back my curiosity any longer. "Mind if I ask how you know my name? We've just met. And what's with your dress style?"

He throws his head back and laughs. "This is what I wear. Kind of fits this July heat, don't you think?"

Two guys standing nearby, finishing their glasses of lemonade, scoot off to continue their work. “Thank you, Jesus,” one of them shouts over his shoulder.

I stare at the men to see if he’s joking or has a smirk on his face at calling him Jesus. He doesn’t.

“And yes, I really am Jesus.”

“What?” My mind’s jumbled with confusion.

“I saw you earlier trying desperately to pray, and I heard your concern for Jennifer.”

“You saw me? You *heard* me?”

“Yes, a lot of perspiration and effort you put toward praying with equal parts self-punishment.”

I stop chewing on my sandwich. It falls out of my hand to the ankle-high, browned grass.

“Why do you—” Jesus begins.

But I can’t help it. I fall to my face before him even as the rumble of a trolley rolls off the truck ramp two feet away.

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*Tahmid Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue*

*1:45 p.m.*

I hadn’t been able to do much after my encounter with the Jesus-figure in my kitchen. I look out the window just in time as a young man, the second today, collapses before the man’s feet as if offering prayer or worship.

“What is happening?” I am astonished as much as I am troubled. *This is all absurd!*

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*Toby Garrells, at Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*1:45 p.m.*

I remain with my face to the ground, the browned, stiff grass scratching my chin. An explosion of emotion wells up. I open my eyes to see if the sandaled feet in front of me have vanished. Or if I've fallen asleep in my livingroom.

With no warning, strong hands grasp onto my upper left arm and pull me to my feet.

"Thank you, Toby." He reaches down brushing off grass debris clinging to my knees. He lifts the tray to me insisting I take another sandwich.

I reach for one, giving a wavering smile as I do. "Thank you..." I'm struggling to understand what's now happening to me. Is this real or not. "Speaking of prayer. Can you possibly help me with an urgent need?"

"You need help getting back inside your house?"

"Yes." I find myself embracing this incredible scenario. What else could explain this? "Lord, I'll just cancel work. I can't possibly go in knowing you're here—living two minutes' walk across the street from me!"

Jesus sets down the tray of sandwiches on the truck ramp before placing his arm around my shoulder as we head off toward my house. He gestures behind him. "You see my house there?"

"Yes, Lord." I glance and see the old farmhouse, now restored, men taking items inside.

"I promise I'll be there when you finish your shift. And you can always talk to me at any point while at work. I assure you I will hear you."

I'm speechless as we walk. *Is this an incredible dream?*

Jesus squeezes my shoulder gently. "Even if this is a dream, I often do speak through dreams. But no, this is not that."

I go to drop to my knees to worship again. With a half-chuckle, Jesus catches me, nearly dragging me toward my house.

"I know your heart, son. And I receive your worship. I know this is an awe-inspiring moment for you."

I nod, feeling faint. "Yes, Lord. To think you'll be living across the street *from me*..."

Jesus quips another laugh. "I'm here to complete a task. Perhaps you can assist me."

"Yes. Whatever I can do to help you, I'm all for it."

We reach my front door. I pull open the screen door and go to turn the knob to show it's locked when it just slips open without me touching it. "Thank You, Lord!" The overpowering urge to kneel comes again, but he catches and steadies me.

“I love to unlock doors, Toby.”

“Want to come in for a bit?” I expect him to say no, that he’s too busy.

“Sure, Toby. I’m glad to visit with you.”

“I thought you were in Heaven at the Father’s right hand.”

“Yes, I keep that position regardless of my physical location. I am here on a mission that will not last long.”

“I’ve been praying for my neighbors, but not enough, to be honest.”

“May I give you advice about how you pray?”

“Yes, please.”

“It’s not the number of words, but the quality of words. It’s not important if you hold a bodily posture toward me as long as your heart is postured toward me. It’s okay not to say anything at all—just for us to spend time together. My Spirit is always ready to help you, too, especially if you find yourself struggling. Don’t try to do it in your own strength.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Lord.” We sit down on the living room sofa. “I can’t believe you’re here in my living room.”

“Anytime I am honored and welcomed, my Spirit will be present.”

“May I?” I point my phone toward Jesus to take a picture.

“Yes, why not?”

I sit beside him and take a picture of the two of us. We both smile, his right arm draped across my shoulders.

I look at the picture and see Jesus—but a flash of light surrounds his face. I can just barely see his smile and eyes beneath the light. “I suppose you getting a driver’s license might be a challenge.”

He laughs good-naturedly. “Maybe.”

“Lord, how long will you be here?”

“Until the Father determines.”

“Cold drink?”

“Sure, Toby. Water sounds great.”

I bring him a glass of ice water. He takes it and gulps it down. As he finishes, he lets out a breath in delight, his eyes closed. “That really hit the spot on a sweltering day like today!”



I stand and offer to take the glass from the Lord. When he gives it to me, I take it to the fireplace mantle and set it in place—determined never to use it again. “Forever, this will be the Jesus glass.”

Jesus erupts in hearty laughter. Hearing him laugh, I realize it’s been so long since laughter was heard in our home. I’m caught up in laughter, too, not sure why it’s so funny.

“My older brother Mitch will be disappointed he’s not here to meet you.”

“I will meet him in time.”

Jesus seems happy to be here, and he's interested in me. “So, you work at a dry cleaner business. Are you praying and blessing those you interact with at your work?”

“Don't you already know the answers, Lord?”

“What is most important is our fellowship and bonding, Toby.”

“Well, I try to represent you well to people around me. I want your Kingdom to come in people's lives—even though I don't have any remarkable results.”

Jesus stands to his feet and faces me. With a solemn but loving grin, he places his hands on the crown of my head and blesses me. Without warning, I’m caught in the delight of a cool, spring shower.

I open my eyes disoriented, but strangely filled with joy. Have I just dreamed about being with Jesus? I dash to the window; he’s still there talking to the moving guys. My watch shows 2:45 p.m., which means I’ve got just enough time to shower, change into my uniform, and ride my bike to work. I see the Jesus glass still there on our living room mantle and check my phone to see the blazing form of Jesus beside me.

I text my brother.

*“Mitch, you’ll never in a million years guess who visited our house earlier!”*

He texts back seconds later.

*“About to meet client! Who would want to visit you?”*

I think to tell him, but I figure he’ll only believe when he meets him too. I text him back.

*“You’ll see. Tell you more when you get home!”*

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*Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue*

*2:35 p.m.*

I stare at the weathered, long envelope on my bedside cabinet with my name typed on it, *Mr. Frank Bruno*, and the name of my former employer on the top left corner. Attack Cat, resting at the end of my bed without a care in the world, stares at me with his blue eyes. I’d received the letter three months before, but the potency of its message had not regressed in all that time. My job of nearly 30 years a goner—me left with only uncertainty and a hard truth: I would likely join those homeless that I’d always walked by with contempt in our city.

My last evening of work, last night, had been surreal. Coming home on the city bus early this morning, I’d found myself noticing people, envying their carefree talk and occasional laughter. I watched without seeing. I tried to look normal, but nothing could remove the dread and emptiness gnawing at my insides.

I’d been set to go out and give my new neighbor an earful at noon. But when I awakened early afternoon, I just laid there, staring at the ceiling, my thoughts in a jumble. And now, a couple hours later, I’m drenched in sweat and can’t move, my mind replaying my predicament.

The letter’s arrival still haunts me. When I think of it, my breathing grows shallow and ragged, my heart races, my hands tremble, and a cold sweat coats me. It had come with no warning. Not even the hint of a rumor from upper management.

When I opened the official-looking brown envelope and scanned the page, I was left speechless. A crushing vice latched onto my heart. I sat there at my kitchen table for hours. Finally, I called upon my reserves, got up, and climbed my staircase to my bedroom where I collapsed onto my bed.

*What will I do?* I thought to myself on that day, and every day since. And now, three months later, the job hunt had returned not even nibbles of interest; no calls, no requests for interviews. I knew the reason all too well. Over six hundred employees, most of them decades younger—all laid off as the business went into bankruptcy. Jobs for someone my age wouldn’t come easy.

I'd paid my rent up to the end of this month which had taken the last of my savings. I shake my head knowing I'm in trouble. No relatives to go to, no mother, God rest her soul, and no children to act as a safety net. And now, the house that had become my haven and insulated me for so long would soon be a fond memory only.

My eyes land on Attack Cat. Our eyes lock, and I feel the worst not knowing what his future will be, that his home for the last twelve years will soon be taken from him. Will he somehow understand the change? It shatters my heart to think I won't be able to look after him, because I'll be homeless. Just thinking that word, and its meaning to me, drives me even deeper into depression.

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*Jarrett Blackman, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*2:50 p.m.*

I don't know how long I was on my knees. I lost all sense of time. I just know that when I opened my eyes, I felt like a new man. Something huuuuge had changed within me. And the other guys appeared to have been working for some time. Even Bryan hadn't disturbed me. In fact, later that afternoon, he came to me, put his arm around my shoulder, and gave me a look of support. He hadn't said a word.

I finished my day with a hop in my step. When we'd brought in the last box and a lamp, Jesus stepped up to me and extended a hand to me. As I held his hand, I felt something there. I looked to see a crisp, folded \$100 note.

I'm stunned. "Thank you very much!"

"I gave the same to each of you for the great work today." He scans the house—boxes and furniture strewn everywhere. "Jarrett, your colleagues have bought some ice-cold beers. You will find, however, that your taste and desire for that is no longer present."

"Jesus, how? And why is my thirst gone? Others struggle for years if they ever break free."

"My Father knows exactly what each person needs."

"Okay." I place the tip into my weathered wallet. "Thanks. As I see it, I've moved quite a lot into your house today, and you've done me a great service and moved a lot out of my life."

Jesus' face lights up. "There are other challenges that you'll need to face head-on through learning and grace."

I nod, more out of respect than fully understanding.

He scans the stacked-up boxes in his living room. "I've spoken to Bryan about giving you some time off—"

"Time off?"

"—to come and help me get unpacked and organized. I'll double your pay what you'd normally earn. Does that sound fair?"

"So, I'll be coming here tomorrow morning?"

Jesus smiles, a look of fondness displayed toward me that surprises me. "You'll begin work on Monday. But tomorrow will be a hang out day. Come at eight for breakfast. I'll be cooking."

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*Bryan Silversen, Moving Company Foreman, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*5:46 p.m.*

Heading home now, I can't stop replaying the events of the day. And his arrival, that of this so-called Jesus, had been one of the strangest clients I'd ever met. But to be fair, I had been warned. According to my boss and company owner, Bruce Calbot, a man dressed like Jesus had come into the office days before to appoint and pay for the moving service—the goods to be brought from a storage unit across town to the empty old farmhouse at 30 Summit Avenue.

"How'd he pay?" I'd asked Bruce.

"Cash."

"Too bad. A credit card would've revealed the man's legal name."

When I'd seen Jesus step off a bus just before eleven-thirty in the morning at the end of the street and walk toward where we were, I absolutely didn't know what to think or do. Yet as he drew closer, there was no hint that this was a spoof, or that he was someone with an unstable mind. He looked me square in the eyes, spoke with a normal voice, yet had a charismatic personality that was difficult to dismiss. He was easy-going. And I noticed a vibrancy in his

words—as if every word landed inside me and did something. I'd never sensed that from another person before.

When he first arrived, he extended his hand toward me. I shook his hand watching for any sign that I was part of a hoax. His handshake firm, he seemed to look not just at me, but through me. His mouth upturned beneath a finely groomed, medium-length beard. “Hello Bryan. I appreciate what you guys will do for me today. I know it's not an easy task with this stifling heat.”

He appeared in his thirties and bore a light-tanned complexion. His demeanor wasn't what I'd been expecting—that's for sure. Here was a self-actualized man of strength and presence.

“It's fine, sir. My guys love their jobs. It'll go smoothly.”

“Good to see the truck is getting emptied in a speedy manner.”

I scan the back of the truck, almost half empty. “My men do an excellent job. We select them based on the fact they're good with other people's things and have a strong work ethic.”

Jesus nods. “Hard work is a sign of integrity.”

“That is true.”

“I'll be preparing drinks and sandwiches throughout the day.”

I frown at that. “There's no need to do that, sir. They will work hard regardless.”

“I know they will, Bryan. But I'd like to show my appreciation.”

“Be my guest. I'm sure it'll put smiles on their faces and a pep in their step.”

Throughout the day, he did as he said, offering cold drinks and the stacked-high sandwiches. His regular offerings rejuvenated the men. And as we spent time with him, we found ourselves looking forward to those short breaks just so we could talk with him. Soon enough, it wasn't even what was on his trays that enticed us but his personality, the way he spoke to us, and how he seemed to know each of us as if old friends.

About four o' clock, we could see the back of the truck which lifted everyone's spirits. But although I felt glad the job was nearly completed, I also felt a strange sadness. It was as I was thinking this that our client stood next to me.

“You're always welcome to stop by, Bryan. You or the guys. Bring 'em all, I don't mind.” He punctuates his words with a genuine smile.

Finally, I realize I must risk offending our client. “May I ask you something?”

“If I am him, what does that mean for you and your life?”

I set down my clipboard on the edge of the truck's ramp. "I suppose it'd change my perspective about life. It'd change everything."

Jesus nods with an impressed grin. "I like your answer."

I give him a direct look. "If you're him, it should be something you can prove quite easily."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'm not sure. But I'll let you know when I think of it."

Jesus leans toward me. "Or maybe I can do something in your heart and life that's never happened before. Wouldn't that be more satisfying than a magic trick or knowledge that would be almost impossible for me to know, such as naming the five cousins of your mom's sister's children—Michael, Albert, Frances, Melissa, and Jillian?"

"I can't even remember all their names at times. How did you—"

Jesus reaches over, gripping my shoulder. "I'm sure you want something of substance to convince you, right?"

I nod.

"I'm here when you're ready. Drop by any time."

I text my boss Bruce to request the next day off—I've not taken a day off in ages. Normally, he'd make an excuse and say no, even if it was important to me. If he says no—

His speedy reply arrives granting permission.

"Now *that* was a miracle!"

Later, I pull into my driveway and turn off the engine. I sit there reflecting on the strange day. *Very well! Maybe tomorrow morning, I'll stop by 30 Summit Avenue.*

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*Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue*

*7:45 p.m.*

Steady raps sound at my door. I glance at my watch wondering who it could be.

Stepping to the top of the stairs, I shout toward the door. "Be right down! And you better *not* be a salesman or a Jehovah's Witness!"

It's still bright outside, the skies blue and cleared of clouds—the feverish temperature not diminished even a little bit. I imagine everything outside baked by the sun causing the entire world to perspire. I catch a glimpse of myself in the dressing table mirror. I towel the sweat off the top of my shiny scalp and pull my shirt downward over my bulging belly, faded tattoos inking my dark-tanned, hairy arms.

Descending to the door which sits along the side of my house, I yank it open to a tall man standing there, dressed in white, robe-like garments—definitely not from around here. His bearded mouth upturns as he lifts something toward me. I'm fixated by his eyes as my hands reach and take hold of the large circular plate, hot to the touch. A white cloth covers the contents, but an explosive, familiar sweet scent rises from it.

“What is this?” I remain pleasant, but my patience is drawing thin. The intense heat of the plate causes me to juggle it between my hands.

“I made something I think you'll enjoy, Frank.”

“Who are—”

“I'm Jesus, your new neighbor. I just moved in—”

“Ahh, Jesus, eh?” I consider the name, but in all honesty, I don't really care. I've seen enough crazies in my lifetime not to notice the next one. I just want to get this conversation over with so I can get back to bed. But I do have something to say before I let this crazy go his merry way. I point a finger at the guy, unable to stop my anger. “Your guys showed up bright and early this morning—before eight o' clock and after I'd worked night shift!”

I see a flicker of regret. “I am sorry about that. I unpacked my kitchen first just so I could make this for you.” He lifts the white cloth. “Walnut and pecan pie with brown sugar and gooey molasses.”

I'm taken aback by this surprise. Mom used to make this for me years ago, God rest her soul. I eye the golden-brown pie crust, enticed by the rising sweet, tangy aroma. “Well, thanks.”

He replaces the white cloth on the pie, and I set the hot plate on the hall side table.

“I came over to get acquainted. And since we're now neighbors, to become friends.”

“Friends?” I'm unable to hide the sneer in my voice. “What makes you think I need—”

“*Everybody* needs to be connected with others. It's how I made you to be.”

“You're taking this J.C. role a tad serious, aren't you? Can I ask where you're getting your drugs?” I laugh. “Maybe from across the street?” I gesture toward the drug dealer's house.

The man dressed like Jesus looks at me with a big grin. “I understand your skepticism. And I’m glad for it. People have tried to take on my identity to deceive others. The result has always been ruined lives and spiritual bankruptcy.”

“I understand bankruptcy all-too well.” I’m unable to avoid thinking of my lay-off. “Baking the pie was a kind gesture. But I’m not religious—”

Relief shows on his face. “Thank *goodness* you’re not religious!”

“What?” I’m puzzled. Clearly, he’s using reverse psychology.

“Not reverse psychology. Truth.” His voice is calm. “Am I welcome here, Frank?”

I look at him stunned, confused, and growing more curious by the second. *Did he just read my mind?* “Sure, why not?” But I’m still not sure why I’m allowing this.

Without hesitation, he steps inside and past me before stopping and turning, a warm grin on his face. He’s a head taller than me with wide shoulders. The look of him in my hallway, wearing that outfit, makes me wonder if I’m the one crazy for allowing him inside my house.

Attack Cat sits at peace on the carpeted steps in front of us. His eyes remain fixed on Jesus, and he lets out a curious meow which surprises me; he’s never been a vocal cat. And he normally shuns anyone he doesn’t know, and especially if they come into the house (not that I’ve had many visitors in the last years since mom died). Honestly, I’m astonished.

“I think AC likes you.”

“I should think he would.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because instinctively, he knows.”

“Knows what?” Then I know what he means; I wave off his words. “No, no, there must be some other explanation.”

AC steps down in front of the man, my strange new neighbor, and extends his front paws forward as if stretching after a deep sleep, his head and tail held high. To my surprise, he stays in that position.

I shake my head, perplexed. “Something weird is happening to him.”

The stranger bends low, extending a hand to AC’s head. Only when he touches him does AC relax and move off into the kitchen, tail raised high.

“I’ve never seen him act like this.”

“He actually knows who is in this house more than you do, my friend.”



“If you say so.” But the whole scene leaves me scratching my head. I grab the pie as we head to the kitchen.

Then, he stops and looks at me, concern etched on his face. “Your letter. I know all about it.”

At the letter’s mention, my eyes double in size, stunned. My voice betrays a trace of anger. “Been reading my mail?”

The man’s face conveys all seriousness. And are those tears in his eyes? “I’ve been reading your heart, Frank.”

I stagger backwards, the pie tipping to fall. He reaches out steadying me—and the pie in my hands. *What’s happening to me right now?*

“I’m your neighbor for a season—to make a difference.”

I allow all disbelief to fall away—if only for a minute. “If you are him, then what can you do to help me?”

“I can prepare you and help you understand you’re not alone. I’ve always reached toward you since your earliest years. And the best years of your life are still in front of you!”

“Then how come I’ve never seen evidence for you? Am I *dreaming* right now?” I slap my face hard.

Jesus chuckles even as he steps ahead of me into the kitchen area. He speaks over his shoulder. “There’s a lot of misrepresentation about me that creates barriers between people and myself.”

“Yeah, church people—we’ve never got along too good. What can you say about that?”

He sits on one of the island stools. “My Church has always been full of people who are growing and learning to be like me. Some are associated with my Church, but don’t really know me. Others know me but because of distractions, they never quite live synchronized with me. If they did, they’d be reaching out, shielding and cushioning the vulnerable from a harsh world, and giving the unloved a taste of my love to counter the lies of darkness.”

“That’s a mouthful!” I sit down on the opposite stool. “But if the majority are faulty failures representing you, that’s not good advertisement for those searching for something real in this life, something bigger than themselves.”

“Well said, Frank! I can only say there are many who *do* represent me well.”

“Well, there’s not enough of ‘em. So why are you here on Summit Avenue—moving next to me as my neighbor? Is this the Second Coming I’ve always heard about?”

A smile plays at his lips. “No, no. This is not that.”

“Then why *are* you here?”

Jesus reaches toward me and grips the top of my hand as if we’ve been friends all our lives. He squeezes my hand—a strong grip. He looks me over as if I’m a schoolboy preparing to go to school on my first day. Then he teases formality. “Mr. Frank Bruno, just wait and see what I’m going to do in your life!” He follows this up with a good-natured laugh.

I cannot deny that his words affect me. I *want* to believe them. Yet there’s still a nagging disbelief in the back of my mind that won’t let go. “I’m trying to adjust to all this.”

“I understand, Frank. If you just accepted my word to be the Son of God, it would mean you are gullible. You just want reality, and, deep down, to be able to live without worry again. And maybe, just maybe, to experience true love.”

“No thanks to the love part. That only takes from a person. Not interested.”

As if in anticipation, the man rubs his hands together. “I have a lot to teach you in a short time.”

“Regarding so-called reality, what if it’s too farfetched for me to grasp?”

“What if the evidence *is* strong enough, even while you maintain caution? Wouldn’t it be acceptable to move forward?”

“Fair enough.” I stand up. “Would you care for a drink?”

“Sure, Frank. Anything ice cold would be welcome!”

I step to the fridge and retrieve two cold bottles of water. I set them on the island counter between us.

He lifts the water toward me in a toast. “To our new friendship! And what’s going to come.”

“I’ll agree to the friendship part after tomorrow morning when I know for sure this ain’t me suffering from heat stroke. I’ll let you know about the ‘to come’ part later.” I lift my water bottle to tap his.

He nods with a grin. “I understand, Frank.”

I cut two pieces from the warm pie, and we eat. The explosion of sweetness takes me back years causing tears to well up as I’m reminded of dear mom. I find myself missing her unconditional, robust hugs. I put my fork down for a moment to savor the rush of good memories, careful, for some reason, not to let it show on my face.

We eat in relative silence and finish our water. Then, as if old buddies, he stands up with a pleased look, and extends a hand to me which I grasp. “See you tomorrow, Frank.”

I throw him a mischievous smile. “Wait!” Elbow on the counter surface, I bend my arm toward him.

“Really? You want this?” He points, slapping his opposite bicep.

“Yeah, ‘really’!” I wait for him to grab hold.

“Why, Frank?”

“You know why. If you really are Jesus Christ, no one has done this with you. Would I be correct?”

“Except for my childhood in Nazareth, that would be true, Frank.”

He’s a big man, his hands massive as they clutch onto mine. But he’s not worked in a warehouse like me the past thirty years. Our arms tighten as the contest begins. His formidable strength causes my forearm to shudder and shake.

I lock eyes with Jesus, giving him a sly grin. “What you been doing in Heaven the past two thousand years, Lord, pushing pencils?”

He half-smiles in response. “I’ve been praying for you. And I’ve bench-pressed the weight of sin off your shoulders so you could be free!” A film of wetness shows in his eyes as something from him deposits inside me. Then, in one fluid motion, my strength fails me as the back of my hand hits the table.

“Ahh! Nice one!” I’m tickled at our competition, and we both stand up. He steps to me, his arms spread wide. I’m caught off guard by this action but don’t want to stop it. We hug, and for a moment, it feels just like one of mom’s hugs again. I let go of my pride, and we linger like that for a couple seconds too long. When I go to let go, he pulls me in again.

He speaks, his voice tender. “I’ve longed to hug you for so long, son.”

For a second, I feel like bawling my eyes out. As I pull back, I manage to reply, grinning. “Rematch, soon?”

His sudden smile reaches his eyes. “Sure! If you want more of this!” He slaps his bicep again.

Strange and as uncertain as I am about all this, I feel happiness for the first time in as long as I can remember. I lead Jesus to the side door. I consider the events of the day—the rude awakening, the meeting of a neighbor not from hell but from heaven. It’s honestly too much to believe and too good to be true, yet I feel part of me believing.

He speaks over his shoulder as he walks toward his house. “You’re welcome to come over any time, Frank.” His white robes glisten as streaks of sunshine reflect off him.

“Sure thing!” I shut the door before mumbling to myself. “If I haven’t gone loony!”

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*Delante Thomas, 29 Summit Avenue*

*9:05 p.m.*

When I finally awaken from my sleep, my head groggy and still aching from the night before, I look out my bedroom window to see the moving truck gone. The day’s thankfully cooling, the sun hidden behind the line of tall trees across the road. An annoying cricket chirps outside my window.

My new neighbor, a bearded man, sits on his front porch. He looks out of place in his strange clothes—like someone from Egypt or something. But since it’s my business to know everything I can about my neighborhood, I decide to get out of my room and go investigate—strange or not.

I slip on my tank top and shorts before stepping out onto my porch. I trudge across my yard toward the new neighbor’s porch, knee-high grass scratching at my calves. Crickets sound all around, and fireflies light up across the darkening way.

I wave at the guy, wondering how he’ll receive me. “How ya doin’?”

He acknowledges me with a raised hand, his voice firm and polite. “Welcome!” He extends a hand toward me as I step onto his porch and grip his hand. He keeps a pleasant but commanding demeanor, of a caramel complexion, broad-shouldered, and wearing sandals.

“Delante, is it?”

“How’d you know—”

“I am Jesus.” No added explanation or hint of laughter follows.

“Your mother was quite religious, eh?” I wonder about the name and his odd choice of clothing.

“Here, have some cold lemonade.” He lifts the silver tray to me. Two large glasses sit there, topped off with ice and white, paper straws. I take a glass but instantly regret it. Now I’m locked into having a conversation with this guy.

He smiles. “Oh, you can take it back to your place if you prefer. No obligation to stay here talking with me.”

Had my face given him a hint of what I'd been thinking? I'm trying to figure out what's happening here. Something out of the ordinary.

“Jesus *what?*”

“Would you like to sit for a while?” He gestures to the empty spot beside him on the porch swing, wide enough for three people.

“Nah, I'm good.” Ignoring the straw ‘coz I don't do straws, I take a mouthful—the cold, sour-sweetened lemonade refreshing as it slips down my throat.

He puts the tray down on a small side table before retrieving the other glass and taking a sip through the straw. As he finishes, he lets out a satisfied breath. “A good finish to a good day, don't you think?”

I give a weak, uncommitted nod. “If you say so.” I look for any telltale signs this guy's crazy, then ask the question I really want to ask. “What's your game plan, *Jesus?*”

“What's yours, Delante?” His eyes seem to latch onto my house behind me. Without warning, he stands up, puts down his glass, and speed walks off the porch in the direction of my house.

“Huh?” He leaves me standing there. “Where are you going?” I follow, slowly at first, then picking up my pace just to keep up with him. He's aiming for my place. “Hey!”

He turns, while walking, flashing me an amused grin. “You wanted to see *my* things, right? I'd like to see yours *first*, Delante!”

“What are you talking about?”

He steps up past the caved-in first step onto my small porch and faces my front door as if expecting someone to open it.

“*What* do you want?” I am not happy at his invasion of my space.

He speaks into the door as if I'm inside, not behind him. “You came scoping me out—seeing what might be of interest to you. Now, I'm scoping *you* out to find out what might be of interest to me.”

“Yo?” I'm unable to understand what's happening.

“May I?” His hand rests on the doorknob.

“No. Who do you think you are?”

He thumps his fist at the door three times, then speaks, barely heard. “I see your empty heart, Delante. Would you like to see my heart’s fullness for you?”

“Are you crazy?” I step up on the porch behind him.

“I’ve always knocked at the door of your heart, Delante.” Sadness resonates in his voice.

I shake my head in disbelief. “Why do I have to meet all the fruitcakes?”

“I remember you when you turned ten years old. I collected your tears of joy at the altar that day. It was an exciting day for you and me both!”

“How did you—”

“I *am* Jesus.”

I stare at the back of his head. I’m frozen in place. I’m caught in a vortex of confusion.

“How far you’ve gone from that altar, Delante.”

“Did my mother send you to me?”

“She’s been praying for you for a long time. May I enter?”

I look down at my porch with the peeled and worn-away white paint. “I don’t know who you really are, but I’m sure you’d not like it inside.”

“Why not?”

“Even my mother doesn’t like visiting.”

“Why is that, Delante?”

I find it hard to believe I’m half-believing this guy. “Because, it’s not a good place for anyone.”

“Is this house a reflection of your heart?”

I whirl around and plop down on the porch edge. I stare out across the darkness, the fireflies doing their thing.

He still directs his voice at the door. “There is hope. There is always hope in me.”

Then the weight of his hand rests on my shoulder. I reach and grab his hand, swiveling to take a good look. I gasp, startled, when I see the large scar upon his wrist. I throw it away from me as if stung. A cold shiver passes through me. “This has to be a dream. I’m still in my bed!” I get up to speed-walk away, holding my head with both hands.

Sudden movement rushes toward me from behind. I turn just as a hand reaches and grabs my cheek in a fierce pinch, jolting my head sideways.

I yell out as much in shock as in pain, waving him away from me.

He stands there with that amused grin again. “You're not asleep, Delante. This is as real as it gets.”

I massage where he pinched me, tendrils of pain emanating across my cheek. I shake my head. “If you really was Jesus, you wouldn't have done that to me just then!”

With the hint of a smile, he takes in a deep breath before releasing it. He walks back to the small porch and sits down. “Tough love is the only remedy for a hard head. And from today, your life will never be the same again.”

His words hit me. And for all intents and purposes, I just allow myself to believe. “Why would you want *me*? Look at my life? I'm all about me, myself, around the block and back to me again! And I've hurt people.”

“Yes, I see what your life is. But I also see what it can be.”

“It's too hard.” I walk back and sit down on the opposite porch edge.

“By yourself, yes. It is impossible. But with my help, through genuine relationship, I can help you do *anything*!”

I run both of my hands across the top of my scalp in growing frustration. I decide all at once I've got to get away. I can't face another second of this. I leap up from the porch and jog away.

Jesus' words float after me. “Another day, when you're ready, you'll open your door to me.”

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*Delante Thomas, at Alyssia Long's Home, 15 Cisco Place*

*9:25 p.m.*

I make my way two streets over to Alyssia's place. I hope she's forgiven me for our spat this morning. I'm still replaying the *Twilight Zone* scenario I just experienced, finding it hard to believe that a man dressed up like Jesus, even with scars on his wrists, has made me walk away from my own house!

I approach her door and yank on the screen door, but it doesn't budge; I rap against its wooden frame. Michael gets up from sitting on the floor, his eyes fixed on the TV, and walks over to the door to disengage the hook. I open the squeaky door and step inside.

“Moooooom, Delante's here.” Michael's eyes return to the TV.

She yells back from her bedroom. “Unlock the door for him.”

“I already did!”

“Alyssia! Mind if I get a drink?” The living room’s scant having just the black, faux-leather sofa and armchair, with an old TV on a small table in the corner. Michael sits in the center of the room on a frayed, circular beige rug.

“Help yourself. I’ll be there in a minute.”

I go to the kitchen, grab a glass, then pour room temperature Coke till it’s half-full. I top it off with Jack. Saturdays deserve a little thrill.

“I just met Jesus!” I step back to the living room, still finding it hard to believe what just happened to me.

“It’s about time, Delante!” Alyssia lets out a good-natured laugh, which always lifts me.

I plop down on the sofa just as she enters the room looking ravishing—the drab setting suddenly falling away, replaced by excitement and somehow lighter. She walks over and stands over me. “Sorry about this morning. It wasn’t your fault I drank too much last night.”

“I know it wasn’t my fault.” My eyes are planted just over Michael’s head on the TV, which is playing a cop show.

Her voice turns icy. “We both need to be responsible about what we do. To watch out for each other.”

I look up at her. “Yeah, yeah, you’re right. More responsibility, a *little* less drink.”

“*A lot less* drink!”

“I just met my new neighbor; his name is Jesus.”

“Jesus?”

“Jesus.”

“You mean a Jesus Freak?”

“You heard me: Jesus.”

“Delante, have you been using...?” Her voice tapers off as she glances in Michael’s direction. She sits beside me.

“Do I look like I’m trippin’?”

“Nah, you don’t...which worries me. You’ve got my attention.”



“I went over to meet the neighbor who’s dressed like someone from the Middle East—you know, scope out his things for future reference. Then, after talking for a minute, he just gets up and walks past me telling me he wants to see *my* house.”

“What?”

“Weird, right? Then when I challenged him, he spoke of the time I’d gone to the altar at my mom’s church when I was Michael’s age. But what really freaked me out was when I saw his wrists... There were scars there, Aly!”

“And this guy’s moved in across from you?”

“Yep!”

“That *is* strange, Delante.”

“Tell me about it!”

“He’s not *really* Jesus, Delante.” Her voice calms me. “That’s ridiculous to even consider.”  
*Of course, he’s not Jesus.* “But what about the scars?”

“Obsessed people will do anything to fit a look. I watched a documentary about a guy infatuated with tigers whose had his face tattooed orange with stripes, and all his teeth sharpened! Those scars would be easy to imitate.”

“Yeah, but he knew that stuff about me from when I was a kid.”

Aly raises her hand to my face and caresses my cheek. “Hey, what’s this bruise here?”

“Jesus did that to me.”

“He did *what?*” Anger flashes in her almond eyes.

“He said something about tough love...and to convince me I’m not sleepin’!”

Alyssia leans toward me, giving me a quick peck on my lips, staring into me as if searching for something. “Jesus or no Jesus, I think we *do* need change in our lives. The way it’s been going lately isn’t good for you, for me, for our future family.” She glances to Michael.

“I know, Aly. Soon, I’ll make it happen.”

“Then what’s your plan? Maybe this Jesus-character’s been sent to be a wake-up call to you, to remind you of what you’re not proud of, and to get you to make changes.”

I’m staring at her hand in mine and find myself picturing those scars in his wrist. “I’m not interested in religion.”

“But there’s got to be something good we can take hold of so we can change direction.”

“This Jesus character... He gives off this vibe... Reminds me of the day I prayed to God as a kid and the warm fuzzies I felt after I asked God to come into my heart.”

Her lips form a small smile. “You’ve never told me about that. Sounds cute.”

I laugh. “It happened after a 3-hour sermon. The reverend gave an invitation to come to the altar. I didn’t respond at first, but then something I couldn’t resist grabbed hold of me. A group of us went forward.”

Her alluring smile grips me. “Really? That’s such a nice story, Delante. You should’ve told me about this before. What happened next?”

“After I prayed, I felt forgiven and clean. I can still remember that feeling like it happened yesterday.”

Michael walks over, standing in front of me. He stares at me as if he has a profound question. “You wanna play *Uno* with me?”

Alyssia interrupts him. “Michael, leave Delante alone. He just got here!”

I reach forward and rest my hand on his head. “Maybe later, Michael.” I know there’s almost zero chance that’ll happen. I take a sip from my drink. Michael returns to sitting cross-legged on the rug floor.

Alyssia pats my hand. “So, what happened after that?”

“I became dedicated to our youth group for a while. Then, life happened.”

Alyssia seems to search her memory. “My parents didn’t take me to church.”

I gently massage her arm and hand. “I’d have liked it better in your house, I think.”

Suddenly animated, Alyssia sits up, amusement and curiosity playing at her lips. “Could I meet him?”

“Seriously, you want to meet the Jesus-wannabe?”

“Why not? Crazy is never dull.”

I’m unsure about that. “We’ll see, but first, I want something from you.”

She stares at me, a playful expression on her face. “What’s that?”

I tug on her until she’s sitting on my lap, her face in front of mine.

She wraps her arm around my neck and an impish grin appears. “A kiss?”

“That’d be a good start.”

We linger, kissing each other before she pulls back.

I throw her my puppy-eyes expression. “Is that all I get?”

She giggles before taking my hand, jumping up while yanking me up. I see Michael sitting there, staring at the television, his *Uno* cards in a pile in front of him. Despite the ecstasy I know is about to happen to me, sadness shoots through me at seeing Michael like that. I don't know why. Alyssia closes the bedroom door behind us and locks it.

We make love—always the height of my days. Yet even as I do, as I satisfy myself and match her passion, I can't help but replay the words of Jesus, "Your life will never be the same from today." I wonder what that means and if that could really be true. But then again, I don't want to change *that* much.

Day Two: Sunday

*Cahva Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue*

*7:30 a.m.*

A knock at my front door. I glance at my clock. *Who can it be at 7:30 in the morning?* I get up from my bed and go to my window. Pushing the thick curtain to the side, I'm startled to see it's that strange man, the one who just moved across the street yesterday. He's still dressed in a long, flowing white robe, wearing an egg shell-colored head covering. He turns his dark eyes up to me until our eyes lock before throwing me a smile. I release the curtain letting it block the light again and step backwards until my bed catches me. I sit on the bed's edge in the silence. *What do you want?*

Another knock.

I sit there listening to the stillness of the house, wondering and feeling foolish for allowing this stranger to command my thoughts and my actions.

When no more knocks come, I'm relieved. But I also have a strange sensation pass through me of sadness, because I didn't go down and open the door. I'm perplexed by these contrary feelings.

A minute later, I look out the window to see him gone. I rub my temples wondering what's happening on my street.

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*Jarrett Blackman, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*8:03 a.m.*

Running a few minutes late, I knock at Jesus' screen door.

The door opens, and he stands there wearing an expectant, pleased grin. "Hello Jarrett!" He pushes open the screen door for me, and I step inside the farmhouse. As a kid, I remember seeing this abandoned place on our way to the park from the lower parts of the city.

"Hi, Jesus." I try to act normal despite the reality of who I'm with.

As I enter the roomy foyer and then to the right into the spacious living room, he gestures for me to sit in the armchair—the same one I helped carry in yesterday. I take a seat perpendicular to

a long, brown couch where Jesus sits, his eyes on me. I ask the question on my mind since I left Jesus' house yesterday. "Why'd you choose me to help you? There are other drunks in this town. I can take you to a place called cardboard city where a bunch live under a bridge. I've stayed there off and on over the years."

"You were chosen because the Father saw your immediate need."

"Don't get me wrong, Boss. I'm grateful. But don't those drunks under the bridge have an immediate need, too?"

Sadness flickers across his face. "I assure you; the others have not escaped my Father's eyes, either."

I struggle to keep the irritation out of my voice. "But why the thirteen-year wait? It's been a shi—sorry...a car crash life for me."

"Any other time prior to yesterday and you'd have rejected what was offered to you, Jarrett. Would you like coffee, tea, juice?"

"Coffee, white, three sugars. But if you're *him*, didn't you already know that?"

He grins at me as he steps through the dining area into the kitchen, speaking over his shoulder. "Coffee with milk and three sugars coming up!" He fills the kettle at the sink and places it on the stovetop eye with a *chink*. "I'm glad you'll be here to help me out this week. It'll be a good week for the both of us."

"Thanks again for the opportunity. Working here with the Great J.C. is beyond words. And I'm also glad to be away from the moving company during this monstrous heat. Less stress and no heat stroke will do me good."

"It must be taxing for you guys this time of the year."

"Can you believe there are customers, no matter how hot or how many steps we have to lug their stuff, don't offer even water?"

"That is so wrong."

"Say, if you've moved into town, don't tell me the Devil's moved here, too?"

He stands at the edge of the kitchen and locks eyes with me. "He's much more interested in bullying, deceiving, and occupying human hearts."

"You sure? I think the Devil's living over on Regent Street."

"Really?" An eyebrow lifts on Jesus' face.

I can't hide my grin. "Yeah, my ex-wife lives there."

Jesus shakes his head, a smile fighting to the surface. “We have a lot to talk about, Jarrett.”  
I can’t hold back from laughing. “I think you’re probably right about that.”

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*Toby Garrells, 33 Summit Avenue*

*9:39 a.m.*

When I awaken, my first thought is a question, whether the previous days’ events with Jesus had all been in my mind. I do my normal prayer routine yet wonder if it would make more sense to just go spend time sitting with him across the road. I do my morning Bible reading, again my mind torn between doing my routine or just going to see him.

Mitch didn’t come home last night; probably stayed at his girlfriend’s place. Lately, he’s rarely home. I guess I can understand with all we’ve gone through the past year. My eyes dart to our family portrait, but I turn away—keeping my mind from going in that direction.

I decide I’ll offer to take Jesus to my church—a good excuse to stop by and see him.

Moments later, I stand on his porch and wonder for a fleeting second how I’ve been duped into thinking this could be *the* Son of God, the Jesus of the Bible. But only one way to know for sure. I knock just as my mind reels scenes of people in cults drinking Kool-Aid and with Joker smiles on their faces.

Jesus opens the door, a fond look displayed on his face directed at me. I’m surprised at that look, to be honest. “Good morning, Toby!”

“Hello.” *It’s the same person I met yesterday. But have I been deceived?*

He smiles. “Yes, the fondness was directed to you, Toby. I really do like you. And what you drink from me will not be poisoned Kool-Aid but life that becomes a river flowing from you to others.” He pushes open the screen door for me to enter. “Make yourself at home, Toby!”

I’m overwhelmed with sweeping awe again. “You’re still here!”

“Indeed, I’m still here, Toby!”

I enter the foyer.

Jesus turns to me, a question displayed on his face. “You would like me to come with you to your church?”

“Yes.”

“A great plan! And I’ll also get to spend quality time with you, Toby.”

“Really?”

His face is lit with enthusiasm. “Yes, really.” He speaks over his shoulder. “Jarrett? Ready?”

“Where we goin’?” A thin man with a weathered, whiskered face, sandy-brown hair touching his shoulders, appears in the doorway behind Jesus.

“Let’s go to church, Jarrett!”

A streak of panic flashes across his face. “Oh, I’m not one for church.” He looks disturbed and apprehensive.

Jesus opens his arms to him, his voice endearing. “Come, Jarrett. It’s time to broaden your horizons.”

“But I’m not dressed—”

Though I don’t say it, his denim pants and Metallica black t-shirt might be out of place in my church.

Jesus’ voice leaves no room for discussion. “Come. The people there will be more scared of you than you of them.”

We step back outside.

Jarrett, clearly pouting, pulls the door shut behind him. “You didn’t tell me we’d have to go to church today, Lord!”

“It’ll be fine. Let’s get going.”

We head down the road, the still, oven-like temperatures thick and almost unbearable. I notice a cluster of yellow-chested birds singing from a nearby tree. “Lord, would you call them to me?”

“A good test to prove who I am, eh, Toby?”

I grin just as Jesus whistles in the direction of the birds. Within seconds, they’ve flown and landed on my shoulders as we walk. “Wow.” I stroke one’s head, his eyes closing in delight.

When the birds return to the treetops, I query Jesus. “Are you happy with your people as a whole?”

His eyes search the horizon in front of us. “My people. So many of them have become dull of hearing. So many do not know my voice. All around them is a great harvest, but few care or take notice of my Spirit.” There’s a solemn look on his face.

“If the noise level of the world’s too great, can’t you raise the volume of your voice?”



“Even that would not work. Peter stood before me when I transfigured. Yet, he listened to another’s voice when the time of testing came. Imagine your consternation if you were a shepherd and had a flock of sheep and a pack of wolves approached, but no matter what you shouted, no matter what you did, they didn’t take heed of your warning. Yet, some of these same people would say I don’t care, or that I’m aloof from their troubles!”

I note the look of sadness on Jesus’ face. “I hope I’ll always be attentive to you.” I pause, considering my next question. “May I ask if I’m one of your better servants?”

“You go from one extreme to another, Toby. When you’re hot toward me, you move like a battering ram against the darkness. When you’re lukewarm, you become ineffective and dictated by appetites and bad habits.”

His analysis correct, I’m refreshed by his honesty.

“Toby, I want you to be ‘steady as she goes’ and to be consistent. I’d rather have five or ten minutes of solid, focused praying than thirty minutes of words lacking conviction, authority, or purpose. If you could somehow grasp the One Who lives within you, you’d stop moving about like a mouse.”

“Holy Spirit?”

He wraps his arm around me and pulls me in as we walk. “Yes!”

“I’m tired of tiptoeing through life. I want to be a lion for you, Lord.”

Jesus grips the back of my neck as we walk and squeezes tenderly. “My Kingdom needs lions, not mice.”

“But how do I stop being a mouse, Lord?”

“You must be convinced of your identity and move in that authority I’ve given to my people. You mustn’t be tossed about by every fancy, every storm, and every temptation. With my help, you must learn to overcome your obstacles and be led by my Spirit each moment!”

“Can you teach me how to do that, Lord?”

“Yes, Toby. I’m excited to show you.”

Jarrett speaks, walking behind us. “What about me?”

Jesus turns and fixes his eyes on him. “For now, you are to grow roots in me. Years of the enemy’s entanglements must be pruned from you. Meanwhile, you will learn of me, know my rest, and who knows? You may even find yourself used by me very soon.”

“What, really?” Another look of panic shows on his face.

Jesus gives a reassuring smile. “Relax, Jarrett.”

We saunter to the bottom of the hilly road before turning left. Up ahead alongside a busy road is a red-brick church with a belfry and white-face clock situated at the top. Nearing the church, we see a half dozen people entering inside, the service about to begin.

“Have you been here before, Lord?”

“You mean do I approve of this church?”

“Yes.”

“I haven’t come and taken their star from them.”

“What does that mean?” Jarrett asks from behind.

“I visit my churches. If they are contrary to me or have become entangled by darkness or its wisdom, I remove their star which means they no longer speak with my authority.”

We enter a cooled down, red-carpeted sanctuary and take a seat near the rear on a padded pew—the church almost full. I notice faces glancing at Jesus and Jarrett, all of them curious at my visitors. Some faces show disapproval, others scorn. No one approaches my guests to make them feel welcome.

Moments later, my pastor steps to the front and encourages all to pray with him to launch the service. He lifts his hands toward the ceiling fans. “Lord, come and make yourself home here. May you walk in our midst and command our time!” The pastor stays in that position with his eyes closed.

From beside me, Jesus stands and walks the aisle to the front leaving Jarrett and me looking at each other. A flood of panic shoots through me. What will Jesus do? How will my pastor react? My heart pounds within me as Jesus steps up onto the platform and stands beside Pastor Douglas.

Jesus speaks, his voice sincere and commanding. “Thank you for your invitation.”

Pastor Douglas, stunned, looks Jesus over from head to toe. The congregation shifts in their pews, caught up in hushed murmuring. Fleeting glances and pointed stares hit me from all over the room. I realize just how much of an outsider I’ve been while attending this church for almost a year.

Pastor Douglas speaks, challenge in his voice. “Who are you?”

“Jesus of Nazareth.” His voice is level, without any fanfare. “I’ve stopped by for a visit.”

The pastor, dumbfounded, gestures diplomatically toward the pews. “Sorry sir, can you please take—”

“Pastor Alex Douglas, you’ve prayed in the wee hours for this city, along with your wife, Pearl. But you’ve been bogged down by a church council that does not heed my counsel. And you’ve been led by your largest donators, rather than being led by me and what I want to do through you and through this church body.”

I can’t help it. I speed walk my way to the platform and stand at Jesus’ side, hands in my pockets, my eyes fixed on Pastor Douglas. “Pastor, I know it’s incredible to even contemplate it, but this is our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Toby, I’m sorry but this cannot—”

Jesus addresses pastor. “I am.” Then to the people: “I’ve come to make the star of your church shine brighter.”

Pastor Douglas’s face turns two shades of red. “This is wholly unbiblical.” I notice two deacons moving toward the platform along the sides of the sanctuary.

Jesus smiles at the challenge, but my heart still races within me. “Did I not visit Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus? And John at Patmos?”

Pastor appears unconvinced. “For you to say you’re the Lord Jesus Christ is ludicrous! Toby, you’ve been grossly deceived!”

I lower my head, confusion pooling in my heart. *Have I?*

Jesus lays a hand on the pastor’s shoulder. “Your zeal to protect your flock is commendable. I am glad you are here as the overseer. And I see that words will never be enough!” He turns to a large lady bound in a wheelchair near the front. “Julia, get out of that chair!” And to a young boy wearing dark-tinted sunglasses dressed in a long-sleeve white shirt at the back of the church, “Corbin, you can see now!”

I know both people—they’ve both faced challenges the past year. But our church, as far as I could remember, had never prayed for them.

The lady’s legs quiver and contort before straightening. Her white shoes land on the carpet. “Pins and needles!” She scans the faces of those surrounding her. “Pins and needles, I shouldn’t feel them! And...I-I can wiggle my toes!”

“And you can walk, Julia.” Jesus nods, an encouraging smile aimed at her.

In awe and with anticipation, she locks eyes with Jesus and bravely bends over before heaving her bulk up out of the chair. Her eyes enlarge, her jaw drops, and her arms stretch out around her as she takes one step, then two, followed by a series of steps—joy lighting up her face. “I’m walking!”

The boy toward the back of the church examines his mother’s face, his breath caught in his throat. He tenderly takes her face in his hands, wiping away a tear from her cheek. “Mommy, your skin is so smooth.”

Catching my eye, Jesus points to the front pew on the right side. “Toby, go to Sebastian there!” I glance at the elderly Black fellow sitting in the first pew, leaned over so he can see the pulpit. Standing barely 5 feet tall, he has a hunched back and grossly bent neck which keeps his eyes always fixed on the ground. I’ve seen him often around town pulling a food trolley.

I don’t know what exactly I’m doing. I feel powerless and self-conscious with everyone watching me as I approach the man. But his face displays a smile and look of curiosity at all that’s happening.

The cacophony of the first two persons healed, the church watching and talking to each other at the spectacle overtaking the church, makes me excited but also afraid. My heart pounds within me, and my dress shirt sticks to my shoulder blades as perspiration drips down to the small of my back. Jarrett stands at the rear agitated, his eyes bulging. I think he might slip out the backdoor at any moment.

“Hello Sebastian.” My trembling hand shakes the hand extended to me.

A full smile appears, revealing a handsome face. “Hello, son. You’ve got an interesting friend with you today.”

I nod. “May I pray for you?” As I say this, words spring forth from deep within me. *Do not pray. Command in the Name.*

It’s then I notice Sebastian’s dark eyes conveying expectation. “Yes, Toby. I always welcome prayer.”

“Hmm, not prayer. A command. The Holy Spirit—I think I sensed Him tell me to command.”

Sebastian’s eyebrows lift. Another full smile. “Interesting.”

“I command in Jesus’ Name for this body to be restored as it should be...” I continue to hold my hand on his upper back—a hard, grapefruit-sized lump beneath his black suit.

After five of the longest seconds I've ever lived, I glance up at Jesus whose gaze is fixed on me. He smiles while speaking, as if a father watching his son learning how to ride a bike. "Command out of love for Sebastian! Love compels you to act, to make war against the enemy until my Kingdom comes fully in Sebastian's life!" I hear Jesus' words, in sync with the voice of the Spirit within me.

Knowing Jesus is watching, I speak again. I do care for this man. I've felt sorry for him when I've seen him around town. I've always wanted to help him. Unexpectedly, a flood of overwhelming love and faith rises from within me for Sebastian.

Then it happens. The stiff hardness deflates beneath my hand. Bones twist and pop—and realign. Sebastian's eyes double in size. "Oh my!" Tears stream and fall onto the pew's plump red cushion—from him and I both! He slips from the padded pew down to his knees on the carpet and then to his side even as his head and body perfectly straightens and aligns.

Pastor Douglas speaks, his voice low, wavering. "Signs and wonders...can be counterfeit and sent to deceive."

Jesus wraps his arm around the pastor's shoulders. Then places his other hand atop his head. "Be immersed in my Spirit now according to your cries the past year. I bless you."

In response, the pastor lifts his hands above his head, closing his eyes.

Then Jesus addresses everyone. "And to any who are hungry and thirsty, who wish to be effective witnesses for me, according to your desire, I immerse you with my Spirit *now!*" He sweeps his hand across, his eyes connecting with each person. Eyes close. Arms reach upward. Weeping erupts. Others wear an expression of overwhelming joy. Worship and praying aloud, some in the beauty of foreign languages, sounds from all corners of the sanctuary.

Some, though, remain still and quiet. They keep their hands beneath chins, watching the spectacle, and whispering fiercely to each other.

Jesus lowers the pastor, overwhelmed, to his knees. Then he steps down and makes a beeline to those with scorn on their faces. He beckons them to come to the middle aisle. Only reluctantly do they step out. Methodically, he speaks into their ears. Almost all these slip to their knees, too.

Several, though, turn around with distressed, accusatory, twisted looks of anger before rushing out of the building as if the sanctuary had caught fire.

Well, to be honest, fire of another sort *had* erupted within the building.

“Lord, what of those who left?” Jarrett yells. “Wait, I know what to do!” He scrambles out the door following them.

A half hour later, Jesus has taken the congregation outside and seated them beneath the shade of a giant oak. We all sit on the grass, its soft coolness inviting—the shaded air free and robust with potential. All eyes remain fixed on Jesus, pastor next to him. Little Corbin sits a few feet in front of Jesus, while I sit on a mound of grass behind him. I can’t believe all I’ve just experienced in just one hour.

He talks to all of us. “I have breathed on each of you my Spirit. For some of you, I’ve done necessary heart surgery, so to speak, to prevent spiritual lethargy or, worse, eventual death. And from this day forward, I want you to think *beyond* the four walls of your church.” He takes in all the people, and a smile of appreciation appears. “Make your church building not a place to hide each week, but a place to bring the sick, the brokenhearted, the poor, the forgotten and marginalized. Use it as a triage for this city—a place to strategize in cooperation with my Spirit. All authority has been given to me. Go and make disciples of the people, for I will be with you to make it so!” He beams while surveying the people with a loving, patient look.

I notice that look on the Lord’s face. “Jesus, you seem so filled with joy right now.”

He speaks over his shoulder to me. “Observing my Church like this fills me with tremendous contentment and joy. Now, they match my yoke, which is never too hard, and my burden, which is never too heavy. You can see they’re ready to go to work empowered by my Spirit to do our Father’s will.”

Just then, voices sound from across the way. Jarrett’s returning with the five that had run out of the church. Their faces are now open and smiling, and they’re listening to everything Jarrett’s saying. I wonder what’s happened. And Sebastian... Wow! He sits on a log along the edge of the gathering, his head held high, his eyes closed, his face content and bathed with a look of sheer joy and gratitude. Still in communion with the Spirit, he sings under his breath.

With a pleased grin, Jesus’ eyes lock with Jarrett’s as he steps nearer. “What happened, Jarrett?”

“I just told them my story—what happened to me yesterday and how I was changed when I met you!”

One of the five, a rotund man in his 50s, steps forward. “As a member of the church counsel, I’m ashamed to say I’ve not been attentive to the Lord’s voice for so long.”

As we all stand, Pastor Douglas faces Jesus. “We want to go where you lead us, Lord.”

Jesus squares up with him, gripping his shoulders. “My Spirit yearns to lead you. And I want to go where *you* go.” Jesus addresses all present. “You’re all welcome to visit me at 30 Summit Avenue next Sunday.”

Pastor’s facial expression is expectant. “Shouldn’t the world know you’re here?”

“Seeing me in person won’t bring transformation and necessary rebirth. Knowing the Good News of my Father, though, will bring change. *That* is what is needed.”

After hugs, we wave goodbye to the congregation as we head back.

Jesus extends a hand to Jarrett as we walk, pulling him into a hug. “And you...I’m so proud!”

Jarrett’s face turns three shades of red at that, his eyes fixed on the ground as we walk.

I’m curious. “What made you go after those people, Jarrett?”

“I sensed something, I think the Holy Spirit, lead me to go after them.” I watch Jarrett wipe away what I think might be a tear.

The Lord looks at me with a toothy grin. “And by my Spirit, you deposited immense joy into Sebastian!”

“What I liked about him most was how humble he was, just so gracious to receive despite years of struggle in a defective body.” A surge of emotion wells up within me at the memory of seeing him made whole. “I saw joy on his face even before he was healed.”

“He and I have had a decades-long relationship. I am fond of him. But make no mistake. Although his body gave him daily challenges, his spirit remained unblocked, mighty to do my will, and to pray for others.”

“Lord, I just want to be used every day like I was back there.”

“You *can* be. And I have given you the mantle of a lion—to go where I lead you, to speak what I say through you, and to be my healing hands to a world that needs to enter my Kingdom.”

We near my house, and I wonder if my adventure with Jesus for the day is about to end.

Jesus rests a hand on my head as we’re about to part. “I see your heart. Come over at 4 o’ clock for an amazing Sunday dinner!”

I wave as I go to my front door. “Can’t wait, Lord!” *Just a few hours and I’ll be back with him.*

I come into the house and find a note from Mitch: “Had to show a house today. Client’s only day off work. Will see you about six.”

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*Bryan Silverson, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*3:08 p.m.*

Shifting from one foot to the other, I knock at the front door, unsure of my decision to come here. The door swings open, and there stands...Jarrett, not Jesus.

“Jarrett! How’s everything?” I’m quick to mask my disappointment. I wonder if I’ve succeeded. He’s the last person I expected to answer the door.

“Hey Bryan. Came to visit Jesus?”

“Yeah, where is he?”

Jarrett’s face turns sad and his voice somber. “He went back to heaven this morning.” A stab of disappointment hits me. That is, until the corners of Jarrett’s mouth upturns into a sly grin. “Naah, just joking! He’s just in the kitchen cooking.” He pushes the screen door open for me.

Off-kilter but relieved, I step inside.

Despite the volume of goods we delivered yesterday, the living room looks surprisingly ready for use. I step through and see the long, heavy oak table we delivered and set up yesterday. It’s ready for use with ten chairs around it. Jesus stands in the roomy kitchen, working about the stove, steaming pots all around, the delicious aroma irresistible.

Jesus, checking the oven, sees me. “Bryan, welcome! Make yourself at home. Hungry?”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“I’m making something tasty—and enough for you to take to your mom, Joan, later. And your girlfriend, Jessica.”

“Really, Lord. I didn’t come to be a burden.”

Jesus looks at me with a raised eyebrow. “In a Jewish family, life is always centered around festive homecooked meals.”

“Jewish, eh? Oh, I’d forgot about that.” I look around. “Is there anything I can do to help out around here?”

“I appreciate the offer, Bryan. There are beds upstairs that need to be assembled, if you’re so inclined?”



“My pleasure, Lord.” For a fleeting second, I wonder inwardly why he’d need a bed if he’s the Son of God.

“The beds are for guests, but also perfect for leaning against when it’s time to commune with Abba.”

“Abba?”

“Father.”

“Ahh, yeah.” I say it as if it was obvious.

Jesus looks at Jarrett. “Jarrett, care to give Bryan a hand?”

Jarrett, clearly not overjoyed at the suggestion, joins me. To be honest, I’m also not thrilled. We head upstairs.

Almost an hour later, Jesus yells up to us. “Bryan, Jarrett? Dinner will be ready in a few minutes if you guys want to wash up and make your way down here.”

I’m tightening the last bolt of our third bed. “Just gotta place the mattress slats and we’ll be down.”

Jarrett’s been a genuine help, to my surprise. In a brief time, he’s changed, though still looking like a grump most of the time.

Stepping downstairs minutes later, the table’s set with a spread of steaming dishes—a platter of heaped roast beef, mash potatoes, rich brown gravy, a plateful of oven-baked biscuits, and all sorts of steaming vegetables.

Jesus looks at me and Jarrett. “Before we eat, could you two do me a favor?”

Jarrett and I both glance at each other.

“Mr. Bruno, next door at 28, has suffered life-changing news the past months. We’ll do the right thing and show him he’s not alone, that he’s cared for. Jarrett, would you go and invite him to join us?”

Jarrett scrambles toward the front door.

I’m happy to help, too. “And what can I do?”

“Take this plate to Miss Cahva Ayustine across the street at 31.” He hands me a foil-covered plate, hot to the touch. A familiar, delicious aroma seeps through—what smells like cooked beef in oyster sauce, and steaming vegetables.

Jesus stops me before I leave the table. “If she doesn’t answer, leave the plate on her small table on her porch.”

Stepping outside, I rush to drop off the plate and get back to that table. Crossing the road, I see the house has had better days. Tall, unpruned trees, overgrown weeds, and out of control rose plants surround the house. A sheltered porch is situated along the house's front. I go to the main door situated on the house's right side. I rap at the heavy wooden door, the doorbell button broken with wires hanging out of its housing. I listen for any movement and consider no one home until I hear shuffling inside, followed by silence. I knock one more time, expecting the door to open. No one answering, I set the plate on the small side table beside a single rocking chair, covered with webs and surrounded by brittle leaves.

Headed back to Jesus' house, I see Jarrett making his way back from the Bruno neighbor I met yesterday morning. We meet at Jesus' porch. "Is he coming?"

Jarrett shows a rare smile. "He was surprised but glad for the invite! He's coming."

Together, we reenter Jesus' house. Seeing us, Jesus throws up both arms accompanied with a robust smile. "Let's eat, friends!" To Jarrett, he points to the chair on his left. And to me, he gestures to the chair on his right.

I sit down just as Jesus lifts his off-white shawl onto his head. He prays aloud, his eyes upturned, and his mouth smiling with such affection that I'm mesmerized by the whole affair. Finishing, he rests his eyes on Jarrett, then me.

I fork pieces of roast beef layered with thick, chestnut-colored gravy onto my plate. "Lord, can I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"When you prayed, your face..."

"I noticed that too," Jarrett adds.

Jesus looks at us both. "What?"

"You just looked so...happy."

Jesus chuckles heartily. "And you both can live in this joy, too. It's not exclusive to me. What you saw is my reaction to my Father. He's so fond of me, but the Father is also so very fond of you two!"

I nod, but not quite understanding. A thought crosses my mind. *I'm sure He'd be fond of me, too, if I was perfect!*

Jesus leans toward me, his eyes fixed on me. His voice is tender but emphatic. “My shed blood long ago makes you perfect before the Father!” He takes the platter of meat and forks pieces onto his plate. “You can have all of what I have...because I made it possible for you.”

I grab some still-hot biscuit rolls from a plate. “How?”

“Being surrendered and submitted to my Father, to me, to the Holy Spirit will usher you into my *shalom*.”

Jarrett is the first to ask with a mouthful of food. “Um, what’s that?”

“It’s a Hebrew word that means being in a place where nothing’s missing from your life and nothing’s broken. It is my wish for each of you to be whole daily through this life.”

Jarrett snickers. “If only I could win the lottery, then I’d know the meaning of that.”

At Jarrett’s words, a smile plays at Jesus’ lips. He tears a chunk from the fresh-baked loaf. “Wrong. That would give you six months of happiness at most.”

Jarrett raises a lone finger, stopping Jesus, accompanied with a mischievous grin. “You’re probably right. But it’d be the best six months of my life!”

Jesus laughs at Jarrett’s words, a rich and full laughter, and I’m caught up in it too. Without warning, Jesus reaches over and jabs Jarrett’s arm. I’m amused by the whole scene.

And it’s then that I realize I like Jarrett. Yeah, not so dependable on the job, but there’s something in his personality I’m liking the more I’m around him. And despite all his challenges, he’s never lost his humor, though sometimes there’s an edge to his words.

Jesus resumes. “That happiness from the world would not be able to reach your deepest parts and deposit joy. Only genuine relationship with me and living generously grants joy.”

I’m curious about the plate I took across the street. “Jesus, what’s going on with the person at 31?”

“Ms. Cahva Ayustine is a proud, independent, older lady. Her family across the world, she’s content to live in her house by herself. You brought her a plate that will taste of home cooking from decades ago!”

I drink the chilled lemonade from my tall glass. “Where’s she from?”

“East Timor.”

“Her house and yard’s had better times, that’s for sure!”

Jesus lowers his fork, fixing his eyes on me, his lips displaying a grin. “Did you have something in mind?”

I'm willing, but uncertain. "But how? She doesn't want interaction."

"Leave that to me! All humanity's searching for the puzzle pieces of life to fully understand their place, their worth, their purpose, their identity."

Two faint raps at the front door, Jesus goes to answer the door.

Seconds later, Jesus returns with a blond-haired teenager following. There's a look in his eyes that I've seen before when my movers delivered a houseful of goods to a local celebrity. He's starstruck.

Jesus points to our visitor, who I remember stopped by yesterday. "Bryan, Jarrett, meet Toby from up the road and across the street. He's one of mine."

I stand up and shake his hand. Jarrett stands but only when he sees me stand. As I sit down again, I notice seven plates set out on the table. "Lord, more are coming for dinner?"

There's a gleam in Jesus' eyes. "Yes, my house is open to all guests and all those searching."

Jarrett speaks up with a tinge of irritation. "Who else is coming, Lord?"

"You'll see! Meanwhile, after you've enjoyed your meal and rested a bit, I have three more unassembled beds upstairs that could use your touch, gentlemen."

I nod, happy to be of service. Meanwhile, I dig in, enjoying the tasty food. I don't think I've had a meal like this in years!

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*Cahva Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue*

*3:45 p.m.*

*Knocks at my front door...again! Who can that be? And what is going on in this neighborhood? More interruptions in the last two days than in the past twenty years combined!*

I go to the living room window and peek, careful not to be noticed, and see a man walking away, someone I've not seen before. As he walks, he casts a glance behind him. Then I recognize him—he's one of those moving men I saw yesterday holding a clipboard.

I decide at once I'll not stand for any more of these intrusions. I grab a piece of paper and a marker and write: *Do Not Disturb!* Opening my door, I use tape to affix the sign. It's then I notice a plate covered with aluminum foil. I glance across the way and see the man reenter the

house of that strange new neighbor. I roll my eyes and go to close my door, intending to leave the plate where it is, when I catch a whiff. *Is that...?*

I step back out onto the porch, lifting the plate to my nose. Sure enough, the scent is familiar—like something delicious my mother would cook for me when I was a child. I picture my mother’s face and find myself sitting at her table long ago, my nose taking in the heated, sweet scents of her cooking. Tall and beautiful, my mother’s raven hair is tied back behind her head as she steps over to me and sets a glass of water in front of me. She smiles, which draws out my own smile.

Those were the beautiful times—before it was all ripped from me.

With a single glance toward that house across the street, I step back into my home and ease the door closed. The aroma of the dish, hot in my hands, fills the darkened foyer as I press my back against the front door. *What is happening on Summit Avenue?*

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*Toby Garrells, at Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*3:58 p.m.*

At seeing Jesus again, I can’t stop from smiling. His face, too, lights up at seeing me.

“Come on in, Toby! Dinner’s ready!”

The lengthy wooden table is filled with platters and glassware, the cascade of delicious scents causing my eyes to water.

Twenty minutes later and half a plate eaten, I get to meet Frank Bruno, introduced to me by Jesus. He’s an older, balding man with a kind, but hardened face, wearing jeans, a grey t-shirt, with tattoos on his forearms, and sporting a large pot belly. And then memories resurface of my dad hanging out with him when I was a kid. He’s amused and pleased to be here, I can tell, but also surprised at seeing all of us at the table. Jesus and him already know each other, to my surprise.

A bit later, I’ve eaten as much as I can of the delicious spread when knocks sound at the front door. I push off a lingering sadness that I won’t get one-on-one time with Jesus tonight. But the truth is, I want others to know him as much as I know him.

Jesus arises. “Our final guests for the evening. Please, start praying.” The focus of his words are directed at me.

He steps from the dining area through the livingroom to the front door.

I text Mitch:

*Hey Mitch! When you get home from work, come over to 30 Summit Avenue so you can meet our new neighbor!*

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*Delante Thomas, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*5:04 p.m.*

Alyssia and I stand there on the front porch, Michael in front of us. She wears a grin of pure curiosity. I feel foolish having agreed to bring her. Every window in the rather large farmhouse, upstairs and downstairs, is lit with yellow-flamed lamps. I tap the door with my knuckles. The Jesus-lookalike yanks the door open, his eyes landing on me, then Alyssia. When they fall on Michael, his face brightens.

“Welcome!” He pushes the screen door open before resting his hand on Michael’s head. “Michael! So glad you could come today for a visit with your mom. A home is especially blessed by the presence of children.”

I’m caught off guard by his enthusiasm. Alyssia looks at me with a slightly overwhelmed look. She bites her lower lip until a smile fights its way to the surface.

Jesus gestures for us to step inside. “Dinner is served!”

Unappealing from the outside, what meets us when we step inside the house are the aromas of cooked-through roast beef, mash potatoes and baked bread. “We didn’t come to intrude.”

Jesus half turns to me. “I’ve been expecting you, Delante.” He points to three placeholders at the table, which puzzles me to say the least. *How did he know?*

Then the Jesus actor does the intros. “Toby and Frank, meet Delante, Alyssia, and her son, Michael.”

A young man sits next to Jesus who I recognize as being the little brother of Mitch from across the street. Then I see Bruno who lives next door. Not a fan! For years he's shown only disrespect to me. Rumbling from the ceiling—like something heavy being dragged across the floor. Probably Dracula's casket with the way people like playing Halloween around here.

I toss a nod to Toby. "I know your brother."

A surprised look appears on his face. "You do?"

I shrug. "Yeah, from high school."

I avoid looking at Frank, but face this man claimin' to be Jesus. "Are you sure we're not intrud—"

He raises a hand to stop me, smiling. My eyes drift to those wrist scars. "Glad you've come. Make yourself at home. Take a seat."

I'm still unsure about coming over here, especially with Aly and Michael.

Alyssia and Michael sit at the middle of the table, their backs to the living room, while I step around and sit across from Alyssia, beside Frank. "Alyssia finds your claims to be Jesus..."

Jesus passes the large platter of meat to Alyssia. "Absurd?"

"Yes." At saying this, I note the Jesus actor's face doesn't change one bit. Alyssia loads Michael's plate—the boy's eyes as big as golf balls at the feast before him.

Jesus passes mash potatoes to me before speaking. "I can understand that as any incredible claim must be investigated and scrutinized."

Alyssia gives Jesus a sidelong look. "This isn't a usual thing, is it? You showing up like this?"

"Father, Spirit, and I have worked since Creation. We continue to work."

Alyssia's on the prowl. If anyone can spot a fake, it's her. "And how long before the news media finds out?"

"My servants work to prevent such intrusions."

Except for small talk between Alyssia and Michael, we eat in relative quiet for a few moments.

"JC" scans the table. "Is the food to everyone's liking?"

Alyssia nods as does Michael, who flashes a toothy grin. "It's so good!" For some reason, Michael's enthusiasm annoys me.

"And Michael, I've heard your prayers."

Alyssia clinks knife and fork onto the plate, glaring at Jesus. “Hey, if you wanna play Jesus, fine! But do not involve my son!”

His face doesn’t react whatsoever. In fact, Jesus fixes his eyes on her. That look appears again on his face like on the porch last night when he looked past me to my house. “And what of the one inside you? Should I also not be involved with him?”

Confusion snakes down my spine at his words. I swallow hard, wondering what the hell Jesus is saying. Alyssia turns to me, eyes enlarged and disturbed.

His face somber, Jesus resumes. “That which is sacred should be protected.”

“Amen,” Toby adds, without looking up, munching on a crusty roll.

“Alyssia, what is he talking about?” Her hand reaches and holds my hand. Usually cool to the touch, her hands are now warm and clammy.

“He knows.”

“Knows *what*?”

She touches her tummy with a gleam of wetness in her eyes. “I’m five weeks...” She mouths the words “preg-nant” with a quick glance to Michael who’s busy cutting roast beef slices into smaller pieces with knife and fork.

My insides hollowed out, I shoot up from the table. “What, you didn’t tell me?”

“I wasn’t sure.”

I gaze at her. “Wasn’t sure about *what*?”

She’s distraught and fighting back tears. “That I’d...keep...” She looks again at Michael, concerned.

I stare at her, unable to find my voice. Our eyes finally meet.

She covers her face with both hands. “I can barely make ends meet as it is. One more mouth to feed—and you’re barely around.”

I step around the table and pace the living room with my hands held behind my head. “Is it mine?”

Frank interrupts. “For goodness sake, go home to talk—”

I rush forward between Alyssia and Michael slamming the table, leaning toward Bruno, not in a mood to play. “I did *not* ask for your opinion.”

To his credit, Bruno backs down, his fat mouth chewing on his free dinner.

She’s now angry. “Of course, it’s yours!”



Jesus raises an eyebrow. “Actually, the child is mine. I knit this one in your womb. And despite the sins of father and mother, his path is set for wonderful things...if you’ll give him the chance to live.”

“*Him?*” I ask.

A smile plays at the corners of his mouth beneath his dark beard. “Him.”

Alyssia grabs her skull as if it might split in two. “Jesus, what should we do?”

I’m still in disbelief at this news! “Why are you asking him? We don’t know this guy!”

The Jesus-lookalike answers her, but his eyes stay fixed on me. “Alyssia, you have been spiritually stillborn since your day of accountability.” His eyes move to her. “Birth of another sort is needed!” He glances at each person at the table, and then to me, still standing in the living room. Michael’s wiping the gravy on his plate with a half-eaten, golden biscuit.

At that, my anger nearly explodes out of my chest. “Hold it! I gave my life to God years ago.”

Jesus stands up, places the chair underneath the table, then leans on the chair’s back. “But you took it back not long after.”

*Can’t argue with that.*

Alyssia looks up at Jesus. “What do we need to do?”

“Do you know when a woman enters a covenant of marriage?”

“I know it only from movies.” She throws a reproachful glance over her shoulder at me.

A small smile appears on Jesus’ face before he resumes. “It begins with an invitation. And later she will say to her bridegroom, ‘I do,’ and then the marriage is consummated.”

I have to interrupt this whole scenario, which is going wrong in the worst way. “Wait, wait. We just came over only to meet you, not join a cult. That’s it!” I offer my hand to Alyssia to take it and come with me. She hesitates as if hypnotized. She doesn’t even look at me, just stares into the actor’s face. “I want to hear what he has to say.” She leaves no room for discussion.

I roll my eyes, sighing. “Alyssia, like you said before. This *cannot* be Jesus.”

She finally breaks her eyes off him and looks at me. “Delante, but he knew...” and puts one hand on her tummy.

“A lucky guess! Let’s get outta here!”

Jesus continues talking as if I’m not even there. “If you want to experience rebirth, you must be sorry for your wrongs committed against the Father, others, and even yourself. Then put your

trust in me and what I did for you millennia ago. You do this by saying, ‘I do’ just like in a ceremony of marriage!”

Tears brim her eyes. “But I’m a mess.”

*I’m losing her!*

I’ve had it, and I reach grabbing at her arm to yank her from her seat. “You’re not a mess!” But she’s anchored to her seat. I speak to her son. “C’mon, Michael!” Confused, he stands up.

“Delante!” Alyssia pulls Michael back down, her face twisted with anger. “If you want to go, go! But me and Michael aren’t leaving!”

I glance at Jesus. His eyes remain resolute but filled with warmth. “Don’t go, Delante. Stay.”

“So, you only love us *if* we change?”

“I love regardless, Delante, change or not. The change is for *your* benefit—and for your future. At an appointed time, I will set aside my love and judge without partiality each and every one.”

“I’m outta here!” I storm toward the front door.

An irritating, know-it-all voice halts me—Frank! “*Finally*, peace and quiet!”

I rush back to the table, my pulse thundering against my ribs. My hands are clenched fists. I stare at Frank. “Shut up if you know what’s good for you!”

He says nothing, which is good for him. I turn to get outta this house.

Alyssia yells after me, pleading. “Delante, please don’t go.”

“I’ll see you guys later, maybe!” I open the front door, push open the screen door, and step out. The clammy night air clings to me. Rolling thunder rumbles in the distance, a storm approaching.

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*Alyssia Long, at Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*5:21 p.m.*

Michael stands beside me looking on, his arm stretched across my shoulder. I’m in tears as this one who seems to be Jesus takes my hand in his and speaks, his concerned eyes fixed on me. “I have committed all of who I am to your life and well-being. I have given all that’s possible to

win you.” He pauses, turning his hand and wrist upright. I see the one-inch-scar. For a second, I see a flash of light, like the glimmer of a diamond.

*My eyes playing with me?*

Jesus draws my hand toward the scar. He’s nudging me to touch it, and I do. The contours of rippled skin around the wound are soft, and the space where something penetrated tender, I assume a long nail. It’s large enough for my finger to fill. “My love was not just words, but actions to save and protect you. May I enter your heart today, so you can enter my heart. If you are ready, we will establish covenant.”

“A covenant? Sounds serious.”

“It is serious. It is an eternal joining, far greater than a marriage contract.”

I hold his large hand, his fingers long and wrapped tenderly around my hand. “I can’t believe this is happening to me right now.” I turn and look at Michael. “But we do want a change in our lives.” Then, back to Jesus. “I didn’t believe in you because there were so many distractions not to believe. But the biggest reason is that I didn’t want to change. I loved my old life too much.”

Jesus seems to understand, nodding. “The enemy distracts and deceives. It can be difficult to hear my voice, listen to my Spirit, and turn away from the old path of life.”

I nod at his words. “I only want what’s real. I can’t even get genuine commitment from Delante.” I squeeze his hand which is warm and soft, but strong. “Should I give up on him?”

Jesus smiles. “I am working on him even this minute. Be patient with him. But after entering covenant with me, you’ll want to reassess your relationship to see if it helps you in your new life or not.”

All at once, I just want relief from exhaustion. “Would you come into my heart?”

He shifts in his seat, a look of joy lighting his face. “If you come into my heart, I will come into yours.”

“I’d like that,” I whisper, my throat constricting, tears blocking my vision. “*Please* come in. I need a new direction in my life so much.” I squeeze my eyes shut, the weight of my own words anchoring within me.

A tap on my shoulder. I look up to Michael staring at me. “Mommy, can I also pray?” I look to Jesus. He grins before reaching and pulling Michael next to him.

“Amen!” The older teenager beams. I think his name’s Toby.

The guy, Frank Bruno, slowly eats, his face neutral. He avoids looking at us.

Michael taps my shoulder again. “Yes, Michael?”

He points to my tummy. “Can we pray for him, too?”

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*Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue*

*7:15 p.m.*

I’m stuffed from the homecooked spread. I’m shocked, to be honest, with the goings-on there. I guess I’m also full of curiosity at this Jesus character. I reserve judgment but assume the worst. He must be a counterfeit. Maybe an alien?

I left about six o’ clock—way too many people for my taste. And that house is a magnet for all sorts. Seeing that drug dealer step into the house shocked me, nearly pushing me over the edge. If Jesus was real, he’d surely have known about all the people that guy’s destroyed. Instead, he welcomed him in along with his loser girlfriend. I sympathize for her son and the kid on the way.

I catch a glimpse of the calendar; just 7 days till the end of July. My insides feel hollowed out, as if by ravenous termites. All my job hunting the past months to no avail. I suppose if I was a recruitment manager, I’d also look past a 57-year-old man to the other hundreds of candidates, decades younger, that had also lost their jobs.

My situation leaves a bitter aftertaste. My home of decades, not my own but a place I’d shaped into my own haven, would soon be cut off from me. I’d always assumed I’d one day die here. Probably alone but at least comforted by my things and Attack Cat, if he lived long enough. Lots of relationships without the tethers, or leashes, as I call them. I dig through the spare bedroom turned into my storage room of boxed memories. *What am I going to do with all this stuff?*

I flap open my suitcase. Assuming nothing changes between now and this Sunday, I prepare for the worst—all the while wondering how this could be happening to me. *Me!* Mid-tier management making a fair living and now my job hauled off to some foreign country.

I pack as much as I can into my suitcase, including a heavy hooded parka jacket for when fall and winter arrives. I get my shoulder bag and fill it with things that’ll be easier to handle and

protect. A laptop. A large and small photo album—the smaller one filled with black and white photos. I grab a set of green stamp collector books that my grandfather gave me when I was a teenager.

Finished, I go down to my kitchen and heat up a slice of the Jesus pie in my microwave. I do not now believe he's the Big JC, but I do have to say I find myself liking him and filled with curiosity. Somehow, he knew exactly what dessert to drop off to me. And the way he spoke to the drug dealer's girlfriend—the knowledge he had about her pregnancy without her showing that she's pregnant—it was all uncanny. What if they were all in it together? Like a cult group looking for naïve victims. But what would they gain by tricking me? I don't have money. I'm not interested in going off to a mountain and sitting on its peak staring out at the world. The whole thing just seems strange.

I sit down at my table and dig my fork into the soft, heated pie—its sweet aroma tickling my nostrils. I consider that soon, even eating a fresh, delicious piece of pie will be a bitter reminder of my life before the change. Just seven days to go—eight nights sleep—and then I'm out on my own.

I put down my fork, my appetite suddenly eclipsed by the fear gripping me.

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*Delante Thomas, at Alyssia's House, 15 Cisco Place*

*9:05 p.m.*

It's after 9 o' clock, hints of a thunderstorm gathering on the horizon, when I head over to Alyssia's house. I can't believe what happened earlier. I feel dissed, and I don't like how this imposter's taken over the neighborhood in just two days. And then to learn, through that imposter, that a baby's coming, a boy, my son—my chest ignites with heat just at the thought! I honestly don't know what to think, or what I should do!

I rap at the screen door, the hook keeping it closed. "Hey, you in there?"

She steps out of the bedroom and our eyes meet. "Hey!" She sounds irritated with a tinge of anger. Her eyes have lost all softness and her jaw is set.

"Why did you fall for that guy's act? You know that guy cannot be the Jesus of the Bible."

“Why do you say that?”

“Because things like that don’t happen in real life! Not to you, not to me—and definitely not in a city like ours!”

“But I’ve been changed.”

“What are you talking about?” I yank on the door which doesn’t budge. “Are you gonna let me in or not?”

Reluctantly, she approaches the door and slaps at the hook releasing its hold. The door squeaks as I yank it open and step inside. “I could use a cold beer. Can I have one?”

“There isn’t any, Delante.”

“Why?”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I want change. And it began tonight, thanks to Jesus!”

“Don’t call that actor Jesus.” I slip down into her armchair, and Alyssia sits beside me on the couch.

“I felt the change. Even Michael—”

I’m unable to control my anger. “You let that guy influence your son?”

She stands with her arms akimbo and speaks in a coarse voice. “Can you keep your voice down? Michael’s sleeping.”

“Sorry!” I say in a forced whisper. “I just can’t believe you’ve become so gullible.” I leap up, step to her, and reach for her hands seeking appeasement and to end this madness.

She takes a half-step backwards and glares at me, keeping her hands out of reach. “I’m *not* gullible, Delante!”

“Then give me proof he’s really who he says he is. Then I might believe, too. Because the Bible I read when I was a kid said to beware of false Christs.”

“The Bible says that?”

“See? You need to research. You can’t just accept that guy’s words and costume and act without proof.” I see she’s thinking about my words. “Can I get a hug?” I keep my voice soft, craving her affection.

Finally, with hesitation, she steps forward until we embrace. I look down into those alluring, black eyes and the open face that always makes a dull day exciting and worth living.

I stroke her head, the scent of her hair alluring. “Isn’t this much better?”

She becomes rigid, pulling back out of my arms. “I know what I don’t want. From now on, until we are both settled, I want nothing more than this from you.”

I’m disturbed, to say the least. “A hug’s all I get? Why?”

She looks up at me, her lips pressed together in a grim line. “I don’t need to explain myself to you. Maybe if you remembered the other parts of the Bible you seem to be an expert on, you’d not need me to explain to you.”

“What’s wrong with love?”

“What we’ve had isn’t love, but something else.”

Rolling my eyes and annoyed, I let go of her and step back until the armchair catches me. “See? Religion equals boredom, U.S.A. Thanks for proving me right.”

She steps over and sits down on the chair’s arm. She’s perched over me, and her eyes soften. “If it was just religion, I’d agree with you. When I prayed to God earlier, I felt a change happen inside me.”

As she shares, I’m reminded of my altar experience from years ago. And for a second, I envy her being in this place of contentment. Her face...*has* changed, which disturbs me even more!

I let out an exaggerated sigh. “I hope this is just a phase with you.”

“It’s not.”

I shake my head unable to believe this is happening. “I should never have taken you to that actor.”

She looks down at me and runs her fingers across my arm. “When Michael stopped praying, his eyes were filled with something I’ve never seen before on his face.”

I’m unable to hide the disgust in my voice. “I can’t believe you let that actor influence your son?”

“After he’d prayed, his eyes glistened, *Delante*.” A fleeting smile appears on her face.

“He’s just a kid, Alyssia. What you saw is what you want to see.”

“And what about you, when you met God as a boy?”

“It didn’t last.”

Alyssia resumes her thinking as if she’s describing a vague dream. “I just know something real happened earlier to Michael and me. If you hadn’t become angry, you could’ve experienced it, too! Look at the impact he’s had on the neighborhood since arriving just yesterday!”

“A good actor, and a fraud, can be convincing, Alyssia.”

“What about you, Delante? You said it yourself, you went over to Jesus’ house to—”

“—that is *not* Jesus!”

“My point is you went over to that guy’s house to scope out his goods. You acted like a good neighbor. So, who’s the actor?”

“I want to change, Alyssia. But I don’t want any of us to be conned by someone like him.”

She throws her eyes to the ceiling and forces the air from her lungs. “Even if that guy isn’t Jesus, I prayed to God at that table. And so did Michael. We both experienced a change.”

“Let me prove to you he’s fake. Then will you calm down about this Jesus shi—”

“Don’t say it!” Warning in her voice, she jabs the air with her long forefinger pointed toward me.

“If I prove he’s fake, you’ll reconsider your decision earlier?”

She stands up and whirls around toward me. “I...will observe. But I’m not changing back to the old me, not for you, not for anyone!”

“The old you was sexy.” I look her up and down.

She walks toward the kitchen, stops, and turns to me, eyebrows raised, a flare of anger lingering beneath the surface. “The new me is choosy. And waiting for the right time for everything from now on! Jesus take the wheel and all that!”

I stand up, rush toward her with a big smile, hoping to defuse the tension in the air. I playfully wrap my arms around her.

“Stop, Delante!” She’s irritated but laughing.

I put on my best charm. “Let Jesus do the driving...while we make loooooove.” I lean forward to plant a kiss, but she resists as a smile stretches across her caramel cheeks.

“Stop it, or else you’ll be speaking to me on the other side of that screen door from now on!” She looks into my eyes, as if searching for something. Her face displays a fixed, sober look. “I do care for you, Mr. Delante Thomas.”

“I care for you, too.” And then I remember the revelation from earlier. I rest my hand on her tummy. “And I care for this little one.”

“Delante, I need permanence in my life. And stability. It’s time we woke up to our responsibilities. Up till now, what we’ve had between us is lust—nothing more, nothing less.”

“But it’s not lust if I really love you, is it?” I take her hands in mine.

“Love...just because you say it don’t mean it’s real!”



I release her hands, annoyed again. “I knew it was a mistake to introduce you to that actor!”

“My decision for change is real.”

“Like I said, bor-ing! See you tomorrow. By the end of the week, I’ll prove to you that guy’s a fake. ‘Night!”

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*Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue*

*10:30 p.m.*

A knock. *Has Jesus returned?* I’m in my bedroom and head downstairs to see who it is. Opening the door, I see him standing there with a grin, his open face lit up like a sunny day. His white robes blow from wind leftover from a thunderstorm that passed through earlier.

“Hi.” Despite my earlier skepticism, I invite him inside. Admittedly, I feel my mood lift at the sight of him and his buoyant face. He is a likeable person.

“Hello Frank!”

“Thanks for the dinner earlier! It was one of the best meals I’ve had in a long time!”

“You’re welcome, Frank. Are you about to sleep?”

My racing heart, filled with anxiety, hasn’t allowed me sleep. “Naah, it’s still early for me.” I gesture for him to step into my living room straight-ahead just beyond the staircase on the left.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to spend much time with you earlier when you came over.”

“It’s all right. You’re quite the popular guy. You even got the neighborhood drug dealer stopping by for dinner.”

Jesus takes a seat on my sofa. “Do you think I don’t know about him, and the destruction he’s sown?”

“He’s a leech, sucking the life out of good people.”

Jesus looks intently at me. “And should I only attract those that are well? Those not in spiritual danger?”

“I dunno. I’ve worked my entire life to barely keep a roof over my head. It’s just unfair that the ones who break the law don’t seem to get punished while those who live lawfully struggle and never get ahead.”

“Delante is going to change. One way or the other. Either he will surrender to me, or darkness will claim him in totality.”

“Don’t mention his name in my house. As I said, he’s a leech. And leeches don’t get to have names! You should send him and people like him straight to hell...if you really are who you say you are, that is.”

Jesus leans forward at that.

*Did anger just flash across his face?*

He speaks, his voice softer than his look. “If only you could see his potential as I see him. I died for people like him—to intervene and stop them from being judged and separated from me forever.”

“You died, eh? I know on our first visit, you convinced me you might be the Big JC. But having thought about it, I just don’t think it’s smart for me to carry on such a charade. They might lock me up for insanity if it gets out.”

Jesus smiles at that. “My presence here will be long-lasting. I’ve come for you, for Delante, for Summit Avenue, for this city, and to change the trajectory of many in this region.”

“Prove it. So I can get past the doubts and stop feeling like I’m being taken advantage of... Surely you can show me something that would convince me.”

“Let’s take a picture.” Jesus throws me an upbeat grin.

“Huh?”

“Get your phone.”

“Fine!” I reach for my phone, step over to Jesus, and prepare to take a picture. “Your face...”

“Indeed. Take as long a look as you need.”

I take a picture of what I’m seeing, and a few besides. “Why can’t my camera capture your face?” All I can see is a bright flash and a barely seen facial outline.

“I am. Therefore, my face cannot be replicated. But my image has been placed within each of you from the very first of your kind—Delante included.”

I scratch my chin. “Image? What does that mean?”

“My likeness. On that sixth day of Creation, I breathed my spirit into your Forefather. You became so much more. You became eternal.”

“Eternal?”

“An animal will perish and can only return to life if the One calls it forth. But a human being will live forever. It is not the end at your final breath.”

“Hmm, so mom...”

“Her eternal destiny has been determined.”

“Is she—”

“That is between her and my Father. But in time, all will be revealed.”

I consider this added information. “But if all this is true, why is there so much hurting in the world? And heartbreak? Why is everything such a mess?”

Jesus’ face suddenly appears burdened and sad. “I know...it seems hopeless. The weeds grow up with the harvest—and in the end, I will sort it out who goes where. Make no mistake, no evil act will go unpunished. But equally true, those seeking mercy, will find mercy in me.”

“Amen to that!” And I’m comforted. And I realize I’m a believer again.

Jesus rests his hand on my arm. “But Frank, it’s not enough to believe in me. Like Alyssia, Covenant is needed to enter the safety my Father provides. Otherwise, Judgment awaits you.”

I glance at the image on my phone. “After what I’ve just seen, I guess I do need you. And sorry about my attitude toward Delante. I guess I’m willing to be open-minded about him.”

“That’s a good start, Frank.” He reaches over and rests a hand on my shoulder. “If you follow me, you cannot let unforgiveness dwell within you, or see any person as irredeemable.”

A half hour passes when I open my eyes to Jesus’ beaming face in front of me. I’ve just finished praying, asking the Lord into my heart and life. There’s a real joy on his face after surrendering to him. I’m dumbfounded at the change, and we step outside. The night air is now still and cool, the crickets and tree frogs singing to each other along the treeline all around. Fireflies light up the darkened stretch across the way. Looking up, I see the night sky full of wonder and majesty. Every star glimmers with pinprick intensity, brighter than I’ve ever seen. It’s as if I’m seeing such for the first time. I walk beside him to his place. I point to the sky’s brilliance. “Look at that!”

He chuckles lightly. “You are seeing through new eyes.”

“It’s...amazing. What happened to me earlier? I just feel...so alive now.”

“When you confessed, turned from your sin, and placed your trust in me, my Spirit entered you. Your spirit, dead in trespasses, came alive. Born again aren’t just words.”

“I’m not exaggerating. It feels like I’ve lived my entire life inside a darkened shed till moments ago!”

“Without me in your life, life has not been as it was intended.”

We reach Jesus’ front porch. Despite my joy, I feel a sadness that I can’t stay with him longer, sensing our time about to end. I feel so wide awake and alive.

Jesus smiles at me before gesturing to the three-man porch swing. “Would you like to sit for a while?”

Pleased, we sit down, the chains squeaking as we rock back and forth. We enjoy the stillness of the night air, not saying a word. But as nice as the moment is, as good as I feel spiritually, my mind can’t fully relax knowing the uncertainty in front of me.

Jesus glances at me. “I know about your plight.” Then he rests a hand on my shoulder and grips it, squeezing until I sense genuine concern from him. I know he cares.

“Can you help me, Jesus? Maybe just a little bit of heavenly favor? All I want...all I need is a decent job.”

“You have my favor. And I will be with you through all your days, and you will have my perfect peace through all the tests you will endure.”

“Doesn’t sound like Heaven’s favor.”

A broad smile stretches across his face. “Every test will strengthen you and change your character so it’s more representative of me.”

“Like I said, that doesn’t sound like Heaven’s favor.” A grin fights to the surface as new joy washes over me again. “But I will trust you. And I really like what I’m feeling right now!”

“When you hear the Spirit speak, obey. The rest will be taken care of one step at a time.”

A half hour later, we’re swaying in the night air when I feel tiredness tugging at my eyelids. I get up, my knees clicking as I stand. “See you tomorrow?”

“Yes.” He stands up beside me.

“Are you sure you’re not leaving or something?”

“Not yet. You will know when it’s my time to depart.”

“Thanks for everything.” I embrace the Lord.

Jesus clings to me longer than expected before speaking into my ear. “Abide in my Spirit always. Then my joy will spring up from within you and carry you—no matter what tests come.”

“Joy, eh?” I scan his face to make sure I understand. “I can feel a bit of that inside me now.”

“Maintain that joy by keeping your focus fixed on me, not events, not the storms.”

“I’ll do my best.”

He smiles, seeming to understand me. “Don’t worry, Frank. Your future will be one of immense joy, as much as it’ll sometimes be filled with difficulties and struggles.”

“It’s the latter part that I’m worried about,” I admit. “I guess that’s where trust comes in.”

“Exactly, Frank.”

Day Three: Monday

Jesus swings the door open for me just as I step onto his porch. “Ready to get started, Jarrett?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

He leads me downstairs to a roomy cellar that stretches the length of the farmhouse with multiple bookcases. Dozens of medium-sized boxes lay stacked in the middle of the room. “Jarrett, please unpack these boxes and place the books onto the shelves.”

I can’t help but grin. “Don’t you have angels for this kind of thing?”

Jesus responds with his own grin but says nothing.

I scan the mound of boxes filled with books. I tap one of the boxes in front of me. “Have you read *all* these books?”

“These are for others to read.”

I shake my head. “I’m not much of a reader.”

“Perhaps other things speak to you in ways books cannot.”

I yank a strip of tape off a box. “It’s been so long, but I guess the outdoors speaks to me more than books. When I was a boy, I’d go fishing with my dad. I didn’t get along with him during my teen years. But when we’d go fishing at a local lake, we’d sit there for hours in the quiet. We never talked much, but I always felt a connection to him during those times.”

Jesus nods. “And that’s how I designed you. And I’m sorry your father isn’t with you now.”

I lift a stack of books onto the bookcase and set them in place. “What I just described to you was rare for us. All other times we butted heads.”

“Do you regret that?”

I break down the box I’ve just emptied. “Yeah, I guess I do. If I’d not been so hard-headed, I might have had better times with him.” I break open another box, pulling out half a stack of hardbound books.

With a nod and a wave, Jesus ascends the staircase. The creaking sound of his footsteps reverberates across the floor until I hear the main door open, followed by the screen door. Sensing he’s stepped out, I run upstairs and take a look through the curtains, my curiosity piqued. *What are you up to, Jesus?*

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*Tahira Akhand, 27 Summit Street*

*8:10 a.m.*

As my family and I finish our *salat al-fajr* prayers, I make breakfast for my boys and then help them get ready so we can go to the local park. Tahmid will be pleased that the children aren't in the house making noise. Twenty minutes later, I hug and kiss my husband who's slipped back into bed since he got home about 2 a.m. last night. A medium picnic basket held by both my boys, I usher them to the car. Once in the car and belts clicked, I step around to the driver's door when I see the front tire flat.

Disappointment and resignation shoots through me. *What to do?* I don't want to risk disturbing Tahmid's sleep. Perhaps we could walk, as it's not that far. But Tahmid wouldn't be pleased with that either; I rest my hands across my protruding belly.

"Can I give you a hand?" A strangely dressed, bearded man approaches from across the street, wearing a smile and waving. "Pop your trunk and we'll take care of your problem!"

"What...?"

"I'll change the tire for you. Shouldn't take but ten minutes."

Though disoriented, I remain polite. "No, no, my husband—"

"I met Tahmid yesterday."

"You did?" I wonder why he didn't tell me. He usually tells me everything.

"I know your husband worked long hours last night and needs his sleep."

My hair sticks to my forehead from the few minutes I'm beneath the baking sun. I finally settle into a decision, though not sure about it. "You don't mind, sir?"

"I do not mind. But it'll be safer if you and your little ones step out of your car until I finish."

"Ah, yes, of course." I open the rear door, which animates the kids to unclick their belts and scoot out. They search the stranger's face until he smiles warmly; they, in turn, smile back at him. They head to the porch and front door as if to go inside.

"No, children. If you go inside, you'll wake your father."

They groan. Nadir, our eldest, raises his voice. "But it's hot out here, mom."



“Don’t talk back to me.” I throw him a stern look. They stop and meander over to the shade of a medium-sized tree in the middle of the yard. They sit down on the grass.

“You’re wondering who I am and about my dress style?”

I nod, unsure about talking to him.

“*What* are you doing?” My husband’s voice comes from behind, and I whirl around to Tahmid standing on the porch in his bathrobe, his enraged eyes fixed on the stranger.

The man straightens up, his face not losing his friendliness. “Tahmid, my friend.”

“I am *not* your friend!” His eyes fix on me and the children, all light gone from his face. He speaks to us, unwavering, as if conducting a business transaction. “Come inside, please!”

The children scramble onto the porch and stand behind their father. I hesitate, not out of disrespect to my husband, but not wanting to offend the stranger with his good intentions and kind eyes.

A patch of red coats Tahmid’s face. “Tahira, please!”

Finally, I give up, throwing my gaze to the ground before stepping onto the porch and shooing the children further into the house. I hover behind Tahmid, concerned.

“Very well.” The man shows no hint of offense. “Have a good day.” He steps away from the car and heads across the street to what was, up until days ago, an abandoned old farmhouse.

Tahmid turns to me. “I’ll change the tire.” His voice is calm, devoid of emotion.

“He told me he met you yesterday? Who is he?”

“He’s a crazy man. Believes he’s Prophet Isa Masih, peace be upon him.”

“What?”

“And he says he’s much more than that—blasphemous words we will not entertain!”

I watch my husband step off the porch without another word. I ease the door shut to keep the stifling heat out.

“Nadir, please get your father a glass of ice water for when he finishes.”

“Yes, Mother.” He’s always quick to help when needed. At the living room front window, I look past my husband toward the stranger’s house wondering about this new neighbor.

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*Jarrett Blackman, at Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Ave*

8:32 a.m.

Peeking through the window, I watch Jesus return. For some reason I can't explain, guilt wells up in me after watching the whole affair. I rush back downstairs.

Stepping back into the house, he walks across the floor above before descending the wooden steps until his eyes lock with mine. "Want to go for a walk, Jarrett?" His face shows no hint of being offended or upset.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have watched."

"It's fine, Jarrett. But next time, don't just watch. Pray also." He punctuates his words with a clap and a broad smile. "That is fundamental to any work done in my name."

"Sure, Boss." I point to the heap of boxes spread across the floor. "What about the books?"

"That can be sorted later. We have important business to attend. Ready to go?"

"Sounds good, sure." I follow Jesus upstairs, glad we're leaving, and that I won't be cooped up in this cellar all day.

We step out and walk alongside each other, the scorched air hitting me like an oven blast. "Jesus, can we have a little bit of cloud cover today? Sorry if it's a stupid question to ask."

"The Prophet Elijah once prayed for rain. What do you think is the difference between you and him?"

"Hmm, I don't remember much about him—just the story of the chariot taking him up."

Jesus chuckles. "He was a mighty man, but just a man like you."

"And?"

"What made him a great man, a great prophet, was an ear inclined to me. And because he yielded to my ways, even in the small things, he could ask me anything according to my will, and he knew I would act."

"I'll keep that in mind." Walking along, I talk internally to God.

After minutes of walking in silence, Jesus turns to me, his lips upturning with an impressed look. "I heard that. Look there!" He points toward the western horizon.

Sure enough, a clump of clouds are amassing at the edge of the deep blue sky. I'm amused as much as I am amazed. "Wow. Thank you, Lord."

It's then the weight of his right arm drapes across my shoulders. To be frank, I'm surprised he wants to be with me, or that he likes me. I've always had trouble keeping genuine friends. Something about my personality that pushes people away.

He glances at me. "Don't worry. I love you as you are, rough edges and all."

I take in his words, unsure what it all means for me. But I'm mesmerized. "So, where're we headed, Jesus?"

"Just as you just prayed, there's another who has prayed for many years. Today, the answer will come!"

"But why just now? Couldn't you have responded to this person sooner?"

"Timing is everything. And it's a him."

We walk for twenty minutes along the road, only sporadic traffic seen, until we come to a bridge underpass known by the locals as cardboard city where over twenty people live. "We're goin' there, eh?"

Jesus' eyes fix on the tents and large boxes at the top of a cement slope, shadowed by the Lewis Bridge above. He points to a convenience shop up the road a bit. "Let's get some cold drinks and groceries before we meet these great people."

"Great people? I think you might have the wrong address, Lord."

Jesus laughs at that. "No, Jarrett, we are at the right place."

"Whatever you say, Boss."

Twenty minutes later, we're each holding the handle of a large ice cooler, loaded with ice and dozens of drinks, walking up the incline. In two smaller coolers are lunch meats, bread, fruit, and sweet cakes.

As we reach the top of the slope, a bald, older man sees us and steps out of his A tent. Heavily tanned with faded tattoos, he wears only soiled, tattered cargo shorts. His weathered, half-toothless face shows only scorn in his eyes.

Jesus scans the area before his eyes land on the man.

The scorner stands akimbo, his eyes fixing on the cooler held by us.

"I'm Jesus. And this is Jarrett."

The man's face hardens, counting off his fingers. "One, I've heard every quack story you can imagine. So yours doesn't surprise me. Two, I'm not religious." Then his eyes lower to the cooler, his hands dropping to his sides. "But what you got there?"

Grinning with eagerness, Jesus lifts the lid off. “Cold drinks and sandwiches for all of you.”

Others step out of their various tents, boxes, or makeshift lean-tos. All look disheveled, some of them looking like they’ve just run a mile—the scorcher temps having hit these people hard. A sudden rumble of thunder rolls across the sky, followed by a flash and the roar of rain hammering the road and treeline in the distance. Within seconds, a cool breeze sweeps up from below across the flat section bringing with it rain—but it doesn’t intrude past the overhead bridge.

Jesus lifts his hands in happiness. “And a cooling shower, courtesy of Jarrett.”

I swallow the lump in my throat in wonder. “Because of me?”

“Because you put your faith in the right place.” Jesus eyes those gathering around. “And in this case, the answer to your prayer also benefits our friends.”

The rain pounds the pavement and nearby road, and the wafting cool breeze makes this the best place for relief. Eyes close, delighted—the people experiencing respite from the onslaught of heat. A calm settles on all.

We hand out ice-cold drinks. Everyone drinks deeply, smiles appearing on the people’s faces with conversation breaking out.

After a bit, Jesus speaks, his voice echoing within the underpass. “I’ve heard all your cries. And although it may seem hard to believe, I’ve collected your tears over the years.”

Scorn-face, the shirtless older guy who met us, sips his drink standing on the side, looking uninterested. He cuts in without looking at Jesus. “That’s all nice. But what about tomorrow? Next week? What about when winter sets into the land in four, five months? What good is you being here today, or collecting our tears, when our feet are freezing *then*? When we wake up cold and stay that way almost without end for months?”

Jesus takes a step toward the man, his face adorned with an amiable expression. “Roberto.”

The man looks up, startled. “How did you know my name? My mother, God rest her soul, called me that!”

Jesus rests a hand on his shoulder. “When I enter your life, it will be for all time and beyond. And I will bring life and favor to you. If you want real change in your life, you can have it by keeping your eyes fixed on me.”

I think I see his eyes moisten. “W-Who are you?”

“I am Jesus from Nazareth. I’ve come to change lives, yours included.”

The man fixes his gaze on Jesus' face. "Are you really him?" His eyes have changed from scorn to pleading.

Jesus answers him. "I am."

The man staggers backwards. "Are you here to judge the world? 'Coz I'm not ready." At this, something seems off about the man.

"No, I'd much rather seek and save the lost, which is why I have come."

The man bends over in laughter, slapping his knees. Some titters sound from around us, but others shake their heads.

I stare at him offended, wondering what he's doing and what he's thinking.

In a roar of laughter, Roberto throws Jesus a look of disgust. "Did you really think I'd fall for that? How's the cult revenues? Look around 'coz we don't have much to add to your coffers!"

I'm indignant, heat pooling behind my eyes. "Hey, he's the real deal!" I point toward Jesus. "You should be grateful he's come to you at all with your attitude!" A gentle touch comes to the small of my back—Jesus beside me. His face displays calmness despite being challenged.

Roberto laughs some more, disdain etched on his face. "Prove it. Anyone from around here could find out my childhood name! I've been here in these parts since birth."

Jesus smiles at Roberto with a knowing look. "Would you help me? I promise your eyes will open today."

He turns away, but after a single breath turns around with a look of reluctance on his face. "What do you want me to do?"

"Help your friends by making sandwiches." He points at the small cooler packed with supplies. "Jarrett here will assist you."

The man runs his hand across his hairless, sun-scorched head. "Why should I? And I don't have no friends here."

Jesus says nothing, just stands there with a fixed, patient look.

"Fine!" He steps over to the cooler eyeing the lunch meat packages. I approach and draw him to the side where we wash our hands using a bottle of water and a bar of soap. I invite the others to come forward, assisting each one to do the same.

I place bread slices onto paper plates and hand out to those in line. Then Roberto pulls away the plastic film from the packets of roast beef, chicken, ham, and turkey before building one

sandwich after another based on each person's preference. The people top up their sandwiches with cheeses, sliced tomato, lettuce, and various sauces at the end of the queue.

After two-thirds of the people have been served, a portly man with silver hair and too-large glasses speaks. "Is there enough for round two?"

Roberto scans the remaining meat slices. "I don't think—"

A grin plays at Jesus' lips. "Make whatever people ask for. There's plenty!"

Roberto looks at Jesus. "But we're almost out—"

Jesus points a single finger downward.

Roberto looks at the plastic containers, now stacked high with lunch meat. "What the—? How...?"

Roberto builds the sandwiches, and no matter how much meat off the stack he grabs, more somehow remains. "I can't believe this!" He upturns the plastic, emptying the remaining slices onto a plate in front of him. He grabs all the meat in his hands and lifts, revealing more meat on the plate. Resignation crosses Roberto's face.

"Okay, I believe. You...just might be him."

I swallow what I'm chewing. Now it's my turn show scorn. "'Might'?"

"Yes, might. Just because I can't explain something doesn't mean he's the Son of God. I'm not easily duped, y'see."

Jesus pipes up from the side. "Caution is commendable, Roberto. Many will come in my name as pretenders and predators."

Toward me, Roberto's eyebrows lift with a see-I-told-you look.

Noise from my left—someone fast approaching up the cement incline. A man with a head of long, curly red-orange hair steps through the cascading rain into the sheltered, flat section. Rain-water drips from his rusty, curly beard, set against rounded, ruddy cheeks. Despite the July heat, he wears a drenched, stained, sandstone trenchcoat.

"What's goin' on here?" There's a slur in his words, and his eyes dart this way and that. He staggers up to the line of people with an uneven gait. He eyes the food suspiciously while swaying like a storm-blown tree.

"Hello, Mr. Patrick Miles." Jesus flourishes a smile, as if recognizing an old friend. "I've looked forward to your arrival."

Patrick looks up startled. "Who the hell are you?"

Even though he's a yard from me, the older man, in his 60s, reeks of spilt cheap wine and unwashed socks. Jesus steps nose to nose with him. "I am your Maker, and I've come for you."

"What?" A look of skepticism, alarm, and fear converge on his face.

And before another word can be said, Jesus engulfs the man with his arms, hugging him tight. The man struggles in Jesus' arms, his face displaying panic and confusion.

"What? Let me go!" He trembles with defiance, waving his arms trying to break free.

"Your mother, Isabella, always prayed for you. Today, I've come."

"W-What?" He's confused, still resisting. "You knew momma?"

"Yes, she loved you." Jesus passes his hand through an opening in the man's trench coat until his fingers grasp the back of the man's neck. "Her unexpected death two decades ago sent you careening out of control. But I am here to take you back from the darkness, son!"

Struggle melts into something else. The man slams his head into Jesus' shoulder as sobs rack his body. A deep roar escapes from the man's lips as cries roll out of him echoing off the cavern-like section beneath the bridge. Tears merge with rainwater coating his cheeks and dripping down onto his red moustache and beard. Jesus doesn't let go. Instead, he holds even tighter, caressing with one hand his curly red hairs on his head. Seconds later, the Lord lowers him to the ground, still holding on, still loving on the man.

The surrounding people continue to munch on their sandwiches, occasionally looking on, but keeping quiet. I dunno, but maybe they recognize something good happening here.

An hour passes.

Then two.

Jesus just holds him, the man's head leaning against his shoulder as if asleep. I can relate to that. I sit there, admiring a display of love that I've never quite seen before. Then the rain slows to a trickle, and the sun bursts from behind dark clouds bathing the world in golden light.

The man's head pulls back. He laughs briefly before studying the face of Jesus. "It...it's been years since I felt someone give me a hug." His voice is quiet and endearing, his slur gone.

"I know, Patrick. If you choose to walk with me, I will never stop holding you the rest of your days." Jesus stands up and helps Patrick to his feet. "Are you hungry, son?"

The man looks at Jesus astonished before taking in a deep breath and releasing it as if all at once relieved. "Yes."

Jesus brightens. "Roberto, let's make Patrick the biggest sandwich you can muster!"

“But the meat, it’s—

Jesus again points downward with a grin.

Roberto sees the pile of meat and rolls his eyes. “This is...too weird of a day!”

Moments later, Patrick eating a heaped sandwich, Jesus addresses everyone again. “The world can be a cold, cruel place. Although you bear the likeness of God, you are often ignored as if you don’t exist, or they look down on you. One person down the street might say, ‘What a wonderful life’ or ‘Life is beautiful.’ But it can also be grueling, filled with pain, struggle, and heartbreak. Let me tell you this one thing—there is One Who loves you, Whose arms are extended to you, of welcome, of peace, and of a love so deep it defies language. This Sunday, I invite you to come to my house to celebrate new and overflowing life together. But know this: it will not be what you’re expecting.”

The people look at each other taken aback at the invite, pleased and with smiles breaking out.

Jesus and I then say our goodbyes. Jesus fixes his gaze on the orange-red bearded man.

“Patrick? Would you join us? I want you to stay at my house tonight.”

Patrick’s shocked. “Your house? You’re living here in our city?”

“For a time.”

As Patrick walks alongside us, Jesus extends his arm around the man’s rounded shoulders and pulls him close. Patrick glances at Jesus, a sheepish smile on his lips. I walk, glad for Patrick’s good luck, but also feeling a tinge of sadness. I’d been looking forward to time alone with Jesus when we walked home. But if I’m honest, nothing can match what I just seen happen between Patrick and Jesus—it was outta this world!

Reaching Jesus’ house, the Lord takes Patrick upstairs to his bathroom. He tells him to enjoy a bath and take as long as he’d like. Several hours and many echoey songs later, a reborn Patrick comes down wearing a baby blue bathrobe and slippers. I’m sitting in the chair, resting my eyes, when he stands in front of me. Patrick lifts both hands as if a runway model showing off his latest look.

Jesus, sitting at the table, laughs good-naturedly. “Patrick, would you care to stay for a time? I have a room upstairs you can use. All I ask in return is that you help out when opportunities arise.”

“Opportunities? Like what, Lord?”



“You’ll see. They will become plentiful soon enough.”

“Sounds fair. Could I hug you again, Lord? I can’t believe what’s happened to me today.”

“You don’t have to ask.” Jesus stands and steps to Patrick before enfolding him in his arms. A streak of feeling left out shoots through me, just as Jesus extends his other arm in my direction.

“Come here, Jarrett!”

I leap up and hug Jesus, for some reason feeling like a kid.

“I love you both, children.” Laughter erupts from Jesus, robust and infectious. “And Patrick? You smell wonderful!”

Patrick laughs, too. “Why thank you, Lord.”

Jesus takes Patrick upstairs to his new bedroom before returning.

I watch to see if Jesus has changed toward me for my thoughts. “I bet he’s stoked to have his own bed and a chance at a new chapter in his life.”

“Indeed, he is.”

“You know, don’t you, Boss?”

Jesus nods. “If a lamb has been ravaged by wolves, I must keep that lamb near me until it is mended and strong enough to move about on its own.”

“I like that picture, Lord. Patrick deserves that kind of attention after so long without. And thanks for what you’ve done for me, too.”

“The lamb I was referring to isn’t Patrick.” He squeezes my shoulder again, followed by an ear-to-ear grin. We lock eyes, and I see tears filling his eyes. I feel the same emotion I felt on Saturday morning when my heart opened to Jesus.

Jesus lifts my chin. “And I’ve only just got started! But even as I work construction on your life, I want you to be giving space for me to work *through* you to others...like Patrick.”

“Oh, like you said this morning about praying?”

Jesus lowers himself to a chair at the table. “Yes. Just as you prayed for rain, you should also pray for spiritual rain on those caught, willingly or unwillingly, in spiritual drought.”

“Got it, Boss.”

I return to the cellar and continue my work of shelving books. While doing this, I reflect on Jesus’ words and pray even as I work, and for those we met at cardboard city.

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*Toby & Mitch Garrells, 33 Summit Avenue*

*5:28pm*

I hear Mitch's car pull into the driveway. Seconds later, he comes inside. His keys *chink* against the bowl on our side table in the foyer.

I'm sitting on the couch. "Hey Mitch. Where were you last night? I was worried."

He steps through the living room to the kitchen. "Went to Shelly's place."

"Can't you text or call to at least let me know?"

"Sorry, it slipped my mind." He gets out a frozen dinner and uses a fork to punch ventilation holes through the plastic film before setting it in the microwave and hitting the power button. He comes over to the couch and sits down beside me before throwing his head back against the cushion. He forces out a breath from his lungs. "What was it you wanted to tell me the other day—someone you met?"

I try to think of a way to tell him without sounding crazy or gullible. "It's better if you meet him yourself."

"Who?"

"A new neighbor. Someone you could say is quite famous."

"Who would be interested in our town who's quite famous *and* knows you?" A sly grin appears on his clean-cut face.

"You won't believe me if I tell you."

"Who?"

I shake my head refusing to budge. "You need to meet him in person."

"*Who?*" His voice leaves no room for discussion.

"Let's go then. I'll take you over to meet him."

"Look, I'm tired. And it's still an oven out there. Who is it, Toby?"

I bring out my phone and unlock it. I bring up my gallery and rotate the screen toward Mitch. "Take a close look."

He leans toward my phone. "What's with the flash? I can barely..."

"There wasn't anything wrong with my phone."

"Hey, what's with the guy's clothes? Nope, don't recognize him."

“Look, this will sound crazy, but Jesus from Nazareth has moved into our neighborhood to complete a mission.”

The microwave dings, the tomato-cheesy scent of lasagna wafting across to us from the kitchen. Mitch bursts out laughing as he jumps up to get his dinner. “Nice one! But did you think I’d really fall for that?”

“He’s really here on our street!”

He waves off my words before using an oven glove to tip the tray onto a plate. “Little bro, while I’m up, should I get you an ice pack for your heat stroke?”

“Come on then. You’ll see when you meet him!”

“Let me eat first. I’m starved.”

Thirty minutes later, with reluctance, he follows me. We step outside, the air so hot there’s a tinge of something burnt in the air. My clothes stick to me as we walk across the road.

“You’ve been seriously duped if you believe Jesus has moved onto our street.”

“He unlocked my door for me when I got locked out. Remember I texted you? And he’s read my thoughts. And the pictures I took?”

He walks beside me, his hands tucked into his front pockets. “You’re starting to scare me that you believe this.”

We step up onto Jesus’ porch. I knock on the screen door. The inner door opens, revealing Jesus. “Hello, Toby. And I see you’ve brought Mitch. Come in.”

I look at Mitch’s face, all light gone from his face, and deadly serious. “Who are you?” He directs his words to Jesus as he steps in front of me and nudges me back a step.

Jesus gives Mitch a sober, kind look. “You need to be convinced.”

Mitch whirls around and walks past me, yanking on my arm. “C’mon, we’re not entertaining this crackpot!”

I stop him. “Five minutes.”

“What?” Anger mixed with skepticism shows on his face.

“Just give him five minutes. Then you’ll know and believe.”

“No!” He continues walking. “Don’t be gullible! Come home now!”

I face Jesus. “Lord?”

“There’s a lot going on in your brother’s life. Go with him. If you’re hungry, come back at 7 o’ clock for dinner—you and Mitch are invited.”

“I’ll be there!” I meander after Mitch who’s already halfway to our driveway.

I reflect on Jesus’ words about Mitch and wonder what might be going on. I know the death of our parents and older sister a year ago had changed us in momentous ways. To this day, it steals my breath when I think of it. Only recently Mitch had become certified to sell real estate—an accomplishment that had saved our family house from being repossessed.

Coming back into our house, I sit down beside Mitch who’s turned on the TV and flipping through channels.

Mitch doesn’t look at me, just speaks matter-of-factly. “I don’t want you getting involved with that guy!”

“He’s the real deal, Mitch.”

“That’s impossible! And I’m your legal guardian. So, you better obey me or else!”

I want to react, but I think about what Jesus said. “What’s going on with you, Mitch?”

He glares at me. “I’m the one being sensible here. Nothing’s the matter with me.”

“If you’d given him five minutes, he’d have convinced you. He invited us to come for dinner tonight.”

“Well, you’re not gonna be there!”

Mitch’s cellphone chirps which draws his attention. Distracted, he goes to the kitchen. A few minutes later, even as I’m thinking of how I’ll be able to slip out of the house to be with Jesus, he comes back into the living room. “Shelly wants me to come over. I’ll probably be back late tonight.”

I nod, unable to keep from pouting.

“Don’t go to that freak’s house for dinner. Promise me?”

“But I—”

“Promise me!”

“Fine. I promise.” I feel my heart sink just saying the words.

“See you later, then!” He grabs his car keys and heads out.

As Mitch leaves, I pray. “Lord, Mitch has forbidden me to come over. But I really want to spend time with you. I don’t think I can obey him.”

*Stay.* The words float upward in my spirit unexpectedly.

I look out the window toward Jesus' house. "But how can I not be with you when you're here and all?" Even as I say my words, my chin slips downward against my chest as I accept the Lord's directive.

A couple long hours later, I glance across the road. A sharp glint hits my eyes—and I see Jesus headed toward my house, a silver tray in his hands. Jarrett and an orange-bearded man are marching with him. My heart lifts when Jesus throws me a smile with a slight lifting of the tray. I dash to the front door and yank it open just as he steps onto my porch.

Jesus grins good-naturedly. "I thought we'd bring the celebration to you." He steps in and reintroduces me to Jarrett, and to a new guy, Patrick—but I realize I've seen him around town either drunk or asking for food. Today, though, he appears entirely changed and bubbling over with joy. In fact, I've not seen another person so happy in a long time.

Jesus sets the tray on the kitchen table. I see two whole roast chickens with vegetables and potatoes in a rectangular pan, coated with thick, brown gravy. On the sides are baked, flaky biscuits. The rich aroma grabs me, but just being with Jesus is enough. I retrieve plates and set them in place. We sit down together before Jesus reaches for our hands.

"Shall we give thanks?"

I grab his hand, warm to the touch.

After Jesus gives thanks, we dig in. Jarrett eyes the place. "You live here by yourself?"

"With my big brother, Mitch."

"Seems like a big place for just two..."

I gesture to the family portrait on the wall. "My parents and older sister—they died in a car crash a year ago."

The trio stop eating at that. Jarrett speaks. "Sorry to hear that. That's tough!" He pauses before resuming. "I remember the news. Your parents and sister...sheesh."

Jesus looks at me longingly. "Toby has used the last year to draw closer to me. His eagerness and desire have not gone unnoticed."

"I try," is all I can say. "Jesus, what did you mean earlier about Mitch, that he has a lot going on in his life?"

"I will let him share with you in time. For now, keep praying for him."

"I will."

“It ought not to be like that!” Patrick’s face grows a deep red as if a powder keg about to explode. He avoids looking at Jesus, but it’s clear who the words are aimed at. “A child shouldn’t be left alone without parents.”

Jesus nods, understanding in his eyes. “Life is difficult, and not always as we would like. But this life is but a drop in the ocean in comparison to what is to come.”

After finishing our meal, we all step into the living room to recline and allow our meal to digest.

Patrick begins humming a song, toes a tapping, when his voice lifts and fills the house. His voice sweeps us up with both resonance and melody. He sings about the hugs, long ago lost, suddenly rediscovered after a thunderous, cooling rain. Tears moisten my cheeks—the words raw, honest, and moving. As he finishes, I feel myself drawn to worship the One. And I can’t stop from slipping to my knees and worshiping the Lord as the beauty of something I recognize as holiness surrounds us.

I consider that nothing can rouse me from my place of deep worship. That is, until I hear a familiar sound—a car’s engine in front of our house. *Mitch!* “Oh no! My brother’s come back!”

Jesus, seated on the sofa, grins. “Good!” He rubs both hands together. Jarrett and Patrick both look at each other, they, too, on their knees on the floor like me.

I give warning. “He’ll be angry.”

Jesus leans forward with a reassuring smile. “Everything will be just fine, Toby.”

Keys unlock the front door, and it slips open. Mitch eyeballs the room’s occupants as he steps inside, His eyes lock on mine, blazing with fury. Something moves in his eyes, an anger I’ve not seen since—

I face Mitch, trying to defuse his anger. “Hungry? Jesus brought—”

He doesn’t look at me, but at Jesus. “Get out!” He gestures to the door.

Jesus stands up, keeping a neutral expression. “We’ve left a plate for you. Just need to reheat it.”

Both Jarrett and Patrick open the door and exit the house. Jesus steps past Mitch before stopping and facing him.

Mitch keeps his eyes fastened on me, refusing to look at Jesus.

Then, Jesus reaches out resting his hand on Mitch’s shoulder.

Without looking at Jesus, Mitch pushes his hand off. “I said get out!”

Jesus' eyes connect with mine, a look of sadness, and what I perceive to be a broken heart. He turns and leaves, gently pulling the door shut behind him.

My insides feel topsy-turvy. I prepare for the worst, sitting on the sofa and leaning forward, my eyes fixed on the carpet. I feel embarrassed that he'd do this to my guests, and especially to Jesus.

He stands there, glaring at me. "In case I wasn't clear before, you're not to hang out with him at all—not at his place, not here, nor anywhere in-between. Got it?"

"No."

"What?" He takes two steps toward me, anger erupting on his face.

"You're not dad. And you haven't given him a chance to prove to you his identity." I stare back at him, determined not to give in.

His eyes fix on me, a look of uncertainty flashing across his face. "You wanna be gullible, fine! But don't bring that guy into this house again! Or you can pack your stuff and move out!"

"If you'd give him a chance, you'd see what I've seen."

"Ground rules—you're to be home every night and not skip work or other responsibilities. Got it?"

Reluctantly, I nod.

"My job—it's been really tough the last month. Flat house sales."

"Why?"

"Maybe to do with this heat. But until I have a breakthrough, I'll need you to help with the bills and mortgage for a while. I'm really overwhelmed right now while you're playing house with someone pretending to be Jesus."

I ignore his dig. "No problem. What's mine is yours."

Relief shows on his face. "Thanks. I'm heading to bed. See you in the morning."

As he goes upstairs, I feel satisfaction that I stood up to him. I close my eyes and lift my brother in prayer, asking the Lord to show him favor in every area of his life, and to bring him into a place of relationship like he had before the death of our parents and sister. Even when the drunk who killed our family was sent to prison for manslaughter, Mitch hadn't been able to look toward God again.

Day Four: Tuesday



*Tahmid Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue*

*6:03 a.m.*

I shoot up from my bed, wide awake, that man's face carved into my mind's eye. My heart thumps in my throat and sweat covers me. In the dream, someone grabbed my hands and led me up a steep hill. Begrudgingly, I go along until we reach the summit where a ghastly sight meets me—a bloodied man writhing on a tree, his feet nailed in place. His arms extend outward from his torso along thick branches, large spike-like nails pinning his wrists and feet in place.

“Are you alright?” Tahira's soothing voice comforts and reassures me. Her voice changes to alarm. “Your t-shirt. It's soaked.”

My t-shirt clings to me. I push off the bed covers and jump up. “I'm alright.” I say that, but his face appears in front of me like a ghostly apparition. I force myself to give a reassuring smile. “I'll shower.” I wonder if she can see how troubled I feel right now.

Stepping into our bathroom, I take a cool shower hoping it will wash away the remnants of the dream.

Moments later, Tahira greets me as I step out in my bathrobe. “Tahmid, what's wrong?”

“Nothing, honey.” I'm unable, at least now, to tell her the truth. “The extreme heat at work has put everyone on edge. And customers seem to be staying home.” I stare at myself in the dresser mirror as she steps up to me and holds me from behind.

“Why didn't you tell me about meeting that man?”

*That man! Can I go for five minutes without thinking about him? And now, he's even invaded my dreams.* I relent, allowing myself to speak of him to satisfy Tahira's curiosity. “I met him on Saturday when he moved in.”

“But why didn't you tell me about that? You usually tell me everything about your day.”

“Because he's a deceiver, and we won't be entertaining him.”

“He seemed sincere. No signs of trickery from what I could see.”

I face Tahira and hold her, determined to speak sense to her. “Do you think every devil that comes to us has two horns and a pitchfork? Of course, they come with an angelic face to deceive and get us off the true path. We must be stronger than that.”

Tahira nods. She reaches up and wraps her tapered hands along the sides of my neck. I'm besotted by her beauty—her dark, almond-shaped eyes, her alluring milk-white skin soft and unblemished, her smile always able to strip away a day's stress. "Please, Tahmid. You must take care of yourself. Your family depends on you. And my parents coming on Friday...you know how they can be if things aren't quite right."

With a look of reassurance, I lower my lips to hers, planting a kiss. "Everything I do is for our family. And don't worry about your parents. Everything will be perfect. I'll make sure of it."

As Tahira leaves to tend our sons, I find myself replaying the mysterious dream. The fact that it was him, my neighbor, in the dream, makes it even more troubling. And I shudder to contemplate what I saw.

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*Jarrett Blackman, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*8:35 a.m.*

"Jarrett, today, we will pray." Jesus comes down the stairs, his voice charged and excited.

I'm sitting at the table half-starved. A stack of pancakes sits before me courtesy of Patrick, who, I must say, has a knack for cooking amazing breakfast! The sweet pancake aroma tugs at me.

"Sounds good." But I'm not sure about that. Prayer to me is synonymous with taking a nap. Better to get out and do something, like when we visited the church or cardboard city.

Patrick's head appears from the kitchen. "Want maple syrup and butter with your pancakes, Jarrett?"

"You know what, Patrick? I love you! Yes, please!" I sense Jesus stand behind me, his hands gripping and squeezing my shoulders. I look up into his bearded face. An amused grin plays at his lips. I scrutinize that look, wondering what it means.

"We will mix our prayer with fasting, Jarrett."

"Oh, that sounds good." I drive my fork down through three thick, frisbee-diameter pancakes. I yank them onto my plate. My stomach rumbles and my taste buds salivate. I am in heaven.

"Starting tomorrow, Jesus?"

“Starting now, Jarrett.”

I turn around in my seat and face him. This can't be happening. “But Boss, I need my breakfast or else I'm no good the rest of the day. Can't I skip lunch instead?”

A fatherly smirk plays at Jesus' lips. “Let Patrick enjoy the fruit of his labors. You and I have business to attend.”

“But Lord!”

Jesus bends over the top of me and picks up my plate. “Patrick, enjoy.” Then he turns to me. “Are you wanting to learn...really learn my ways? It will cost you something to get there.”

I nod. “Of course, Lord.” I stand up, eye the golden pancakes with a touch of sadness. “But they look soooo yummy!”

“Don't worry. You will soon discover another sustenance that comes from the Holy Spirit.”

“What's that, Lord?” I plop down on the sofa.

“To receive from the Father His Spirit and gifts, to be a conduit for His love to others who are locked away by darkness.”

I feel a bit of shame from my earlier sulky response, but my eyes still wander back to the table. “Sorry, Boss. It's just that I love food and since coming here, I've never eaten so good in all my life! Patrick there's cooking pure happiness!”

“Let's get Toby and Frank next door.” Jesus wraps his arm around me, a huge smile spreading across his face, as he leads me through the front door to the outside. “You and Simon Peter are similar. Praying and fasting is much more exciting than you realize.”

“I don't know *how* it can be exciting, to be honest. But, I'm here to learn.”

“I am excited to show you, Jarrett.”

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*Toby Garrells, 33 Summit Avenue*

*8:45 a.m.*

Several knocks awaken me from the best night's rest I've had in as long as I can remember. I jump up from my bed and glance out the window to see Jesus at my front door, Jarrett standing

behind him staring off in the distance. The Lord looks up and His eyes meet mine. He throws me a broad smile. I'm glad I'll get to start the day with him.

With excitement, I run downstairs and throw open the door. Mitch's car is gone, probably gone to work. "Morning, Lord!"

"Good morning, Toby. Did you eat yet?"

I rub my eyes. "Just woke up."

Excitement ignites Jesus' face. "Get your shoes. Today, we will fast and pray."

I get a few things and step outside. A wall of heat hits me. "Where we heading, Lord?"

"Let's go to the local park, sit in the shade, look over the city, and talk to Abba."

Jarrett's face displays bewilderment. "Abba?"

Jesus smiles at him. "Daddy-God." Jesus addresses me. "Toby, would you run ahead and knock on Mr. Bruno's house. Tell him to join us."

I dash ahead and knock at his door. Mr. Bruno answers wearing a canary yellow bathrobe, an unimpressed look on his face at seeing me. "Hey."

I smile despite his grumpiness. Nothing can ruin my mood! "Jesus said to come and join us."

"Is that so?" He sticks his head out, sees Jesus standing at the roadside, who throws him a wave. At once, Bruno's gloomy face morphs into a buoyant smile. "Okay, I'll be right out." He slams the door in my face.

Within a half hour, we're all seated at a picnic table at the park's edge. Rustling leaf-strewn trees line the park's boundary granting cool shade. On our left below is the city which spreads out into the distance for miles. A baseball field, tennis courts, and a basketball court are nearby along with exercise equipment and a nearby children's playground.

Jesus addresses us. "The enemy's twisted the truth about praying and fasting to my people. Both are a means to connect with God, to learn what truly lives within our hearts, to be empowered, and to be better led by the Spirit each day."

Jarrett looks thoroughly unconvinced. "How is no food gonna help me? And Lord, why are we outside—it's like a sauna even in this shade! I'm sweating bullets here!"

The corners of Jesus' lips lift with a hint of amusement at Jarrett's reaction. Fondness and patience also appears on his face. "We are here for a purpose—which will become understood shortly. Regarding fasting, when you fast, it is the torque-power needed for praying. Fasting is also a way for you to become weak for a time."

“Already accomplished, Boss,” Jarrett says under his breath. “Can I eat now?”

Jesus grins at that.

I’m trying to understand. “Makes us weak, Lord?”

“Yes. When you fast, you empty yourself of things that normally bring you comfort or strength for a time and replace them by leaning into Abba. He becomes your strength, comfort, and chief consolation.”

“I see.” I’m digesting what he’s just said and liking the logic.

Jesus’ eyes blaze with wonder. “Let’s pray!” He lifts his hands to the sky and speaks adoration to Abba. Seconds later, he becomes quiet, but only for a minute. “Open their eyes, Abba!”

I blink at the astonishing site that surrounds us. Ghostly movements encompass us into the distance—tall, lighted beings resembling men with expansive wings. I look above to see four massive creatures circling Jesus in reverence, facing him but keeping their eyes averted from him.

Mesmerized, I scan down across the city into the distance. I witness what looks to be a battle raging. Piercing light from above collides with a smog-like darkness which appears rooted into the landscape and buildings. Like a knife cutting through, the light forms a *V* corridor until the darkness is rent in two. I tear my eyes away from the city to the park around me. It’s then that I see someone walking along the edge of the park, a woman with two children. I look closer when I notice dark strings tethered to her hands and feet—a hulking creature holding the strings and walking wherever she walks. This troubles me, to say the least.

Jarrett pipes up, stunned. “Lord, I can tell you that pancakes are far from my mind now!”

Frank murmurs. “I...I never could have imagined...”

Jesus answers. “Just like a person who sees for the first time, your spiritual eyes have been opened. I wanted you to have a glimpse and remember what is really happening around you.” As I blink, my vision reverts just as Jesus declares praise to the Father. Then he addresses us. “What is it you want to see happen in this park? On our street? In this city?”

My eyes keep shifting to the lady. “For me, I want all to know you and come into relationship with you.”

Jarrett clears his voice, his joshing from earlier gone. “I wasted so much of my life. Now, I just want my life to mean something.”

Frank speaks. “I don’t know the future. I just want to live one day at a time, and live it well—and, somehow, to live it with purpose for you, Jesus.”

A broad smile flashes across Jesus’ face. “Very good. Let the Spirit infuse each of you. As the Spirit rests upon you, yield yourself completely to Him and the Holy Spirit will empower you as my witnesses.”

I lift my hands as if a beggar pleading for food. “Holy Spirit, please come!” Without warning, I feel something like a heat settle within me. “Thank you, Holy Spirit!” I’m caught in a whirlwind of joy, His Presence filling me. I’m declaring praises when what I say twists into something else—an unlearned language bursting forth from me. Weighted words flow out of me, with a definite distinction, inflection, and deliberate pauses. I just surrender my tongue to the Holy Spirit, and I’m astounded at what flows from my lips.

A woman’s voice cuts in from nearby. “What is going on here?”

Her face displays confusion and fear. It’s the woman I saw earlier tethered to spiritual giants. She wears a traditional head covering that reminds me of classical paintings of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She stands in front of us a stone’s toss away. I see she’s possibly expecting soon. I recall seeing this lady on our street—the wife of the man two doors down from me. Her two boys are swinging back and forth behind her. At the sight of her and remembering the hulking brute attached to her, I pray for her even more.

Jesus answers her, his infectious smile showing. “Daughter, what is it you have heard?”

She hesitates, and steps away. “Forgive me, I-I shouldn’t be talking to you.”

Jesus calls after her. “Daughter Tahira, do not fear. Ask if you have questions.”

She stops and turns halfway toward us, uncertain of her action. “It shouldn’t be possible.” Tears stream down her cheeks.

I look to Jesus, unsure what’s going on, or what words just came out of my mouth.

Jesus rests a hand on mine. “It should be impossible. But nothing is too hard for the Lord.”

“I heard my language...spoken flawlessly,” she says, pointing at me, “...by him.”

“What did you hear?” I keep my voice friendly, sensing how brittle she is. But I’m unable to hide the surprise in my voice.

“Is this a joke?” She moves off before I can correct her, gathering her two boys before rushing out of the park.

I speak to Jesus, perplexed. “What just happened?”

Jesus' eyes follow after her. "Your surrender to the Holy Spirit will mean that woman, too, will find her way to me. But it will not be easy for her; obstacles must be cleared."

"But she's obviously religious."

Jesus leans toward us. "Religion can indeed make bad people better people, but it cannot raise that which is dead inside people to new life."

I look toward her, and again I'm seeing in that unique way from earlier. The creature that had been behind her, appearing like an adult walking a child with a cord, has diminished in size. I also notice the creature less in control than before.

I touch Jesus' shoulder briefly, troubled. "I don't like what I see around that lady, Lord. Thank goodness we're Christians."

Jesus rests his hand upon mine. A shade of sadness crosses his face. "Some so-called 'Christians' are led around shackled by even more powerful spiritual beings. We must pray for her, for believers in me in this city, and for those trapped in darkness in this city."

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*Tahira Akhand, Leaving the Local Park*

*9:21 a.m.*

"Mom, what's wrong?" Nadir looks up at me as we head back home.

"Nothing to worry about, son." I try to reassure him despite my troubled heart.

"Why do we have to go home now? Father won't be pleased."

"I'm sorry. I'm not feeling well." At that, Nadir wraps his arm around me as if to support me as I walk. "Thank you, son."

I reflect on seeing the robe-dressed stranger at the park—the man who had tried to help us yesterday with the flat tire. What were they doing at that picnic table? Although I felt a strong urge not to go near, I did anyway. Something about him seemed to draw me. When near enough, it was then I was shocked to hear Bengali, my home language, being spoken by that young man. His words replay in my mind.

*Tethers are coming off. Captivity taken captive. The true light has come. Look to the tree.*

I confronted them even as I felt compelled to run away. But running from them did not mean I could escape what I had just experienced and heard from that young man.

Arriving home, I tell the boys to pick a book and read quietly so their father will be able to sleep undisturbed. I stand at the front window and look out toward the stranger's house trying to understand. *Who are you?*

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*Frank Bruno, Local Park*

*2:15 p.m.*

We're headed back to Summit Avenue, and my stomach rumbles. "Um, Jesus, are we done fasting for today?"

"Yes, Frank. There will be times when you will fast for longer periods. But for today, you are released as we have already accomplished our day's work together."

"Yes!" Jarrett punches the air. "Pancakes, I'm a-coming!"

Jesus' hand lands on Jarrett's shoulder. "Oh, sorry, Jarrett. I didn't mean you."

"What?" A troubled, hurt look crosses Jarrett's lined, whiskery face.

Jesus nudges him with his elbow till their eyes meet. "Just teasing you, son!"

Immediate relief washes over Jarrett's face followed by a laugh indicating "You got me!"

Jesus wraps his arm around his shoulders and draws him in, letting out a full laugh as they share the moment. I find myself liking Jesus even more than I already did with his down-to-earth manner.

Then, I have an idea. "Jesus, what if..."

Jesus' face brightens. "I like your idea. Let's have a late lunch at my house. Frank and Toby: go and bring whatever you'd like to share."

Jarrett looks excited. "I'll be happy with Patrick's pancakes. I can already taste them from here, topped with sweet maple syrup and melted butter!"



Stepping back into the silence of my home a half hour later, I'm overwhelmed by what I've learned in just a few days, and specifically the last hours. Things I thought impossible have become my world now, especially when my eyes were opened to a whole 'nother realm.

In my kitchen, I grab minced hamburger meat, kidney beans, tomato sauces, various spices, and cornbread mix. Nothing beats good ol' chili con carne.

I consider my plight not so heavy upon my shoulders now. But, if I'm honest, I still feel a deep sadness that my stable life, prior to losing my job, will now be not so stable, not so assured. And Jesus didn't give any guarantees when I spoke to him last night. For now, though, I'll just worry about today. What more can I do? I'm already powerless as it is. Might as well try to be happy and enjoy what's happening around me.

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*Tahmid Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue*

*3:04 p.m.*

I awaken refreshed, get myself ready for work, and head downstairs to get something to eat before going in.

Tahira is sitting with my sons on the living room corner sofa, their backs to me. She's reading a story to both, their faces rapt by her soothing voice. She doesn't just read; she speaks in such a way to make every sentence meaningful—packed with nuances, tension, and emotion. In stealth mode, I sit down on the carpeted step to listen—caught up by the whole scene.

A minute later, as Tahira finishes the book, I rise to greet my family. At once, they scramble to greet me, my sons coming and wrapping their arms around me.

“Shall we pray, family?” We do our cleansing practices and within a few minutes, we're ready to begin. We do our prayers facing east to Mecca, our in-sync movements on individual prayer rugs. After we're done, I head to the kitchen where Tahira joins me. Nadir remains in the living room reading to Mazhar.

I sit down at the table and scan the day's newspaper. She joins me in the kitchen and brings out tasty leftovers from the night before. I'm famished.

“Tahmid, I don’t want you to be upset with me.” She stirs the tender chicken and fragrant sauce she’s reheating on the stovetop.

I look at her out of curiosity. “Why in the world would I be upset with you?”

“When I was in the park this morning, something very strange happened.”

I fold the newspaper and set it in front of me. “What do you mean?”

“That man that tried to help change the tire yesterday—”

I stand up and step nearer to her, heat clustering in my chest at the mention of that man.

She turns and raises both hands to assure me. “Nothing bad happened. But...”

“But?”

“He was there praying with three others at a picnic table. And then a real oddity occurred.”

“What, Tahira?” I study her face, unable to keep my heart from racing.

“The young man with him—I believe he lives down the street from us—he spoke in our language.”

“What?”

“Fluently, with all the inclinations of a scholar.”

“How is that possible?” I run my hands through my hair and look at my watch to see how much time I have left before I must leave. “What did you hear him say?”

“He basically said the true light has come, and that the tethers are being removed. He also said something about captivity being taken captive—and something even stranger.”

“Go on.” I force myself to remain calm.

“He said to look to the tree.”

“Tree?”

“Yes.”

Glimpses of the dream I had yesterday morning reappear, troubling me even more. I take all this in and slowly ease myself back to the table and sit. “Last Saturday, you know he came over. There was something about him—the way he spoke and looked at me. He seemed to know all about me, and about us.”

“Us?”

“He knew the city of my birth, my father’s name, and what I went through while growing up. He knew your name and our children’s names.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

“I should have, but I was still reeling from the things he said. And I didn’t want to expose you or worry you about him without more information.” I lower my face into my hands before massaging my temples, throbbing tension amassing there. “I just don’t know what to think.”

Tahira removes the saucepan from the stove top and uses a large metal spoon to load the plate with the piping hot contents. She approaches the table and sets the plate in front of me along with fresh bread, her eyes locking with mine. We’re both in the depths of our thoughts when she finally speaks. “The message must’ve been a trick of some sort. Maybe that young man is good with languages and that man set it up.”

“I don’t know.” I stroke my beard, suddenly not so hungry.

She takes a seat opposite me, in the same seat the new neighbor sat in on his visit. “Since he arrived in our neighborhood, everything seems off-kilter.”

I nod in agreement. “You are correct about that, love. But I’m not sure that man, from what I’ve observed of him, would be involved in deception.”

She rests her hands on her hips. “But how else could that teenage boy have spoken as he did?”

“I don’t know. But I pray Allah will protect us from going off the true path.”

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*Delante Thomas, 29 Summit Avenue*

*3:30 p.m.*

The Messiah-wannabe returns to his house. I can’t believe I’ve essentially lost my girlfriend to that guy. And now I hear from one of the guys living under the bridge that this “Jesus” has been there and performed magic tricks—making food appear out of nowhere. He’s really starting to get under my skin.

I grab my phone and bring up a friend I rarely contact—someone I use only when someone moves in on my turf. It’s time to put fear into this whacko. I ring him. “Jumper!”

“Hey, what’s happenin’?”

I light my cigarette and draw from it. “I got someone on my street here who needs your finesse.”

“Give the details of who and where. Then I’ll take care of the rest. Usual fee.”

I hesitate. “Look, I don’t want you to kill the guy. Just get him to regret moving on my street.”

He laughs at that. “You’re getting soft, Dee!”

“Naaah, I just want you to put the fear of God in him.” I pause before resuming. “And there’s something you need to know about him.”

“What?”

“He’s got everyone around here believing he’s Jesus, you know, Christ.”

“Serious?”

“Yup. But I have something to add to my request.”

“What is it, Dee?”

“Use your phone to record when he cowers and begs you to stop pounding him.”

“Man, I don’t want the police to—”

“I’ll triple your fee. My girlfriend needs to see this guy’s a fraud. An actor. Plain and simple.”

“Okay, I’m down with that.”

We discuss the where and when, and then I end the call. Satisfied, I stand up and face the Jesus house. “You took my girlfriend, but soon, your scam will be shown for what it is, and she’ll run back to me!”

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*Ms. Cahva Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue*

*9:50 p.m.*

The sun is setting and darkened shadows stretching. Thankfully, the day’s cooling after a sizzler. Choruses of tree frogs and crickets cushion the warm air all around. I sit beneath my awning garden bench near my back door. I’m relaxing and enjoying the evening when I notice unexpected movement inside my neighbor’s home across the way; someone had walked in front of the French doors. Unexpected because that neighbor, the Franklins with their rambunctious four children, aged between 9 and 13, had gone on summer vacation just last Saturday. They’d moved into the new property almost a year ago—a new development site that now stretched across several blocks. I didn’t expect them to return for at least a week and a half or longer.

A circular, blue swimming pool sits above ground at the end of their yard about fifty feet from my fence line, acting as a magnet for many neighborhood children—almost always accompanied with fits of screaming. This had become a daily occurrence since the schools had let out for the summer early June. Quite often, their colorful beach ball would land in my yard. And always they squeezed through an opening on the right side to collect it—despite my unhappiness at their intrusions.

I'm worried they're back and my summer quiet time will be ruined. Seconds later, I notice the beam of a flashlight sweep across the glass of the rear double door. It's not my neighbors. It's then that I remember the spat of burglaries of late throughout the city. I stand up and keep my eye on the house while pulling out my phone to dial for help.

"Nine-one-one operator. What is your emergency?"

"Yes, I believe my neighbor's house is being burglarized right now."

"What is the address?"

I give her the details along with my own. The operator assures me someone will be sent right away. I end the call just as an individual looks in my direction from the kitchen window. But it's a cartoonish face—a mask—staring at me.

"Oh no." I take a seat on my bench, troubled. The mask, fixed in my direction, resembles a cartoon samurai, with clenched teeth. I get up and shuffle back into my house, locking my door. I press my back against it, regretting I got involved. I feel all-too vulnerable.

Thirty minutes later, a formal knock sounds at my front door. A police car sits in front of my house. I don't like all the attention. I twist the doorknob and swing the door open.

"Hello?" I keep my voice firm.

"I'm Officer Dec." His voice is calm and deep. He's tall with a boyish face, straight, black hair, and cleanshaven. I wonder how long he's served as an officer and if he can be trusted to walk an old lady across the street, never mind investigate a burglary. "Did you make a call about a home intrusion at 48 Mount Pleasant Road?"

"Yes, I did."

"We've checked the house, and there doesn't appear to be any forced entry. The doors and windows are sealed shut. Do you know the names of the residents and where they might've gone?"

"They're the Franklins. I'm not sure where they went on holiday, but they left last Saturday."

“How do you know that?”

I shrug my shoulder. “Last summer, same month, they granted me two weeks of peace without screaming children in their back yard swimming pool.”

“Oh, I see.” The police officer resists a smile at his lips. “May I step in for a moment? I’ll need to get a more detailed description of what exactly you saw.”

With hesitation, I nod and swing the door open for the officer. I’m about to close the door when I look across the street and see the strange, bearded man sitting on his porch. Every window of the lengthy farmhouse blazes with golden candle light. There’s movement in the windows of people there. And his face stays fixed in my direction.

“Miss Ayustine?”

I pull my gaze away from him and his house to the tall officer.

“Are you all right, Miss Ayustine?”

“That man.” I point at him. “Don’t you think he dresses funny?”

The officer looks too. “I wouldn’t know for sure, ma’am.”

Irritated by his lack of an opinion, I slam the door as the officer enters. I gesture to my wood-framed couch with the thick cushions. “Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you, but I’ll remain standing as I won’t be long, Ms. Ayustine.”

“Very well.” I sit on the edge of my cushioned chair.

“Can you describe what you saw across the way?”

“I went outside to rest when I saw someone move inside the Franklin’s dining room. I thought they’d returned home early from vacation. Then I saw a flashlight beam. At once, I called 911. Just as I hung up, I noticed someone looking at me through the kitchen window wearing a mask.”

“What kind of mask was it? Any details you recall about the person?”

“It resembled an angry samurai—like something you see in a cartoon.”

“Cartoon?”

“Yes, like…” I rack my brain trying to remember the books my grandchildren read. Finally, it comes to me. “Manga.”

“That may be helpful. Could you tell what height he or she might’ve been?”

“Not tall; not short.” I watch the officer scribble into his notepad. “I believe the person saw me call to report what I witnessed.”

The officer looks up from his pad, only mild concern in his eyes. “Do you live here by yourself, Ms. Ayustine?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much. If they wore a mask, it means they’re being somewhat careful. It’s unlikely they’d risk more exposure by involving you, Ms. Ayustine.”

I give a half-nod, unsure of his logic.

“Are you close to anyone in the neighborhood?”

“No.”

“Is there someone on the street I can talk to who might be able to check in on you for the next few days.”

I wave off his concerns, regretting I told him. “No, I’ll be fine.”

The officer’s boyish face doesn’t inspire confidence. “Thank you for your time, ma’am. We’ll increase patrols in the neighborhood. We’ll also try to get in touch with the property owners. We’ve left a letter in the Franklins’ mailbox for them to contact us upon their return.”

I nod and escort him outside. As I go to close the door, that man in the strange garb is coming toward my front door.

The police officer, about to get into his car and seeing his approach, calls out to him. “Hello?”

The man stops and faces the officer. They talk for a few seconds, but I can’t hear the conversation. They exchange smiles and then he’s still headed toward me.

A wide smile beneath his beard disarms me, along with those eyes again—endearing and with a confidence I’m not used to seeing in a man. “Hello, Ms. Ayustine!” I want to slam the door shut, but I find I cannot because of his eyes fixed on me.

“What is it you want?”

He stands in front of me, tall, broad-shouldered, his dark eyes fixed on me. “Good evening.”

“Was it you who cooked me that dish?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t do it again!” I go to close the door when he speaks.

“The missing puzzle piece...”

His charming, strong voice causes me to stop. “What?”

“It’s a picture of you—the most crucial piece in your life missing.”

I look up at him, my eyes doubling in size. “Who do you think you are?”

His expression is solemn, but equally buoyant. “You know already the answer to your question, Cahva. We’ve been in each other’s company before.”

*How does he know my name?* “Let me tell you,” I say with a pointed finger. “I don’t want any more of your people coming near my house. I don’t want anything from anyone—including you. I just want to be left alone!”

He steps back, a streak of sadness showing on his face.

“Good night!” I slam the door in his face, without regret.

But he doesn’t give up. His muffled voice filters through the door. “The puzzle piece you’ve been missing—it’s beneath your sideboard, just behind the left foot as you face it.”

*How’s he know about the puzzle?* I stand with my back pressed against the door for half a minute. Then I step to my living room, draw the curtains, and sit down. I use my remote to turn on the TV, but stare at it without seeing.

I refuse to believe his words. I won’t even entertain it. There is no way he could know the whereabouts of that missing piece.

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*Toby Garrells. 33 Summit Avenue*

*10:25 p.m.*

“Hey Mitch, where are you?” I text, noting the time again. “Are you even living here anymore?”

I push back against the seat cushions of my couch and relax my head as soft music plays. I’m mesmerized by today’s events—the incredible things I saw at the park, the great meal at Jesus’ house, and the promise of much more to come in the next days. Each morning when I awaken, I wonder if Jesus will still be around. I dread to think what it’ll be like when and if he leaves. I don’t want things to return to how they were before—powerless, unfocused, and merely treading water when it comes to spiritual things.

No reply from Mitch, I get up to turn out the lights when a car pulls into the driveway. I sit down at the kitchen table waiting for him to come in. He’ll probably be hungry when he comes in if he hasn’t eaten at Shelly’s.



The front door opens and closes. The familiar jingle of keys chink against the edge of the foyer ceramic bowl.

“Hey Mitch.” I call out to him in case he skips the kitchen to go upstairs to bed.

He pokes his head in, a thin line for lips on his face. “Hey.”

He looks like he’s just run a marathon. “You all right? I rarely see you at home lately.”

“I finished work, and then Shelly asked me to stop by. Nothing to worry about, Toby. I’m heading to bed. I have to go into work early tomorrow.”

“Mitch? I can’t remember the last time we’ve had a talk.”

“Fine, let’s talk.” He steps to the table and plops down opposite me trying to look unrushed. But his darting eyes and tapping fingers against the table say otherwise.

I risk being called mad but must tell Mitch what happened to me in the park. “I experienced something today that is hard to put in words.” I share about the opening of my eyes in a way that still boggles my mind, the burst of unlearned languages from my lips, and the lady leashed to the ominous beast.

Mitch studies me, concern etched in his face. “You expect me to believe all that?”

“I’m telling you the truth. Have I ever lied to you?”

“No, but you’ve showed signs of lacking sound judgment by being around that guy.” He gestures behind him toward the farmhouse. “Maybe you hallucinated?” He leans closer, checking me out to see if he can detect something amiss about me.

I shake my head bothered by his stubbornness. “No, but you’ve got to realize what’s happening across the street is real. God’s pinpointed our city and street for something huge.”

“Not interested.” Mitch stands up and looks at me with a look of concern. “Toby, you need to be very careful.”

He does an about-face and climbs the stairs to his bedroom. I’m confused by his unwillingness to even consider what I’ve shared with him. I remain at the table and pray for Mitch, and for our town. I remember the clash of light against the darkness and consider my prayers adding to our side, pushing and driving back the enemy in others’ lives.

*Help me, Lord. Make me sensitive to your voice and leading! I want to be surrendered to you and only you!*

Day Five: Wednesday

*Ms. Cahva Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue*

*5:12 a.m.*

**D**espite the soft, steady whir of my swiveling fan, a film of sticky sweat coats me. It's as if yesterday's sizzling heat has pooled in my bed. I've been up since after 3 a.m. Finally, out of frustration, I plant my feet in my slippers and walk to the bathroom. After a quick, cooling shower, I dress and head downstairs putting on my kettle to prepare coffee. Since my head hit the pillow last night, I've had that bearded man's face in my mind. I glance out my window to see the sun's golden halo sitting atop the tree-lined horizon. Running my fingers through my damp curly hair, I sigh at the prospect of another sweltering day.

Waiting for the water to boil, I take a seat at my dining room table. My eyes fall to the puzzle spread out across the table in front of me. His words replay in my mind again about the missing puzzle piece. Finally, I give up and get down on my tiled floor, trying to see behind the sideboard's left front foot. I can't see anything in the darkened space. I reach around to check when my fingers touch something thin and almost weightless—*the missing piece!* Retrieving it, I just stare, not seeing the burgundy-colored piece that will complete the ice skating woman's dress.

I'm shocked that he knew. How is it possible? I sit down at the table and snap the last piece into its place. I sweep my fingers across the puzzle image feeling the endless indentations, closing my eyes in delight, suddenly satisfied.

Almost out of instinct, I stand and go to my living room to look toward that man's house. I step back until my armchair stops me. I wonder what is going on. And what did he mean when he said we'd been in each other's company before?

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*Tahmid Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue*

*8:09 a.m.*

I jolt upright in bed, images replaying of me again climbing a steep hill led by a stranger dressed in robed clothing—not unlike that worn by people in the Middle East. At the hill's top, a ghastly

sight meets me: three men suspended on stakes. Their bodies convulse with pain, their outstretched arms pinned by nails to wooden beams. I can't imagine this kind of torture. And the face of the one in the center is the face of the man across the street.

Shaking my head as if to shake myself free from the images, I force myself up and head to the bathroom. It seems no matter what I do, I cannot escape this man. I've prayed. I've meditated on the Quran more than usual. What more can I do? I turn on the shower full strength. Instead of stepping beneath the shower head, I sit down on a chair and clutch my head. The room warms until a steamy dampness coats my face and arms.

"Allah, I've always tried to be a good Muslim. I've tried to be a good husband and father. Please reveal yourself to me because, honestly, I feel lost right now."

"Are you all right, honey?" Tahira's voice filters through the door. "You're up earlier than usual. Did we wake you?"

I cough, clearing my throat. "No, honey. I'll be out in a few." I sit there as tears sting my eyes and drip down onto my floor. I try to stop it but the more I try, the more powerless I feel. I cry—the pressures of work, of this Jesus character, of the dream, of Tahira's park incident—all of it rising out of me. I slip to the floor, my voice breaking. "Please, Allah. I want to know only truth."

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*Tahira Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue  
8:21 a.m.*

I go to check on the kids when I hear the shower from the bathroom. Concerned we've awakened Tahmid, I think he's saying something to me when I realize it's not directed at me. His phone's on the side table beside our bed. I lean in toward the bathroom door to listen. He's speaking, as if in prayer, the words sounding like muffled crying. Just hearing him like that, and feeling shut out from helping him, I slip to the carpet and find myself praying, too, and overcome by tears. "Help us, Allah. We need you to reveal the correct path."

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*Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue*

*10:11 a.m.*

I wake up and stretch, having slept well. Still, the prospect of this room not being mine in just days washes over me. But I won't let it weigh me down too much. At least I have Jesus to lean on, and something to focus on other than my four walls all day.

I'm still in awe of what I witnessed yesterday—the strange glimpse into another reality running alongside ours. And that thing that happened to Toby with the unlearned languages really amazed me. To think that this other world has always existed, and that those not plugged into it are, essentially, blind to reality, is scary. How close I was to finishing my life without knowing about it.

I open my side door and step outside into the stifling heat. Sweat breaks out across my neck and brow. But I don't care how hot it is; I head to Jesus' house sure he'll have a plan for the day.

Stepping onto the farmhouse porch, I knock. The inner door opens a second later revealing...Jarrett standing behind the screen door.

“Hey Jarrett!” I try my best to sound optimistic despite seeing him.

His voice is rather bland. “Hiya.”

“What you guys up to?”

“Hate to tell you this, but Jesus left the house this morning.”

“He did?” Something within me drops away.

“He said he'll be back later.”

Relief washes over me knowing at least I'll get to see him at some point. “Did he say where he was going?”

“Not a word. He just encouraged me to be led by the Spirit today.”

The sun's baking the back of my legs and neck as I stand there. I repress my irritation. “Can I come in for a minute?”

Jarrett opens the screen door for me as I step into the foyer, glad to escape the sun's laser rays.

“Jarrett, are you busy now?”

“Just unpacking books downstairs. He has a library down there.”

“Jesus told you to be led of the Spirit?”

Jarrett nods.

I scratch my chin. “What do you think that means?”

“Not sure. All this is new to me.”

“Did you,” and I pause even contemplating saying it, “also experience things yesterday in the park?”

“Yeah, I did. Why?”

“Let’s get the kid. He knows more about spiritual things. Agree?”

Jarrett nods. “You think Jesus is testing us?”

A smile comes to my lips. “Yes, I do. Let’s go see Toby.”

Toby, opening his door, brightens at seeing us. “Hey!”

I speak up. “Toby, did Jesus visit you earlier?”

“No, why? Where is he?” Panic flashes across his face.

I raise my hands easing his concern. “Don’t worry, he’ll be back later. But he told Jarrett to be ‘led by the Spirit.’ You know more about this stuff. What does that mean to you?”

Toby thinks about it for a second. “Let me get some stuff. I’ll meet you guys back at Jesus’ house in a few.”

We return to the farmhouse and sit down at the table, waiting for Toby. Patrick comes downstairs, giving each of us a big smile. “Hello, friends!”

Our eyes connect. “Did Jesus say anything to you about today?”

He looks troubled. “He isn’t here?”

I shake my head just as Toby knocks before entering and joins us at the table.

Patrick raises both hands, a broad smile appearing beneath his rust-colored moustache and beard. “Anyone want homemade waffles with strawberries and whipped cream?”

Jarrett smiles for the first time today at that.

“Wait, Jarrett.” I scan the guys’ faces. “Let’s do what Jesus said.”

“What?” Disappointment drips from Jarrett’s voice.

“Let’s be ‘led of the Spirit’ just like Jesus said.” With that, I face Toby. “Tell us more!”

“Well, being led of the Spirit is important in the Bible. It means, I think, that God can and wants to lead us on a personal level in everyday situations.”

I nod, liking that. “How about we skip brunch and lunch? Let’s do a mini-fast together. And let’s pray and ask the Spirit what we should do today!” Even as I say that, the alternative for me is going back to my house thinking about Monday half-depressed, which I don’t want to do.

Toby claps. “Okay! Sounds great. But I have work later.”

Patrick, looking zealous, sits down at the table ready for business.

I feel a smile appear toward Patrick. “Glad you’re joining us.”

Jarrett’s face twists with resentment. “Why didn’t you tell me about this fasting business last night. I’d have gotten up earlier to eat.”

I’m about to reply when Toby does, first. “You’re not under any obligation, Jarrett. You can eat something now if you want. Or you can join us. No one is under compulsion.”

He nods his consent. “I’ll go along with the plan. I’m just new at this.” His face reddens before a faint smile shows. “I just love Patrick’s breakfasts is all!”

We laugh at that. Then, we turn our attention to prayer. Jarrett brings up Bibles which we comb through, asking the Lord to highlight any key passage that would be important. We pray for the next hour. I’m mindful as I’m doing this that I want Jesus to come into the house and just tell us what to do. But I’m also trying to be an adult about all this.

Jarrett speaks up. “I remember when we first met Patrick at the bridge underpass where the homeless hang out. I think it’d be great if we go help people in some way.”

A shot of dread shoots through me at hearing Jarrett say “homeless.” I push the thought away, impressed with Jarrett’s thought. “You know, when you get past your stomach, you’re quite the sensitive soul.”

Jarrett laughs, throwing a look to Patrick. “I want those waffles for dinner!”

Patrick roars with laughter. “Yes, yes! I am happy to do that for you tonight, Jarrett.”

I find myself liking Patrick. “Toby, is the Spirit highlighting anything to you?”

The teenager leans forward, scratching his chin. “On a day like today, we should bring chilled water to the street people.”

Jarrett speaks, animated. “We still have the coolers from the other day, and \$100 I can put toward buying water.”

Toby checks his wallet. “I have \$20 I can put toward that.”

I remember my last \$50 in my wallet I'd planned to save toward my first days without a place to call home. I'm hesitant, but then the words tumble out. "I have \$50 to put toward it." I'm glad once I've said it. I pull it out of my wallet and set it on the table.

A couple hours later, having taken the city bus, we're in the heart of the city with packed coolers. We make our way down Ezra Street—a stretch with homes made from boxes, tents, and pallets. Pothole fillings have liquified; burnt tar lingers heavy in the sun-scorched air. Along the street, people have retreated into any shade they can find. Many people have a clammy, flushed pallor. Broken glass, discarded liquor bottles, and signs of drug abuse are rampant with needles and paraphernalia littering the stretch. Even with the offer of something free and good, a lot of the people seem too worn out or overheated to approach us.

Within minutes, though, Jarrett and Patrick are both high-fiving people they know—some of them they recognize from years on the streets themselves. I wonder if soon they'll also see me camped out here and reminisce about our times with Jesus.

About halfway down Ezra Street, there's a green patch of trees offering shade with a trickling, but polluted, stream passing beneath an arched, brick bridge. We invite everyone to join us there within the hour. Toby and Patrick speed walk to the opposite end of Ezra Street to invite anyone they meet.

I'm praying while interacting and passing out ice-cold water. People receive with grateful expressions while others remain comatose. I try to awaken all I can but not all respond. If possible, I lean into their enclosures, lift their hand, and place a cold drink beneath their hands for later. Then, I pray over the person.

Within an hour, dozens of people have gathered in the shaded green area. Toby sees a sturdy bench and stands on it. He shares about Jesus, his offer of salvation, and how our dead end lives have been made new. I like his message—something that hits me in the heart. In just days, Jesus has changed so much in me.

Then, to my surprise, Patrick also begins to share from his seated position on a tree stump. Tears stream from his eyes down his rounded cheeks, the sun's golden light gleaming off his ruddy skin.

"Before Jesus, I was a bumbling idiot." He scans the crowd. "You knew me. And you knew me!" He folds his hands as if to pray. And then he does pray with a booming voice. "I ask you to



reveal yourself to everyone here, that they'd turn away from anything that's imprisoned them, that they'd come to know you today!"

Then, as if he's done this before, he stands up and invites people to move forward to receive prayer. I'm astonished to watch big, jolly Patrick pray, hug, and bless each person who approaches. We all do our part to support, and it's rewarding to see so many with warm splashes of hope and toothy smiles on their faces.

As we're heading home, close to 5 o' clock, I question Patrick, awe in my voice. "How did you do that, to share so effortlessly with those people?"

Patrick's eyes reveal a wisdom I'd not noticed before. "I asked the Spirit to help me. And one thing He showed me...when Jesus hugged me for hours just a few days ago, I was...literally rescued...from myself. So, when I shared, I just imagined the people before us starving souls, not for food or water, but for something I needed days ago but which I thought did not exist—genuine love. I felt angry that anything should get in their way of experiencing that same love."

"That's incredible," Toby cuts in.

Jarrett pumps the air as we walk. "Forget pancakes and waffles! This is what you call true life!"

We're headed back to the bus stop, coolers dragging behind us, when we stop in our tracks. Ahead of us he stands, and for a second, I see a glimpse of The Great King, stately, retaining unimaginable power, untamed, but always good, with four living beings of immense power surrounding him. As his eyes meet ours, we see on his face a proud look coupled with a broad smile. We all rush to him, a thin, elderly lady beside him taken aback by our enthusiastic charge.

As he receives us, embracing us, he laughs good-naturedly. "Were you led of my Spirit today, children?"

I'm about to speak when I see Toby who's fallen forward onto his knees. Then Patrick and Jarrett too. Overwhelmed, I also slip to my knees.

Jesus goes to stand us up. "I receive your worship." Then, having raised us back to our feet, we're introduced to the thin, silver-haired lady beside Jesus. "Theodora's been praying for this city for three decades. Despite being mostly by herself, she's been a warrior. But today, you will become her new family. I just spent the day with her."

The lady's silver-rimmed glasses do nothing to hide the striking blue eyes. She smiles at us as we greet her.

A few minutes later, we board a bus, minus Toby who's gone to work. We're all standing holding hanging straps when I turn to Jesus. Behind us, Patrick and Jarrett make small talk with Theodora.

Jesus locks eyes with me. "I must say I'm proud of you."

"Huh?"

"You initiated the work that took place today—because you heeded my Spirit."

"Thanks, but I was also motivated by fear. I didn't want to stare at walls all day thinking about my future."

Jesus' voice replies, confident. "Your future's secure. No matter what comes, nothing can take that from you. If you hold to me, I will certainly hold onto you."

I nod. "Thanks, that's a comfort." I cast a glance toward Theodora, her buoyant personality endearing. "Momma Theodora, I heard Patrick call her... I can tell she's a beautiful soul."

"She will come and spend the night in the guest bedroom. I want all of you to bond with her."

"Sounds good, Lord."

"It is not my wish for any of my people to be alone. And that includes you." His eyes wait for mine to find his.

"I don't want that, either!"

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*Alyssia & Michael, 15 Cisco Place*

*8:12 p.m.*

"Can we go to Jesus' house, mom?" My son's eyes show excitement as he looks up at me.

I'm curious, and I can't stop the smile from lifting the corners of my lips. "Hungry, eh?"

To my surprise, he shakes his head. "I just like being around him."

"Okay, let's go visit." We head over, the night air cool and insects trilling from the surrounding treeline. Passing by Delante's place, I scan his darkened house wondering if he's asleep or out doing his business.

I knock on Jesus' door, Michael beside me. Jesus answers the door. He stands there with a buoyant expression on his face. In one fluid motion, he pushes the screen door open and steps to

us engulfing me with his arms. His beard tickles my forehead. Then, he addresses Michael.  
“High five!”

Michael slaps at his hand with a beaming smile.

“I’ve been expecting you. Patrick’s cooked a great dinner tonight.”

Michael’s eyes sparkle at that. I really need to get my act together so I can make good meals for him.

Stepping inside, I see a tall, plump man with a curly red hair and beard working away in the kitchen. “I serve smiles!” is on his apron. Noticing Michael and me, he steps to us as if a chef anticipating our visit.

“I’ve just made spaghetti and meatballs with my secret tomato recipe, complete with homemade garlic bread! Does that tickle your fancy?”

Michael’s excited look says it all. I nod and we take a seat at the table facing the living room. Jesus comes and sits down at the top of the table to our right, his back to the kitchen.

Jesus pours water into glasses for Michael and me. “It is great you’ve come. My house is always open to you.”

“We’re grateful for the welcome.”

He reaches over resting a hand atop mine. “I’m doing construction in this city. Would you like to join in the work?”

“What does that entail?”

“Being open to me using you to reach others.”

“If I can serve you any way, I’m happy to.”

Michael holds his hands in front of him, his eyes attentive to Jesus. “Me too!”

In response, Jesus chuckles. “Excellent!”

Patrick comes over with a large, heavy cast iron pot with fettuccine pasta mixed with hearty sauce and meatballs. He sets it before us with a touch of pride in his eyes. Then he returns to the kitchen before bringing a platter of toasted garlic bread—a steamy, buttery aroma rising from its surface. “Enjoy!”

I dish the pasta onto Michael’s plate.

Jesus places a ceramic bowl of shredded cheese in front of us. “Help yourself.”

Moments later, an older white lady with silver glasses and a kind face comes downstairs. She approaches the table, her gentle gaze fixed on Michael and me.

Jesus introduces us. “Theodora, this Alyssia and her son, Michael. They live nearby and just days ago came to faith in me.”

The old lady’s face lights up. “That’s exciting! What’s the experience been like for you both?”

Michael nods, a happy grin showing on his face.

I answer her question. “It’s been eye-opening. When I said yes to Jesus, it felt like someone had cleaned out my insides.” I look down, suddenly unable to continue eating.

“What’s wrong?” Theodora asks.

“My boyfriend...he is so far from God. I really worry about him.”

Theodora reassures me, her voice soothing. “Trust the Lord. He will do everything in his power to win him.”

I nod, her encouragement rooting inside me.

“Are you working now, Alyssia?” The more Theodora speaks to me, the more I find myself liking her.

“I’ve looked around, but nothing’s worked out. It’s a challenge when you have a little one, plus another on the way.” I run my hands across my tummy.

Michael turns his face toward me, chewing. “Hey, I’m not little.”

I give him a reassuring touch, the cue for him to ignore my comment about him. “I’m hopeful, though, since my big change with Jesus days ago.” I mask my concerns about our future, about Delante, and if my newfound faith will be strong enough to keep me from slipping back into my old life.

Theodora sits down on a chair across from us at the table. “Do you have any family here?”

“No. I moved here three years ago from Chicago after meeting Delante.”

A thoughtful expression crosses her face. “I live in the town center. What if I were to hire you to help me around my home—laundry, occasional cooking, and cleaning? You could bring Michael until school resumes. We could also share meals and pray together.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I love the idea, but it seems so sudden. “You don’t even know me.”

“Jesus, would you recommend Alyssia?” She scans Jesus’ face.

A smile pushes out the corners of his dark beard. “Indeed, I recommend you to each other.”

A satisfied look and warm smile appears on Theodora’s face. “If you like, you can start tomorrow and try it out for a few days. I’ll pay you for eight hours work at \$15 per hour.”

“That’s...generous.”

Michael stops eating and turns to me. “Please, mom?”

“You think it’d be a good idea?”

“Yep.” His eyes remain on me, awaiting my response.

“Okay then! I’ll give it a try!”

“We,” Michael corrects.

I acknowledge him, with a proud grin. “We.”

After the hearty meal, and after I’ve helped wash dishes despite Patrick’s protests, we settle into the living room. Michael sits cross-legged on the rug in front of me.

Jesus scans the room, seated in his chair. “Shall we pray for a time?”

I’m curious. “How does all that work since you’re God.”

“Even in Heaven, I intercede for each one upon the earth. No matter where I am, my heart fights to change eternal outcomes.”

“Why do we need to pray in the first place?”

“The god of this world, the deceiver and accuser, rampages across humanity. When we pray, my Spirit seeds my love in the deepest, darkest, loneliest places. This happens because my love is a greater force than evil. At the opportune time, the soul is given an opportunity to respond to me and be saved.”

“But if I recall, undesired people will still go to a place called Hell?”

A streak of sadness appears in Jesus’ eyes. “Many will ignore my voice choosing to follow the enemy who will lead them to everlasting destruction. But that is why we pray, to help the lost find me.”

“Why can’t you just appear to all people and get them to choose A, eternal air conditioning, or B, eternal sauna?”

Jesus stares down at his hands, another flash of sadness showing on his face. I realize my words have gone where they shouldn’t. I wish I could take back my words. “I’m sorry, Jesus.”

He turns to me, moisture in his eyes. “If I were to do that, they would turn to me out of terror. And their sorrow for sin would not be deep enough to bring genuine repentance. They wouldn’t be able to connect to me at the heart level. I have done all possible to win each and every soul. My Spirit has combed through the earth, generation after generation, beckoning and bridging any on the cusp of believing in me. And I have responded to the faintest heart cry for rescue.”

Michael stands up beside Jesus and rests his hand on his shoulder. “We’ll help you, Jesus.”  
A massive smile lights up Jesus’ bearded face in response.

Theodora claps. “Amen!”

We begin to pray, even Michael bending his neck and closing his eyes. We pray for a quarter hour for Delante, the city, and for those less fortunate.

Without warning, a deep guttural snore emits from Michael, causing Jesus and Theodora to double over with laughter. I blush even as Michael looks up managing a grin, his sleepy eyes red.

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*Toby Garrells, 33 Summit Avenue*

*10:20 p.m.*

I get home from work just as a text notification sounds on my phone. It’s from Shelly.

*“Hey Toby. How’s everything there? I’m just wondering what’s going on with your brother. It feels like forever since he’s been around.”*

I text back.

*“But I thought he’s been at your place the last few days?”*

My phone rings. “Hey, Shelly.”

“He hasn’t been here all week, Toby.” There’s confusion and concern in her voice.

“But he’s been telling me he’s at your place.”

“Is he...with someone else?” Her voice wavers.

I have to think about what to say to that. “I don’t think it’s anything like that. I know he’s been working a lot of hours but with no properties sold recently. It’s been taking a toll on him.”

“Could you please update me when you find out what’s going on?”

“Of course.”

We end the call. And he's not even home now to talk to him.

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*Delante Thomas, 29 Summit Avenue*

*10:25 p.m.*

I watch her coming out of Jesus' lit up house. I regret ever introducing her to that guy. I step onto my porch and sit down, her and Michael heading in my direction.

"Hey, Alyssia." At the same time, I throw a nod to Michael.

"Delante, we just prayed for you!" Michael yells out with an excited smile.

"You did, eh?" The words seem strange out of the boy's mouth, but it's a kind gesture. When they come within feet of me, I extend my fist toward Michael who taps mine with his own.

"Michael, let me talk to your mom for a few?"

"Sure, Delante."

"You can have a seat on the porch there, Michael."

Alyssia's glancing at me as we walk together out to the curb. "How's you?"

"Okay here. So, you're having dinner at his place every night or somethin'?"

She answers matter-of-factly. "This is our first visit since you were there with us Monday night."

"Why didn't you and Michael stop by here first, on the way to his place?"

"I checked if you were home, but the lights were out. And Michael was hungry, as usual." She lets out a good-natured laugh, which makes me feel further away from her for some reason.

I stare at her, not happy with our current situation. She reads my facial expression. "Besides, when's the last time you made *anyone* dinner? In fact, when did you last cook for *yourself*?"

"You're right 'bout that." I reach forward and grasp her hands. She allows me to hold them but with little enthusiasm and a look of impatience.

"It's late, Delante. I need to go. I start work tomorrow."

Her words should be good news, but it feels like another wedge to drive us apart. "What? Where?"

"I'm doing daily house cleaning for an elderly lady in town."

I can't hide my impressed look from Alyssia. "What's next? You'll start dating a hotshot man who'll take you to church every Sunday?"

In response, she tilts her head while glaring at me, giving me a look of disbelief. Then she rests her hands on the slight bulge of her tummy. "I'm only interested in you, Delante. When the time is right, I want more with you. But I'm not going to push you to do anything."

"Hallelujah!" I shout in response to her preachy tone. "Can I get an amen?" I shout to Michael on the porch swatting at mosquitoes. He laughs, waving me off.

Alyssia pulls away from me. "Good night, Delante."

"Wait, does God get all of you, and I only get leftovers?"

She faces me, anger flashing in her eyes. "You can have all of me if you take responsible steps, Delante. Not one second earlier."

I clutch onto her arm. "Have you forgotten who I am around here?"

She yanks her arm back, and now she's raging. "That's the problem. I *know* who you are, Delante. But you need to make changes...real changes! 'Coz I'm not interested in endless games."

"Hello there!" comes Frank Bruno's shout from across the way. He's poked his head out his side door. "Everything all right?"

"Stay out of this!" I stare at him to show I'm serious, then turn back to Alyssia. "Why'd you have to make a scene?"

"Who grabbed who, Delante?"

My throat tightens with anger as I see that fat face, balding gorilla coming toward us. *You want to play? I can play too!* I stroll to meet him. He's eyeing Alyssia as if he's an uncle or something. I stop in front of him and look down at his pudgy face. To his credit, he looks up at me without batting an eye. A rage intensifies within me. I'm losing control of everything around me. "You'll turn around and go back to your house, Bruno, if you know what's good for you."

"I don't know what's good for me. I'm a bit thick-headed!" His mouth is a flat line of determination, with a bulldog look.

"Delante!" Alyssia shouts from behind me. Michael's calling my name, too. She reaches for me, but I brush her off more harshly than I intended. She tumbles backward and falls onto her behind. Michael rushes to her side. I return my gaze to Frank, hating him for making things worse than they already were.



“Three seconds.” There’s warning in my voice directed at Frank.

He doesn’t back down. “Someone needs to teach you a les—”

I swing, my fist connecting with the side of his face. He’s too slow and too old to see it coming. Like a sack of potatoes, he drops to the road, his face smacking against the cement.

I lean over him. “Now, what was you saying?”

Alyssia, having jumped up, runs to his side. She tries to pull his bulk onto his side without success until Michael helps her. She looks to me, raging, “Look what you’ve done!”

“He’s had it coming, Alyssia!” A faint siren wails in the distance. I notice that Muslim man looking out his curtain, a phone to his ear. I’m contemplating to go knock him out, too, when I remember what’s inside my house. “You keep your Jesus, that actor. I’m outta here!” I run back into my house.

I flush my supply down the toilet. The siren’s nearing, maybe a block away. I grab my Beretta, run to the backyard. It’s pitch black all around which is to my advantage. I toss the gun into the neighbor’s yard—the one with the swimming pool. They’re away on holiday, so I can collect my piece later.

Two police cars show up followed minutes later by an ambulance. I come out casually and sit on my porch, knowing what’s coming. Bruno’s eyes are open, but he doesn’t know what day it is. I smirk even as something like shame stabs at my insides.

Three police officers approach me, hands on their holsters, and spread out as if a human net. I sigh, letting out an obscenity under my breath, eyeing the lead police officer.

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*Toby Garrells, 33 Summit Avenue*

*10:33 p.m.*

Seeing the police cars and ambulance on our street, I rush out to see what’s happened. When I get near, I see Frank strapped onto a gurney. The young Black lady and her son are standing next to Frank, comforting him. The police are questioning the guy, Delante, that I met the other day at Jesus’ place. The paramedics are prepping the ambulance to take Frank. I approach and kneel beside him.

“What happened, Frank?” He looks tired. A gash spreads from his cheekbone to above his right eye. “Should I get Jesus?”

At the mention of Jesus, his face brightens. His eyes lock with mine. “Tell Jesus...arm wrestle rematch...when I get back.” He struggles to show a smile just as he’s wheeled into the back of the ambulance.

I see the lady and boy, both looking without seeing, holding each other facing the ambulance. Seconds later, the police escort her boyfriend in handcuffs, sullen and silent, to a squad car.

“What happened?” I ask the lady.

“It’s a mess; my boyfriend knocked Frank out.”

I watch the ambulance speed off, flashing lights twirling, followed by the police car. Just as they move off, another car I recognize passes by—Mitch! As he pulls into our driveway, I turn to the lady and kid. “Let’s be in prayer for Frank. And for your boyfriend. Delante’s his name, right?”

She nods with an appreciative grin.

I turn and run to catch up with Mitch, who enters our house.

I follow, entering a few seconds after him. “Mitch?” The AC’s chill hits me, granting relief from the sticky, night air.

He turns around, food already pulled out of the fridge on the table. “Hey.”

“Shelly texted me earlier. She said you haven’t been there in over a week?”

He stops what he’s doing, then stares at the table surface between us. The silence scares me. “Toby, sit down.”

Wondering what Mitch is about to tell me, I ease down onto the chair.

“I told you that real estate sales have been down the last months.”

“What does this have to do with Shelly?”

“I’ve not been going to Shelly’s. I’ve been doing a side job to make ends meet.”

“Do you want me to get a second job, or ask for more hours till school starts?”

Mitch radiates a brief, reassuring smile. “I got this. Just do your regular shifts. That’s good enough.” He pulls out bread slices. “What was going on down the street?”

“Delante, the guy at number 29, attacked my friend Frank Bruno.”

“Oh, so Frank’s now your friend?”

“Yes. He came to know Jesus the other day.”

Mitch winces at my words. “I’m not going to say a thing. I’m too worn out!”

“Are you going to call Shelly? She sounded worried about you and thinking the worst.”

“Worst?”

“That you’re seeing someone else.”

“Toby, I’m trying to stop us from losing our family home. I’m over 30 days late on the mortgage.”

“Can’t you just tell Shelly that, so she won’t worry?”

“I guess. I just didn’t want my problems to worry her, or you.”

“I’ll talk to Jesus about our problem.”

“Don’t!”

“If only you’d be openminded—”

He extends a hand to silence me. Reluctantly, I comply.

We talk for a few more minutes before I head upstairs. I regret that I have to work a double shift the next morning—hard to do when the King of king’s living on my street. But I’m also glad so I can help Mitch out more.

Before sleep, I lift Mitch, Frank, and even Alyssia’s boyfriend, Delante to the Lord. “May your Kingdom come and be established in each of their lives. And in mine.”

Day Six: Thursday

I'm walking along the side of the road when a familiar burgundy Dodge pick-up truck pulls to the side of the road ahead of me. Bryan catches my eye through his open rear window. "Jump in, Jarrett."

I open the door and hop in. "Thanks! Haven't seen you in a few days." Unshaven, Bryan looks worse for wear, as if he's had a few sleepless nights. He puts the truck in gear and pulls out onto the road.

"I needed time to think about everything that happened Saturday. You're heading to Summit Avenue?"

"Yep. A lot's happened since Saturday."

"Like...?"

"If I tell you, you'll think I've been sipping ol' Jack again."

He quips a laugh. "You can't tease me like that and not tell me."

I share about the past few days, and especially the visit to the park and what we witnessed when our eyes were opened, as well as our solo adventure without Jesus on Daxen Street. "I thought this week I was just going to Jesus' house to help him unpack. But it's become much bigger than that!"

"I wish I could've been there with you guys." His voice has a tinge of regret. "But then again, I'm not really one of his followers."

"What's stopping you?"

"Just personal stuff. But to be honest, I feel like I'm missing out."

Minutes later, we pull up curbside in front of Jesus' house. Knocking and entering, we catch Jesus' reaction at seeing us. "Welcome, both of you!"

Bryan, behind me, addresses Jesus. "May I have a word with you?"

"Of course." Jesus turns to me. "Jarrett, care to give Patrick a hand preparing brunch?"

"Sounds good." I step into the kitchen, and Patrick hands me a bowl of tomatoes and mushrooms to slice and dice. I come to the table and take a seat, knife and chopping board in my hands.

Bryan looks uncomfortable and sits on the sofa arm. Jesus sits in the armchair, his back to me. Bryan pipes up. “I don’t know where to begin, but I feel like an outsider since meeting you. I mean, I know I believe, but why do I feel this way?”

Jesus leans forward and pours water from a glass pitcher into one of two tall glasses filled with ice on a silver tray, the ice cracking and snapping. Finally, he answers. “It’s not enough to believe in me. You must enter relationship with me, which happens through Covenant. But to do that, you must be reconciled to my Father, which is like receiving a gift. This is something we eagerly wish to give you—no matter what your past may be.”

“How? I don’t know how to receive what you’re talking about.”

Jesus’ voice is calm. “I will help you.”

“Thanks.” Bryan shifts his body down onto the sofa.

“To receive this glass of ice water, what must you do?”

“I’d have to take the glass.”

“Yes. Salvation is a Gift you receive through relationship with me.” I watch Jesus offer the glass.

“I don’t know if I’m ready yet.” Bryan’s expression darkens. “I’d love to receive. But…”

“But you still have matters you must deal with before you can fully follow me.”

Bryan nods, a solemn look on his face. I wonder if he’s about to break down crying.

Jesus lifts the cup toward Bryan. “Receive my Gift just as you are, Bryan. Then, I will help you make the tough decisions you must make.”

Bryan hesitates before reaching for the glass. When he holds it, he stares at it.

Jesus resumes. “Drink the water so it becomes part of you.”

Bryan drinks deeply, letting out a breath of satisfaction as he finishes. Then he kneels in front of Jesus. “I need your help. You know I’ve been living with Jessica for over two years. And we’re not married. I’m sorry for my wrongs. But I want to do what’s right.”

“I know you do.” Jesus reaches forward and rests a hand on Bryan’s head. “If you truly love her, just like you love me, you must make it lifelong through covenant.”

“I know.” Bryan rocks forward until he’s prone, his face on the floor. “I want to be clean. I want to follow you.”

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*Bryan Silverman, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*9:08 a.m.*

After the tears and quiet confessions to Jesus, a huge weight lifts off me. Suddenly, I'm much lighter and more grounded, as if my reality has shifted. And I feel confident, joyful, and more alive than ever before.

Jesus helps me stand up. "Would you take me to the hospital? Frank needs to be picked up."

"Frank, the guy next door I met Saturday?"

"Yes."

"What happened? Why's he in the hospital?"

Jarrett interrupts, sitting at the table, eating a massive omelet. "The neighborhood drug dealer across the street attacked Frank."

I shake my head at that news. "Lord, I'm ready when you are."

Moments later, we're heading to the hospital, a twenty-minute drive away.

I eye Jesus. "What's happened to me? I feel so different."

Jesus chuckles and reaches over, patting me on my shoulder. "You've come alive in me."

"What does that mean?"

"Previously, your spirit was dead. When you received the Gift, my Spirit entered you and made your spirit alive."

"I...feel joy within me."

"Marriages almost always feel wonderful the first weeks."

"Is this the honeymoon period?"

Jesus' laughter fills the truck cabin. "Yes."

"Should I be worried?"

Jesus shakes his head. "You'll soon learn that to follow me in this world is not easy. And I may lead you to do things you don't want to do, or that go against your flesh, or the grain of this world."

"I'm worried." I give Jesus a sidelong glance with a smirk.

"You could suffer for one hundred years for me in the most extreme manner, but that would only be a raindrop in the Pacific Ocean of the Glory I have prepared for you when you arrive on

the other side. Rest assured, my Kingdom will flow through you if you allow it, and we will do remarkable things together. Nothing will be able to stop us from accomplishing the works prepared for you before the world's foundation."

I nod but wonder what that future might be like. "If I feel as good as I do now, I'll do exactly that!"

"The maturity that I will bring you to will not depend on feelings, though those are valid and not to be shunned. Even when your senses are unable to penetrate the darkness seeking to suffocate you, true faith is resting on what I have said through my Word and trusting the Spirit to empower with all the resources you need to move through challenges."

I take in Jesus' words and feel even more alive as they anchor in me. I drive without talking and realize it would never be me alone; it would be *we* together, as long as I kept myself surrendered to God.

We arrive at the hospital and park. Walking into the hospital with Jesus, I catch the lingering scents of antiseptic and bleach. Despite the modern appearance with shiny, white flooring and contemporary décor, I'm still not happy to be in this place; I loathe hospitals.

A stocky male nurse pushes a wheelchair with Frank toward us. Frank wears a white bandage wrapped around his scalp, and he beams when his eye catches sight of Jesus. When his eyes land on me, his face dims considerably—probably still sore about being disturbed on Saturday morning. The flesh around Frank's right eye is purple-black and swollen as if he's gone a round with Mike Tyson.

Jesus rests a hand on Frank's shoulder. "Hello Frank. We came as you requested!"

"You really are the Big JC!" Frank glances over his left shoulder to the nurse. "This here's Jesus of Nazareth on a stopover in our little city. He lives next door to me!"

The nurse's name tag shows *Rhyle*. He fixes his eyes on Jesus before looking to Frank. "Are you pulling my leg, Frank?" He laughs nervously.

"Ask him, Rhyle." Frank addresses Jesus with the hint of a smile. "Tell him who you are so I'm not pushed by Rhyle here to the loony department."

Jesus looks at the nurse. "Hello Rhyle."

"Hello, sir. You certainly do look the part. But surely Frank can't be serious."

"Frank speaks truthfully. And you are a special young man. You love your family. You're one of the hardest workers in this hospital."



“Sir, you must know the Philippine culture very well. We all love our families very much, and we are dedicated workers.”

A look of concern crosses Jesus’ face. “Yes. But Rhyle, I know you, as well. Even this morning, I saw your homesick heart and that you’ve done well to smile your way through a black pool of depression.”

Rhyle lifts both hands covering his cheeks and mouth. His eyes widen in shock and tears drip from his eyes. His voice wavers. “H-How did you know that?”

With a sympathetic look, Jesus gestures to Frank. “Do you mind helping us get Frank to the truck?”

Rhyle nods, but he’s now seeing without seeing, as if on autopilot, as he pushes Frank.

Frank locks eyes with Jesus as we walk alongside the wheelchair. “I wasn’t sure how I’d get home today. You heard my prayer, didn’t you?”

Jesus grins.

Rhyle pushes Frank to the bright, sunny outside to the parking lot before we help him into the truck.

Getting into the truck, Jesus faces Rhyle. “I’m staying at 30 Summit Avenue. Would you stop by this Sunday?”

“Are you really him—Jesus of Nazareth?”

“Words will never do.” Jesus leans forward resting the palms of his hands across Rhyle’s eyes, blocking him from seeing. “For a time, see.” Jesus pulls away his hands.

Rhyle’s face takes on a startled, mesmerized look. “Oh my.”

“What’s he seeing, Lord?” I’m irritated that I might be missing something. “Example?”

Rhyle goes to his knees before the Lord.

“Lord?” I ask again.

Jesus gives me a sidelong glance. “So be it. See as I see for a time, both you and Frank.”

I had not expected this. The truck has vanished, as has the parking lot and all of this world. The oppressive heat from a second ago has given way to a fresh breeze coming from an unknown source.

As far as I can see, a blackened backdrop surrounds us complete with swirling galaxies, heavenly bodies streaking through the cosmos, and gleaming stars stretching into the distance. To our sides stand towering warriors with outstretched wings, who acknowledge me with a grin.

Frank beside me blazes with light, but once I look more closely, I see his light is actually flowing to him from another source. When I follow the stream of light to my right, I see Jesus is the source. Streaks of light, musical notes, and glistening waterlike waves move out from Jesus in all directions.

And then I hear it...a single, sustained drone heard in the backdrop of wherever we are, rummaging into the distance. It is musical in tone, sweeping in its effect, but also uplifting and strengthening. “What is that wonderful sound?”

The angel to my left lowers himself to me and speaks. “As it is written, all things are upheld by the Word of His power. This single, unbroken syllable you hear is the scaffolding of all Creation. He spoke and all that is, came into being. When the end of this cosmos arrives, the sound you hear will cease, and all Creation will collapse in on itself.”

“What will happen to us?”

“Do not be afraid. He will protect all that are His.”

Then, I find myself outside my truck bowed down before Jesus. I am worshipping. I dare to look up when I notice something move out from me and flow into Jesus, while something from him returns to me.

Then I see the nurse, Rhyle, with his face to the ground.

I’m seeing snapshots of his recent life—a barrage of reptile-like creatures assailing him from all sides. Then the image changes, and he’s tethered to a colossal monster. Without warning, I see Rhyle pacing the third floor of a mall, glancing over a banister. I realize he’s cut off from hope—the darkness driving him literally to want to leap over the edge.

Jesus stands next to him and waves his hand over Rhyle’s head severing a dark cord causing it to slingshot away. Jesus cradles him from behind. Then I’m seeing Jesus, with delight, breathing into Rhyle, except it’s at his conception. A flash of lightning ignites the cells.

Then, I’m back in the truck, staring at the back of my hands clutching the steering wheel with all my strength. “Did you—?”

“Did you?” Frank’s voice is loud, bewildered, awestruck.

Jesus helps Rhyle to his feet and dusts off his knees. “I died to make it possible for reconciliation to take place between you and my Father. You have been in a dark place because you’ve practiced religion all your life without knowing me personally. And you’ve walked in

habits of sin. Turn away from that old life. Fix your eyes on me and keep them there. I will give you purpose, strength, and make it so no dark forces can ever push you to the brink again.”

Rhyle nods, his cheeks wet, a smile fighting to the surface. “Yes, Lord. Thank you for opening my eyes.”

Jesus pulls Rhyle into a hug.

As we’re headed back to Summit Avenue, I catch the Lord’s eye. “Jesus?”

Joy radiates from Jesus’ face. “That was special, wasn’t it?”

“What did we just witness?”

Jesus chuckles good-naturedly. “You saw one facet of eternity.”

Awe takes over Frank’s face. “You mean…”

“You haven’t seen anything yet. That was what your earthly mind could fathom without imploding.”

I tap the steering wheel with enthusiasm. “Honeymoon or not. I’m all yours, Jesus!”

“Me too,” Frank adds. “Whatever the honeymoon part means, I don’t need to know.”

Jesus looks intently at us. “We shall see. My disciple Simon Peter once saw a glimpse of me as I truly am up on a mountain. Not long after that time, he disowned me three times.”

The impact of his words punches me in the gut. “Then, please make us stronger in you, Lord.”

“Strength comes through storms. Are you ready for what is to come, friends?”

I nod, convinced of my determination. “Yes, Lord.”

Jesus studies my face, giving me a sober look. “Let’s swing by the county jail. We need to pick up a friend.”

I’m racking my brain. “Who?”

“Delante Thomas.”

Frank’s head snaps to Jesus, causing him to grimace in pain. His hands clench. “What?”

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*Delante Thomas, at Sussex County Jail*

*10:54 a.m.*

I pace from one end of my jail cell to the other in my deep orange overalls. Strong bleach permeates the enclosed air, which is stuffy-hot from a faulty A.C. A lone, miniscule window sits above me ten feet, white-hot rays slanting into the cell and striking the yellow, cinder block wall.

“Stop your pacing. You’re gonna drive me mad!” My jail mate, in his 40s, shouts from the lower bunk.

“Can you believe my own mother wouldn’t take my collect call?”

“That’s life, man.” He props his head up with his tattooed arms. “First time here?” His overgrown, black mustache, half covering his mouth, twitches as he asks his question.

“Naah, third time. But my first in over a year.”

“Maybe your momma’s thinkin’ three strikes and all that?”

I punch my open hand with my fist in disgust. “I can’t believe she’s leaving me in here to rot!”

Moustache Man chuckles. “You’ve only been here one night and this morning.”

I throw the guy a sharp look. “Did I ask you?”

Just then, a guard’s face appears in the small opening in the metal door. “Thomas, collect your things. You’re leaving in five.”

“What?” Shocked, I dash to the door wanting to know how, but the guard’s already moved along the corridor.

My roommate sits up. “Looks like your mom came after all.”

A few minutes later, I’m ushered to the jail’s release section. My clothes are returned to me, and I change. I give my signature on the bail paperwork that I’ll not leave the county while awaiting my court appearance in four days.

I’m surprised and elated to be leaving this dump. I’m led to the final exit, the door just in front of me, preparing for mom’s lecture. The automatic door slides open flooding my eyes with the brightest light, causing me to wince and raise my hands instinctively. My eyes adjust until I see the Jesus-actor standing in front of me! His robes glisten, and a cloak covers his head. He eyes me the way my baseball coach eyed me when I’d steal a base against his wishes. But I’m not ten anymore.

“Where’s my mom?”

“Your mom has put you in my hands. I am your last hope.”

I shake my head. “Not gonna fall for it. You are a fake.” I walk past the Jesus-wannabe looking for my mom’s car, sure I’ll see it and get away from this imposter.

He walks past me, gesturing toward the truck parked ahead. “You can walk home on your own or come with us. We came to give you a ride.”

I squint to see who’s in the truck. I stop in my tracks, balking again. “Is that...?”

“Frank is coming home, too, from the hospital.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” I pull out my cellphone and go to turn it on—nothing! I must’ve forgotten to turn off my phone last night before handing it over.

Jesus glances back at me. “Coming?”

I can’t believe my luck. But it’s like an oven out here. No way I can walk home. And I’m starving. Without a word, I walk after the Jesus actor. Reaching the truck, Frank’s staring through me; it obviously wasn’t his idea to come get me. I leap over the side of the truck and sit down, pushing my body against the back of the cab.

Reaching Summit Avenue about a half hour later, I jump down onto the asphalt and wave without looking at Jesus. “Thanks.” I head to my house.

Jesus’ voice floats after me. “I’ll bring you cheeseburgers shortly?”

I spin around. “If you’re really JC, you already know my answer.”

Stepping into my house, I slam the door behind me still shocked that I’m not in jail. The room’s darkened, the air stale and crazy hot. Sweat beads on my neck and forehead. I hit play on my stereo—a favorite R & B song plays, vibrating the walls.

Something unknown and unexpected within me drives me to push my drapes apart and heave open my front window. I go to the dining room window opposite, push back those drapes, then attempt to open that window. But all my strength can’t move it. But I welcome the light, and fresh air from the front. I lean against the dining room window and eyeball the fenceline to my right. After dark, I’ll be out there to collect my piece.

I check the fridge and, as expected, find it empty except for one egg, butter, and a plastic milk jug containing spoiled white chunks. I chuck the jug into the garbage can. Plopping down onto my sofa, I reach over and put my phone on charge. I lean forward, holding my head in my hands.

I awaken to knocks. *Alyssia*? I yank the door open. The Jesus-actor stands there!

“Delante, a solitary egg and stick of butter is not good for a homecoming.”

*Wait, how did he know?* He holds an aluminum-covered plate in his hands. I breathe in a welcoming aroma—the whiff of grilled hamburger. And for now, at least, I allow my heart to soften at this kindness. I can pretend this guy’s fake all day long. But it won’t change the reality of what keeps happening—namely this guy knowing things he should not know, and not showing any sign that he’s a whacko.

I take the plate. “Uh, thanks.” It’s hot to the touch and weighs heavy. I stare at the man, wondering what I should do next.

“Can I finally come in, Delante?”

“Maybe next time?” I’m honestly not sure I’ll ever let the guy into my house.

He looks around at the walls and ceiling. “I can help you fix this place up, if you’d like.”

“Naah. Besides, I rent it. Why should I fix up someone else’s property?”

“Because it’s a matter of self-respect to live in a home you can rest in, rental or not.” With a grin, he turns and heads back over to his house. “My door is open to you, Delante. And you can live there forever, rent-free.”

I close the door and sit down. I pull back the foil and two burgers sit there with all the trimmings. I lift my hands to wet eyes. For the first time in years, I feel something like light strike my heart. I realize it’s a strange, alien feeling—something like a little bit of gratitude.

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*Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue*

*12:15 p.m.*

My head is throbbing, and every part of my body aches. Wincing with every step, Jesus and Bryan each grab an arm and help me into the house. I’m not sure about Jesus’ earlier actions—picking up the delinquent who beat and humiliated me. But as we made our way back to Summit Avenue, I realized that Jesus was doing what he does best, helping people no matter how far gone they may be. Still, I was relieved not to have to talk to the guy. I plan to keep it that way.

I’m glad to be away from that hospital and back home—well, for the next three days, that is. I hobble to my kitchen and ease down onto my barstool, Jesus and Bryan behind me, followed by a jovial Patrick.

I point to the fridge. “Help yourselves to a drink, guys.”

They nod, and Bryan opens the fridge grabbing chilled water bottles, tossing one to Jesus and Patrick.

Patrick sets a plate down in front of me. “Frank, I thought you might be hungry, so I brought you something from the grill!”

“Aww, thanks.” The scent of hamburger rises to my nose. “Smells so good!”

Jesus uncaps the bottle in his hand. “How you feeling, Frank?”

I give a quick shrug. “I’m okay.” I gesture to the plate. “And even better that Patrick brought this over!”

Patrick and Bryan both head out, Jesus lingering behind.

He stands over me, his voice unhurried. “Frank.”

I can sense he’s waiting for my eyes to connect with his. Finally, I look up. “Yeah?”

“Do you trust me?”

“I want to, Lord.” I swallow hard and look away for fear my emotions will seize control. I wish momma was here—I could use one of her unconditional hugs. Unemployed. Alone. Beat up and humiliated in front of a woman and kid. Losing my home. A.C. facing an uncertain future.

The weight of his hand lands on my shoulder; he squeezes gently. “Frank, do you trust me? About your house? About all your worries and all your concerns, even Attack Cat?”

I fight to keep my voice steady. “I want to, Lord.” I force myself to take a sip of my water to hold down the sobs threatening to erupt out of me.

Jesus lowers his hand to me. “Take my hand.”

I grip it and feel him squeeze. “Let go of your pain, and your fear. Just go one day at a time. And keep hold of my hand meanwhile.”

All at once, the heaviness weighing on my shoulders falls away. I lock eyes with him. He’s right. With him in my life, no matter what I face, I’ll be okay. If I lose this house, if life is harder, it will still be okay if I keep my hand in his. I need to trust.

“That’s it, Frank! I see it coming alive in you. New faith! I really like that!” The beaming smile on his face warms my heart. He lifts his hands in front of his face, a smile showing. “It’s so bright I can barely look at you!”

We share a laugh.

Then, he does it. He steps to me and hugs me. I can't help it. I press the unbruised side of my head against him, feeling his cool, soft raiment against my face. He cradles my head with his hand and arm, and I just sob, my whole body shaking as I let everything out. I feel no rush from him. He is patient and kind. I know he is with me no matter what happens.

After a time, he speaks, his voice calm, reassuring. "That's it, son. Give your tears to me. Life can be harsh, but together, we will overcome."

I nod. "There's a tear in my beer." I croon that old Hank Williams, Jr. song. We share another laugh.

"Hey." He waits for me to look up. "Enjoy these handmade burgers! And come over in an hour, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be there!"

He's turning to leave when I call after him. He stops and faces me with expectation on his face. "Your plan?"

"A yard sale...tomorrow. It's time."

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*Bryan Silverman, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*1:19 p.m.*

I'm sitting beside Patrick and Jarrett, hamburgers in each of our hands, when Jesus returns. "How's Frank doing?"

"He's doing better. He'll be over shortly." Jesus sits down at the table with us. "Smells scrumptious, Patrick!"

A broad smile appears beneath Patrick's mustache. He holds his burger up to his mouth about to take a big bite. "Thank you. I like, too, if I do say so myself!"

We all break out in laughter.

After we've enjoyed Patrick's meal, I turn to Jesus. "Lord, is there anything I can do for you today besides be your chauffeur?"

Jesus' face lights up. "Yes, it's time to bless the lady across the street."

"How?"

"She is alone and lonely. We will inject something good into her life."



I picture the covered plate I took her and her unopened door. “She doesn’t seem to be interested in any kindness we’ve shown her.”

“I will visit her shortly.”

Patrick grins. “Should I cook something for her, Lord?”

“One hamburger for Ms. Ayustine.”

Patrick smacks the table. “Can’t wait to get to it, Lord.”

Thirty minutes later, Patrick having cooked on the outdoor grill, Jesus holds an aluminum-covered plate in his hands. “I’ll be back in thirty minutes. I want you guys to pray for Ms. Ayustine. My Spirit will quicken others to pray across the world, too.”

We watch Jesus leave, heading across to Ms. Ayustine’s house. As he goes, I pray. Without warning, what I’m seeing around me changes, like a light switch flipped. I’m seeing just like in the hospital parking lot an oil-black canvas with glistening light and myriads of color invading the scene as Jesus moves away from us toward the road.

“Jarrett? Patrick?”

Jarrett grips my shoulder. “I see it, too!”

Patrick’s voice speaks in awe. “It’s beyond words!”

We see Jesus, blazing with light, moving toward the faintly seen framework of Ms. Ayustine’s house. As he draws closer, he flicks his hands left and right as if conducting an orchestra. Piercing light rushes forward from him like the waves of a tsunami. The ink-blackness is plowed backwards to the left and right until a corridor of light blazes around the house. I’m in wonder at the spectacle.

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*Ms. Cahva Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue*

*3:31 p.m.*

My puzzle’s thousand pieces strewn across my table, I’m snapping pieces into place forming the border when a knock sounds at my front door. I roll my eyes and huff as I head to the living room and peek out the front window. My eyes lock with those of the white-robed stranger from across the street; he beams at me while holding a covered plate.

His smile irritating me, I go to my front door intending to tell him to get lost. I yank the door open.

That smile of his meets me, disarming me. His eyes are penetrating and kind, which causes me to hesitate speaking my piece.

“Hello again, Ms. Ayustine. Have you recalled yet when we met years ago?”

I shake my head, even as my memory rolls backwards. I find myself looking through the eyes of a ten-year-old child, kneeling at a church altar—that moment when I asked Jesus into my life.

“That’s impossible. You can’t be him.”

“Your heart knows more than your mind. May I visit for a few minutes? And I’ve brought you one of the finest hamburgers you’ll ever taste.”

I want to slam the door shut despite the pleasantries, despite the plate, despite his charismatic face and smile. I want to forget the distant memories from seemingly another life. But for reasons unknown, I do the opposite. “Fine!” I beckon him inside. I lead him through the living room to the dining room, pointing toward the table. “Sit down.” My voice is harsher than I intended.

“Thank you.” He lifts the chair from the floor away from the table, then sets it back down before taking a seat.

I stare at him. “You didn’t drag the chair across the floor.”

“Indeed, your children used to do that when they were small, and you didn’t like it.”

I nod, and I can’t help a brief smile show at the distant memory. “When the grandchildren were here last, I actually welcomed hearing that sound.”

“How long has it been?”

I wave off his question. “My children are busy people living successful lives. One does not get to their positions by being distracted, even by family.” I glance at his face watching for a reaction, but there is none.

He gestures to the plate, flashing a lingering smile. “Enjoy while its hot.”

I peel back the foil to see a tall burger with dressings on the side. “You’re not eating?”

“I ate earlier. Patrick’s a fine cook!”

“Would you like green tea?”

He nods, seeming to be pleased at the idea.

I go to the adjoining kitchen, put on the kettle, and lean against the counter glad for the distance from him. "I was living peacefully until you showed up."

"You have existed, Ms. Ayustine. But you have neither known peace nor truly lived."

I shoot him a look before reigning in my anger. "I'm quite happy, thank you."

"Happiness is only skin deep. Joy, though, reaches to unsearchable depths. You once knew that. And I can give that to you again."

I shake my head and stare out my window as my mind's transported to another time and place. "I had that before, before it was ripped out of me!"

"War is not from me."

I watch for a reaction. "I prayed for them to be saved. They were not."

He remains silent, which stabs at my heart even more. I fetch a teacup from my cupboard. "Oh, what does it matter? That was another time, another continent." When I look at him, his eyes are fixed on me.

"The darkness is as ravenous wolves. They seek to kill, steal, and destroy. Yet, I work, and overflowing life comes to all who ask, seek, and knock."

I consider saying something more, something that might cut like a razor. A building hiss comes from inside the kettle. I change the subject, chuckling before I can catch myself. "Since you arrived, the neighborhood's gone crazy."

"My entrance always stirs things up, both good and bad. I reveal and bring to the surface that which is most true."

"What does it matter what is true if evil people aren't stopped?"

"What is now, will not always be. This life is but a droplet in an ocean greater in size than the universe."

"And yet, many who live in this droplet suffer greatly."

A look of sadness falls over his face. "I know it is not easy."

"You say truth will eventually win out?"

"Yes."

"After all of us here on earth have been abused, harassed, and murdered by those wolves, as you described them?" I think back again to my parents in East Timor, guns pressed against their temples unless they'd recant their faith in Christ.

“I never abandon my own. And I fight for those in the world who haven’t experienced my salvation. I empower and carry all my servants especially when the darkness becomes seemingly too great. Even now, I am working.”

I glance at him, curious. My eyes catch a sparkle of light from his right wrist, the place of the scar. I look away, my mind playing tricks on me. Finally, the kettle boils. I pour the steaming water through the sieve packed with dark green tea leaves into a cup and bring it to my guest, the steamy aroma rising.

“Thank you, Ms. Ayustine.” He lifts the cup to beneath his nose and draws in the scent. “Smells wonderful.”

I sit down, grab the hamburger, and take a bite. It’s fresh and packed with flavor. I close my eyes in delight—I don’t eat western food often, but I do love a made-from-scratch hamburger.

“Good?”

I nod, not wanting to talk with my mouth full. Finally, I swallow and reply. “Quite.”

“You are fond of puzzles.”

I manage a grin. “Yes, when they aren’t minus one.” I take another bite.

He takes a sip, then lowers the cup onto the saucer. “Why did you depart from me years ago?”

I feel my lips scrunch up as I search for a reason why. “I eventually escaped my captors. In time, I learned to protect myself and fight back. After the war, I tried to forget everything and focus on school. I suppose I just outgrew you.”

“Yet here I am.”

“Perhaps I am now insane. Or I’ve been duped by a convincing con artist.”

“Do you really believe those things?” He takes another sip from his cup.

I catch his eye and tilt my head to the side for a second. “I suppose...not.”

“Would you like to be reunited with me?”

“No.” I say it directly. “Religion just isn’t for me, now.”

“I didn’t say anything about religion. Have you forgotten the tears you shed and the way you felt after we met each other long ago?”

I grin at the memory of a carefree time in my life. “It was a happy time for me.”

He finishes the last bits of his tea. He stands up slightly before lifting the chair beneath him away from the table. “Ms. Ayustine, would you allow me to give you a gift?”

“What kind of gift?” I’m unable to resist. “Is it a million dollars?”

Jesus throws his head back in laughter, drawing out my own subtle smile. Then, he fixes his eyes on me. “Can you trust me just a little bit?”

“Fine. And thanks for the hamburger.”

“Your gift will arrive Saturday morning.”

“Interesting. Hidden charges?”

A smile appears again. “Nothing financial.”

I lead him to the front door, feeling a strange warmth within my heart, and somewhat glad for his visit. I still wonder about this man, though I must admit he’s shown convincing evidence that he may be Jesus.

He throws a rearward glance and wave at me before heading back across the street. “Have a good evening.”

And I realize then just how empty the house feels now that he’s gone.

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*Bryan Silversen, at Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*4:30 p.m.*

Dining chairs positioned in front of his living room window, Patrick, Jarrett, and I pray. We watch Jesus exit the lady’s house and head toward us. We each continue to see through a strange, alien lens. The fact he was able to enter inside the lady’s house and talk to her was a good sign. Running to the front door, I’m eager to find out what’s happened. I yank the door open, Jesus dazzling with a piercing light as he moves toward me. Then, like a switch flipped, my vision reverts to normal.

I push open the screen door for Jesus. “How’d it go?”

Jesus’ lips curve upward until a warm smile appears. “You can begin your work on Saturday morning.”

“Fantastic! I’ll go to the hardware store now and get what we need before it closes.”

Jesus looks past me. “Jarrett, Patrick?”

“Yes, Lord?” Voices in-sync, they both have a look of expectation.

“Can you both go with Bryan and give him a hand?”

Jarrett stands. “You got it, Lord!”

Hand to chin, I share what I witnessed. “I saw the darkness pushed back. Does that mean she believed in you?”

“Even when the enemy’s absent, there’s still the matter of a person’s will to choose.”

“So, we’ll continue to pray for her.”

“Well said. Prayer suffocates the darkness, granting a person space to breathe and think clearly without spiritual harassment.”

Jesus taps Patrick’s shoulder with the back of his hand. “How did you like seeing things in a whole ‘nother way?”

A thoughtful expression appears on Patrick’s face as he strokes his beard. “That...was scary and interesting at the same time. That darkness seemed ominous, Lord.”

Jesus grabs Patrick and draws him into an affectionate embrace. “Man up!”

This makes all of us crack up. Patrick, amused and surprised, looks at us with a sheepish grin.

Then Jesus speaks to all of us. “What is within you is far greater than any fallen creature.” He looks directly at me as if to deliver the same message, and then at Jarrett.

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*Alyssia Long, City Center*

*5:15 p.m.*

We’re at a bus stop waiting to go home. “Michael, how did you like being at Miss Theodora’s house today?”

He nods with a pleased grin. “Her house is so nice.”

He hasn’t intended to hurt me, but his words strike like a hammer. Up till now, I’ve not provided a home life that *I’d* like to live in, never mind my son. But now, I aim to change that.

We take the bus and get off two streets from Summit Avenue. I watch for Michael’s reaction to my question. “Shall we stop to visit Jesus?”

“Yay!” Michael punches the air.

We walk the short stretch. I glance toward Delante's house sad that he's in the county jail. Then, I notice movement through his front window. When his front door opens, I stop in my tracks, shocked to see Delante stepping out onto his porch.

"Hey!" Delante eyes me up and down, a corner of his mouth lifting with a look of desire. He throws a nod to Michael. "Hey Michael!"

"Hi." Michael remains stand-offish.

Delante's voice, directed to both of us, is calm and gentle. "Wanna come in for a bit to catch up?"

I shrug and glance at Michael, whose eyes are set on Jesus' house. "Michael?"

He hesitates. "Oookay." I can tell he's not happy with the interruption to our plan.

We step onto the front porch, avoiding the sunken step. I look at Delante. "When you gonna get that fixed?"

"Did you miss me?"

"I been too busy to miss you." We step into his house, the cavelike room not much cooler than the outside temps. To my surprise, the window curtains are open. But this only reveals how much of a dump the place is, especially after being in Theodora's pristine home the entire day with its bright and airy feel. It's hard to want to be here. I try not to let it show on my face.

"Been busy doing what?" He leads me to his couch where I reluctantly sit down.

Michael takes a seat in the gray-upholstered, deep-arms, high-back chair—only his head seen above the arms.

"I started working this morning for the lady in the city that I told you about."

Delante's face hardens. "Really, what sort of work does she have you do?" He sits down beside me.

*Is he actually unhappy?* "I do cleaning, laundry, and cooking."

"I see."

He's more on edge than normal. I ask the question burning for an answer. "How'd you get out of jail?"

He points to Jesus' house. "Him, the Jesus character. Can you believe that?"

"He bailed you out?"

"Crazy, eh? He even gave me a ride home."

"What you did to that guy across the street—"

“Yeah, I know. I ain’t proud.” He scans his phone quickly before looking at me. “So uh, could we cook something together?” His hands reach for mine. “I’ll go to the local shop, buy some stuff.”

“No, Delante. I’m tired.” I pull back my hands.

“You’re tired, but you’re here strolling down Summit Avenue. Was it to go over there?” He gestures toward Jesus’ house.

“I didn’t know you were out of jail, Delante. Why didn’t you call or text?”

“You know now.” I see anger building on his face, followed with a dismissive wave. “That guy’s really disrupting my flow.”

“Flow? You want flow?” I can’t help my anger from surfacing. “Begin by thanking him that you’re not sitting in jail. Next, fix your porch step.” I stand up and stare defiantly into Delante’s eyes. No movement, no apology—just a hardened look from him. “Michael, let’s go.”

“Where’s the love?” Delante says after me as I move to the front door.

I throw him a fleeting look over my shoulder. “Like I said before, when you get your act together, we’ll see.”

“What do you mean, ‘we’ll see’?”

I turn to Michael. “Go on, Michael. I’ll follow in a minute.” I watch him leave before I face Delante akimbo. “You beat up a man and got arrested last night. Michael needs a role model, not a father’s who’s gonna be locked away till he turns 18!”

“It won’t be like that, Alyssia.”

“Then prove it. I’m giving you time to make it happen.” I turn to exit, before stopping and facing him again. “But know this—I won’t wait forever!”

I’m expecting him to say something, but he just stands there until finally giving a subtle nod.

“See you soon, Delante.” I dash to catch up to Michael, who’s already halfway to Jesus’ house.

Then, I see to our right Mr. Bruno hobbling with a pain-ridden face toward Jesus’ porch. His face is discolored—like looking at the marble cake Ms. Theodora baked for us earlier.

“Mr. Bruno!” I divert from my intended path to go meet him.

He scans behind me to check the coast is clear. Michael’s stopped to wait in front of Jesus’ porch.

“Hiya.” I make sure my voice doesn’t sound of too much sympathy.



He manages a smile. “Hey, call me Frank.”

“Listen, thanks for intervening last night.”

A skeptical look appears on his face. “If colliding with the cement counts as me intervening!”

“It was brave, Frank. Michael and I are grateful.”

He resumes his hobble. I offer him my shoulder, which he declines with a raised hand and a kind grin. “I gotta work through this pain so I get back to normal quicker.”

We go to knock when Jesus opens the door. Pushing the screen door open, he high fives Michael. When he sees Frank, I notice a special glint in his eye. He’s fond of the man.

Then he sees me—his face lighting up with surprising warmth. “Alyssia!” He hugs me. “Glad you’ve come over.” He pulls back to look me over. “Hungry? Patrick made handmade burgers for you and Michael earlier.”

“You knew we were coming?”

His beard twitches upward as a full smile appears. “Of course.”

“I’m starved, and you know he’s your number one fan when it comes to meals!” I gesture toward Michael who’s already hovering next to the table. “And there’s your proof.”

Jesus steps to Michael and looks at him. “Ready for something good from my kitchen?”

Michael’s face brightens and he nods, anticipation showing on his face. “Yeah.”

We take a seat at the table while Jesus works in the kitchen. Within a minute, the sizzle of minced hamburger spills out from the kitchen, the aroma filling the room. “Dinner coming up shortly. Alyssia, how was your first day at work?”

“It was great. Ms. Theodora gave me half a week’s pay in advance so I can visit the grocery store later and stock up!”

“That’s great to hear. Would you like Bryan to take you and Michael to the shop later?”

“Nah, I got it. But thank you. Ms. Theodora—she’s so nice. We really like her.”

“I am fond of her.” Jesus stops and faces me from the kitchen. “And I’m proud of you, too, daughter.”

His compliment washes over me. I stand and step over to the kitchen’s doorway. “But I do have a nagging concern.”

“What is that?” He flips the burgers.

“I’m just worried about how to keep from slipping into my old life?”

“When you learn to live at the center of my will, I will direct your steps. And I will direct your stops.”

“Sounds good. But how?”

“Eat my Word daily for spiritual fuel as you do food for bodily fuel. Pray as often as you breathe. And find a church home to be a blessing within. And most important, receive my Spirit so you can be an effective, empowered witness.”

“That’s a lot.”

Jesus laughs and the left side of his lip upturns into a grin. “It’s only hard if it’s a chore. But if you love me, you will find your spiritual life as easy as coming to visit just like you did today. Alyssia, I desire to pour my life through you in the days ahead as you live life. But in this season, you must allow yourself to grow roots in me.”

“Roots?”

“I’ll show you.” He gestures to the fridge. “There’s fresh condiments inside, Alyssia.”

I open the fridge door and bring the fresh lettuce, tomato, cheese, and sauces to the table. Jesus brings the steaming platter with hamburgers and fresh buns.

“Dig in, friends.” Jesus’ face shows a pleased expression to Frank, Michael, and me. “And seconds are available, if anyone would like.” Jesus throws a sidelong glance at Michael, a grin playing at his lips.

Michael bursts out laughing at that, all at the table joining him. Frank, though, looks dour.

Jesus speaks matter-of-factly. “Frank’s having a yard sale tomorrow.”

Hearing about the yard sale, I want to help. “If I didn’t have work, Frank…”

Jesus sits down at the head of the table. “Ms. Theodora Alexander has already agreed to give you off tomorrow and Saturday.”

“She has?”

“The Spirit leads my people. She already knows you’ll not be going to her home both days, and she will pay you as if you had come and worked.”

“What phone plan are you on, Lord?” My words produce a broad smile on Jesus’ face.

Michael, building his burger, beams. “I’m coming, too.”

Jesus takes a burger from the platter. “And Saturday will be a special day, too.”

My interest is piqued. “What’s up?”

“We will be a blessing to Ms. Ayustine across the street. A splendid work will be accomplished by many.”

“I’ll be there.”

Frank’s face displays a smile, at once followed by another grimace. “Whatever I can do to help.”

Seconds later, I take a bite into my burger—the soft sourdough bun, tasty, sliced, sweet tomato, crunchy, chilled lettuce, and the textured, flavored meat tasty and satisfying. “So good!”

Michael’s eyes close in delight—a chunk of burger already gone from his burger. “Thank you, Jesus!”

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*Toby Garrells, 33 Summit Avenue*

*8:30 p.m.*

I didn’t want to go into work this morning, but the boss had called requesting my help. I thought about quitting just so I could spend my day with Jesus. But then I also thought about my brother struggling to make ends meet. I knew I had to go in to work, like it or not.

So reluctantly, I headed into the oven-like cleaners to put in a day’s work. The heat coiled around me from start to finish as if to suffocate me. I’d hoped for a cooling thunder shower toward the end of the day, but it stayed a scorcher which added to my misery.

It’s difficult knowing Jesus lives across from me. And how long will that be? From what I can gather, he’s only here for a brief visit, as if on a stopover. But why go through all the vigor of moving into that house? And the loads of books Jarrett unpacked. Why is it all there? I wonder if Jesus does this in other towns or locations across the world.

After bringing my bike in and lifting it onto the wall mount, I feel a rush of excitement. *Finally free!* I dash to find out what’s happening at Jesus’ house.

Approaching his front door, it opens revealing Jesus standing behind the screen door, an expectant grin on his face. “About time! I’ve been waiting all day for you!”

He pushes open the screen door and steps out, engulfing me in his arms. As he holds me, my cheek brushes against his smooth, textured robes. His body, compared to the stifling heat, is cool

to the touch and spreads to all of me granting relief. I catch a whiff of something delicious cooking from inside the house.

“Hamburger for dinner, Lord?” I pull back and study his face.

He flashes a smile. “Patrick and I have been taking turns.”

I follow Jesus into the living room and notice Frank seated at the table. He throws me a nod followed by a grimace of pain, but he seems glad to see me. Inwardly, I cringe at the discoloration on the right side of Frank’s face, along with a large bandage situated across his cheek. The lady and her son, Alyssia and Michael, sit with their backs to me; they turn and greet me. Delicious scents of hamburger, potato salad, and coleslaw permeate the air. After a day’s work, I’m famished.

I walk around and sit next to Frank who’s seated on my right. Despite pleasantries shown from him to me a second ago, he looks depleted and gloomy. Michael, sitting across from me, is halfway through a towering hamburger.

“Sorry what happened to you, Frank.” I nudge him with my elbow.

Alyssia puts down her burger. “He was really brave.”

Frank shakes his head. “I was humiliated. It was stupid of me to get involved.”

Jesus, coming in from the kitchen with a plate of oven-baked BBQ chicken in his hands, eyes Frank. “It was a brave act, son. But fighting a perceived enemy requires wisdom, not just physical strength.”

“Thanks for that wisdom.” Frank’s words filled with sarcasm, he doesn’t look at Jesus.

Jesus shows no offense on his face.

“What would you have had me do?” Frank’s voice rises. “Stand by and do nothing?”

“If you had listened to me, you wouldn’t have been put in harms’ way.”

“Listened to you? For someone who’s supposed to be omniscient, I didn’t see you anywhere near the scene!”

Jesus gestures to me. “Toby, explain to him.”

I understand what Jesus is saying. “When my older brother forbid me to come over to be with Jesus, I knew I could pray to the Lord. So I did, and it was as if I’d called him on my cellphone.”

“And?” There’s intense skepticism in Frank’s voice.

“And he replied to me deep inside. I just knew Jesus would come over and spend time with me—probably ‘coz he knew how much it meant to me.”

Frank eyes Jesus. “You did *not* speak to me, Jesus.”

“I did.” A smile plays at Jesus’ lips.

Frank lets out a big sigh. “When?”

“Think about it.”

“I heard the ruckus and looked out the window, saw Ms. Alyssia and young Michael standing on the street. Your boyfriend—”

Alyssia reacts with a corrective tone. “He’s not my boyfriend. At least not now.”

Frank speaks in a course whisper. “Fine.” Then his voice normalizes. “The guy’s being aggressive, when is that guy not aggressive, when he just grabs you and—” He stops, giving Jesus a fixed stare.

A grin shows on Jesus’ face.

“There was a faint warning...something inside telling me to put the brakes on. But what was I to do? Did you really think I’d let her get beat...” He glances at her before looking at Jesus. “I mean, look at her...”

Alyssia looks at Frank with daggers in her eyes. “What?”

“...she’s half his weight!” Frank keeps his eyes fixed on Jesus.

Alyssia speaks up. “I can take care of myself, thanks!”

Frank finally looks at her before throwing his hands up in resignation.

Jesus steps to the table. “Your action, contrary to my inner prompting to do things differently, complicated things. If you had trusted and listened to me not to go out there with all guns blazing, I’d have worked through you much differently.”

“I suppose, Lord.” Frank doesn’t look convinced. “I just hate seeing bullies get away—”

“I know you do for good reason. But that never negates listening to my promptings.”

After I’ve eaten a full plate of BBQ chicken and a delicious hamburger, we spend time in prayer.

We finish and I feel as though I’ve had a great evening. I dread going to work tomorrow morning. I feel like I’ll be missing out again.

His voice chimes into my thoughts. *I will use you where you are. There is always a plan.*

I look at Jesus. We share a smile.

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*Delante Thomas, 29 Summit Avenue,*

*10:30 p.m.*

It's as black as molasses when I slip out my back door and move along the back of my house. The day's stifling heat lingers in the air coating everything, drawing out sweat with even the slightest movement. The trill of crickets vibrates the air all around and fireflies blink across the darkened way.

I eye the chest-high chain link fence at the intersection of my place and the old Asian lady's house where I lobbed my gun into the neighbor's yard prior to my arrest—the one with the circular, above-ground pool. I press my arms against the top of the metal fence and catapult my legs over the top, landing low to the ground. I brush my hands over the grass expecting to find the cold metal of the gun.

*It's not here!*

With care not to be seen, I pull out my phone and turn on the flashlight function. I point the light at the low-cut grass hoping to catch a glint of the grey-steel gun. After several minutes searching with no results, I return to my house empty-handed, irritated, and confused to be without my piece. *Where's it gone?*

I dial my man, Ted. "Hey Mr. T, I need a new toy."

He names the price, and I talk him down a bit. He agrees to drop off early next week. Then I call my supplier. We talk for five minutes. I consider the money I lost with the flush, but that's better than spending years banged up in prison.

Hanging up and business completed, I feel something lingering at my mind's edge, something like regret. Alyssia's words echo within me about Michael, and then my mind latches onto the reality that my son—*my son!*—will soon arrive. They'll need a father who's around, not in prison or six feet under.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I throw my head back against my bed's headboard with a heavy sigh. I scan the room—everything around me drab like my existence. Alone, and suddenly very afraid nothing will ever change.

My eyes drift out my window across the darkened yard to the old farmhouse, the porch light on, and that man sitting on his porch swinging back and forth.



Day Seven: Friday



*Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue*

*2:44 a.m.*

I've barely slept during the night due to the heavy thumping of my heart—as if it might explode out of my chest. I trace it to my thoughts, whizzing by me like wispy phantoms, so much so that I feel I'm caught in a frenzied vortex. The racing thoughts parade by, and I'm powerless to stop them. Every attempt to think up a plan to change what seems inevitable hits a dead end, and my dilemma replays as if to torment me.

Just two more nights to go in my home.

I toss and turn, my breathing ragged, my body protesting in agony with every movement. The fan's cooling air passes over me pushing off the muggy air, but also reminding me that I won't even have that luxury in a couple days. I'll be on the street, being looked down upon by city folk with their secure jobs, their only stress being what to watch on TV or how to cure boredom on the weekend. Unlike the homeless I've seen in town, I don't see myself begging or even positioning myself to be seen by the public. I'll never hold a cardboard sign asking for food or money. But maybe they all think that until hunger strikes and the tongue swells from heat and drinking tepid water under July's scorching sun.

Of course, I have Jesus next door who's stood downstairs in my kitchen encouraging me to trust him through this time. But, having this giant looming over me, staring down at me with its nightmarish face, terrifies me. I can't see anything else even though I want to look away from its eyes and fix them on Jesus instead. And maybe I will when reality hits that I'm turning a new chapter living as a homeless man, when my years in this haven I call home ends.

Attack Cat meows from the windowsill, his blue eyes fixed on me. I get up and stroke him which causes him to want only more of the same. "Sorry I failed you, AC." I rest my forehead against his furry back, just wanting this nightmare to end.

A rumble of gentle thunder rummages across the sky just outside my open window. I look out to see a stiff wind swaying the neighborhood trees, a loud roar of leaves and branches mashing against each other. A cool breeze wafts against my face.

It's then I see someone seated on the porch swing. *Jesus?*

I put on my yellow bathrobe and slippers, and head downstairs. I grab two bottles of chilled water from the fridge. I open the door just as lightning flashes across the darkened sky. I head over to the porch just as a sudden explosion of thunder shakes everything, my ribcage included.

“Hey.” I offer Jesus a bottle of water which he takes with an appreciative nod.

“Thanks, Frank.” His tone’s welcoming. “Trouble sleeping?”

I nod as I sit down on Jesus’ right side, the swing suspended from the ceiling swaying. A steady breeze rushes around us bringing satisfying relief from the day’s heat. Jagged lightning blazes a white path across the sky followed by a jolting clap of thunder shaking the house. I jump out of my skin.

I’m in awe. “Is that your doing?”

Jesus’ eyes find mine, and he smiles. He reaches his right arm past the back of my neck and squeezes my opposite shoulder. I feel safe.

We sit there, the swing swaying, its chains grinding lightly. Across the way, heavy rain pounds the parched ground and sweeps toward us like a liquid wall, pummeling everything in sight. Rain spray, carried by the wind, wets my face, legs, and feet. Delighted after such a sizzler of a day, I squeeze shut my eyes and welcome its tickling relief.

After a minute of living in this luxurious moment, I speak. “Can you see everything? I mean, can you see the other side of the universe at this moment—like a coin-sized meteorite streaking through some planet’s atmosphere?”

Jesus looks at me, the lightning flashes revealing a kind, interested face. “Fascinating question, Frank.” He drums his hand against the top of his thigh. “Yes, I see every miniscule action, great or small, all at once.”

“Every miniscule moment of time, past, present, future?”

“Yes.”

“And you see our thoughts?”

“Yes, like pages of endless books opening before me each nano-second—every iota of thought from all beings in Creation is not missed.”

“I guess that’s comforting to know. And isn’t time a construct of the cosmos?”

“As you, a three-dimensional being, see all of your two-dimensional shadow, I, as eternal, see every detail within the cosmos, including time.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Deep.”

Jesus pulls me closer to him, then directs my head until its resting against his robed chest. At first, my pride resists this, but only for a split second. Look where my pride's gotten me recently. I rest the left side of my head against his softer-than-silk, cool-to-the-touch robes. His chest rises and falls beneath the weight of my head.

“Get some sleep, Frank. I will watch over you.”

Again, his hand squeezes my shoulder reassuringly, and I do as he says. The rain, wind, and thunder all around us on a swaying swing makes me feel as if I'm in a lullaby. What's been so long a journey of uncertainty, mounting stress, and so many unanswered questions all falls away. All my thinking slows to a crawl as my eyes grow heavy, and I find myself sinking into slumber's comfort, next to Jesus in absolute safety.

Soft singing drifts from Jesus' lips, whether me dreaming or not—I cannot tell.

*I love you, Child/More than the years of your life/From before the earth's foundation/I redeemed you before the same/I answered your call/You are mine and I am yours/I love you, Child.*

Awakening, I'm still there with Jesus. The faint golden halo of the sun's light sits atop the treeline. I draw in a deep breath, the air crisp and fresh.

“Sleep well, Frank?”

I sit up. “Yes, I did. I don't think I've ever slept that good before. What's the time?”

He upturns his wrist. “Half-past freckle.” He laughs drawing out my own smile.

“I suppose you don't need a watch.”

“You have plenty of time to get ready for your yard sale.”

I leap up off the swing, insert my feet in my slippers, and shuffle back toward my home. “Thanks again, Jesus!” I look over my shoulder catching his grin, and I feel rejuvenated—almost all the soreness in my body nearly gone. And the grass isn't wet despite last night's stormy weather.

Jesus' voice follows after me. “Want any help?”

“Sure. Thanks in advance.”

Within the next hour, Jesus and I set up four plastic tables from my shed, tables I'd bought years before for a company cookout I hosted. I also spread out thick bedsheets across the grass. I've brought out all my goods—my microwave, my 45” flatscreen TV, my stereo with floor-

sized speakers, loads of books, and knickknacks passed down to me from mom (though I did save my favorites in my suitcase plus my grandfather's decades-old stamp collection). And come to think about it, I'm curious how people will respond to Jesus at my yard sale.

Within the hour, Jesus and I are sitting on lawn chairs with coffee mugs, steam rising into the still, morning air. It's just after 7 a.m. when the first yard sale enthusiasts drive up. Within minutes, two more cars show up. And then I watch as people meander from down the street and make their way up my sloped yard to examine my items.

Everyone looks me in the eye and nods to Jesus. Not one person is surprised at the wardrobe choice of my neighbor.

A man with a tanned, deep-lined face and silver hair walks up to me. He looks well dressed, wearing a wide-brimmed, brown hat. "I don't see a price. How much for the TV?" His calloused hands tell me he's probably a local farmer or ranch owner.

His question hammers at my heart. I don't want to sell the TV. But I can't haul it around with me the day after tomorrow.

"Whatever you feel is fair." I remain polite and try not to let my sinking heart within me be visible on my face. I don't even want to look at Jesus, but I do end up looking at him. He keeps his face fixed outward with a neutral expression. He looks relaxed—glad one of us is. A cool morning breeze flaps his robes against the metal of the lounge chair.

The man reaches into his wallet and pulls out a thick wad of cash. I'm wondering what he's doing having that much cash in his wallet—what looks to be multiple, crisp 20s. He reaches across to me, a broad smile appearing on his face. "Here you go, sir."

"Huh?" I refuse to take the cash which looks to be more than a thousand. I'm unable to hide my confusion. "That's too much. The TV's seven years old."

With a wink from him, the man grabs my left hand and presses the money into my hand. Then, he tips his hat to me and walks off, studying the TV as he passes it by.

"Hey, your TV?" I yell after him.

He looks over his shoulder, flashing a handsome smile beneath that cowboy hat.

"What's going on, Jesus?"

Seconds later, another person walks up and does the same thing. People ask me for prices before handing me cash, enormous amounts of cash, and then leaving—no one taking anything they bought!

Jesus rises, stretching, and studies my face all at the same time. “Want another coffee?”

“Yeah, sure...” My voice trails off. I’m dumbfounded and astonished at the events of the last hour. The wad of cash in my money belt is thick and heavy.

Jesus goes to his house and returns moments later with steaming mugs.

Patrick appears just after Jesus. “Omelet, dear sir? I’m giving armchair service this morning!” He flourishes a smile before bowing his head.

“Yes, please.” I feel hungry—and for the first time, hungry *without* worry! “Cheese, tomato, and mushroom?”

Patrick leaps up into the air clicking his heels together, his stiff, orange beard undisturbed. “Coming right up, Frank!”

Patrick walks back to the farmhouse as if late for work.

“I love that guy.”

“He is gifted to make people smile and feel good. I love Patrick, too.”

“I think I now have enough to pay my rent for the next few months!”

Alyssia and Michael show up soon after and begin putting prices on things, checking with me how much for each item.

Toby stops by on his bike about to head to work, drawn to what he sees on my face. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so happy, Frank! What have I missed?”

“I feel great—and so thankful! People have been giving me astronomical cash for items I’m selling, but not taking the items!”

Toby shares in my revelry, and then heads off. He looks sad to go. I can understand why, with Jesus here.

Another half dozen people show up, showing interest in things before giving me unexpected amounts—and again, leaving empty-handed. Just after ten, my yard’s still full of my possessions.

I smack my chair’s arm. “I think we can stop anytime, Jesus.” A huge weight’s lifted off me.

Just as I say those words, my attacker from across the street saunters up, talking to Alyssia while eyeing my stuff. His invasive presence on my front yard puts me on edge.

“Jesus?”

He senses my tension. “Yes?”

“Help me, Lord. I don’t feel particularly good right now. There’s a rage inside me.”

Just as I confess this, Delante walks up to me and looks down at me. “Frank, how much for the TV?” He leans toward me and studies my face, paying particular attention to my right eye. “You okay there, Frank? Your face... It’s definitely seen better days.”

I grind my teeth together without realizing it just as I feel a hand reassuringly squeezing the back of my neck. And it’s then I consider how blessed I’ve been this morning. I stand up and face Delante, forcing him to back off.

I manage to say it. “It’s yours.”

“What?” He throws me a suspicious look. “Free?”

“It’s already been bought. It’s yours.” Tension’s building within me. I want this conversation over, but I also sense something unexpected: I like what I just did. Oh, but with Jesus’ help.

“Wow, thanks Frank!”

He looks happy, the first time I’ve seen him like that. He collects the TV and hauls it to his place. Five minutes later, he returns looking over more of my goods. “Anything else already paid for?” His look reminds me of someone who’s just hit the lottery.

I’m staring at Delante, grinding my teeth together again until Jesus’ hand presses against the small of my back. I feel something within me give way like an avalanche. I let my chin fall to my chest. “Delante, anything you see here that you can use is yours to take home with you.”

Picking up the white microwave, less than a year old, he steps to me wearing a suspicious look. “What’s going on with you?”

I don’t reply as if to share the news would be to stain that which had already become sacred to me. Finally, though, I relent. “People already bought many of these things. But for whatever reason, they paid and walked away.”

His face distorts as if calculating a complex math problem. “That is so weird. Maybe God wants me to have these things!” He throws Jesus a look. “Could that be right, J.C.?”

Jesus is still and doesn’t reply—but his look remains neutral. For a moment, I imagine how Delante would react if the look from Jesus resulted in his mouth being sewn shut.

Jesus locks eyes with me with a look of disappointment. He’s obviously seen my thoughts.

“Sorry, Jesus.” Turning to Delante, I release a pent-up breath from my lungs. “Anything you need, Delante, take it now. You have fifteen minutes. This yard sale is over!”

“Okay! I’ll be right back.”

I begin to clear the tables, Jesus, Alyssia, and Michael helping me. Just as Delante returns a third time, I see Alyssia speed-walk to meet him in the middle of the yard. She stands nose to nose with him. Without anything said from Delante, he does an about-face and returns to his house. I really like Alyssia!

Minutes later, to my surprise, Delante stands at my front door. I thought he was gone!

“Here Frank.” He takes out a white envelope and slaps it into my hand.

“What’s this?” I open the envelope. I see what looks to be about \$300.

“Why?”

“Alyssia told me why you’re having the yard sale. I still want the TV, but I thought to give you something for it.”

Jesus stands behind me in the hallway. I’m shocked. “I can’t take this.” I hand the envelope back. Before he can protest, I push past him to collect more things to bring inside.

He walks after me. “Why, Frank?”

“We all know what you do for a living. Not interested in that kind of money. Keep the TV and the rest.” I stop to face him expecting anger on his face; instead, his expression surprises me—it’s calm and considerate. “I realize now that I want you to have those items, Delante.”

As if brushing off my words, he shrugs his shoulders and walks off. “Okay then. Your choice.”

Jesus holds books in his arms next to me. “That was a good gesture from Delante, Frank.”

“Yeah, I have to admit it was.”

“Every good act should be encouraged, even when they haven’t experienced redemption yet. Even a tiny act can be significant.”

“I’m beginning to see that.” I face Jesus, a veneer of tears threatening to spill from my eyes. “I’m grateful for the good acts *I* just experienced this morning.”

Jesus extends an arm around me.

“Say, did you have anything to do with what happened with all those yard sale buyers?” Jesus and I walk toward my side door.

He stops and looks off to the distance. “Those in tune with me often act and do what I would do, when directed by the Holy Spirit.” He punctuates his words with a smile.

I reflect it back to him. “It appears so, Lord. It appears so.”

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*Tahira Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue*

*12:43 p.m.*

The restored, ruby-red '91 Cadillac pulls up behind our car in our driveway. I release the pent-up breath trapped inside me seemingly for hours, if not days. My parents weren't sold on Tahmid being my husband, him clearly not the doctor or lawyer they'd imagined I'd marry. It was only Tahmid's determination over the course of my courtship with him that had eventually won them—but not without stubborn hesitation and residue regrets.

I fix my gaze upstairs. “Children, grandma and grandpa are here!” Two seconds later, they rush down the stairs, their handsome faces lit with expectation. Sweet things and things special always accompany my parent's visits. Opening the front door, I watch as Nadir and Mazhar charge out with excited shouts and fanfare. My parents eagerly open their doors to receive the children—the joy on their faces causing a lump to form in my throat. It's beautiful to watch.

Tahmid stands at my side wearing a hopeful and pleased grin, hiding well his nervousness. He's already prepared himself for the deluge of questions that always come the first hours of a visit.

Dad looks dapper with his silver beard and full head of hair, his trim, fit body looking strong despite being in his upper sixties. He acknowledges me and Tahmid with a nod and quick smile before stepping to the rear of the car.

“Tahmid, please...” I say, just under my breath.

He catches my meaning and scrambles to help my father with his suitcase. Dad appears pleased and makes small talk with Tahmid. My mom, dressed in a flowery summer outfit and brimmed hat, stands beside Tahmid before embracing him.

Father addresses the children with a robust smile, leaning over toward them with his hands braced against his knees. “We've got gifts for you both!” The kids jump up and down, glee on their faces.

Within the next few minutes, my parents come inside, and Tahmid takes their belongings to our guest bedroom at the rear of the house, built for my parents to help us the next two months when our newborn arrives.



Within the hour, my parents take a seat on our sofa facing us, my mother, looking content, holding father's arm. The children are on the floor reading their new books—thick, illustrated encyclopedias, one on dinosaurs and the other on animals of the wild.

My father feigns a pleasant smile, but I can see behind his eyes a look of annoyance and disappointment. "Tahmid, how is the restaurant business these days?"

"Busy, but not as busy as usual. The extreme heat's keeping people home."

"Have you thought about putting that on hold?" Father's tone is diplomatic. "You know we would support you as long as needed for you to go to med or law school."

Tahmid nods and pauses, glancing at me before answering. We both know he's now in a danger zone that could result in an argument. He presses his hands together in a conciliatory manner. "I am grateful for your kind and generous offer. But I really believe the path I am on now is the one for me, and for my family."

Father leans forward as if he's caught my husband in a contradiction. "But how long will it be before you even establish your own business? And you know small businesses, especially restaurants, rarely make it past their second year."

"It will take time. And I know the risks."

My father squeezes his eyes shut as if momentarily pained.

Mother leans forward this time, concern flashing across her face. "What of your family? You'll barely be home for them, Tahmid."

Husband acknowledges her words with a nod. "I know it won't be easy. I hope that my family will do their part until we are successful."

I decide to change the subject. "We've had a new neighbor move in across the street."

Father's face shows curiosity. "A new neighbor?"

"Yes." I think to continue sharing what's happened lately when I catch my husband's eye. He does not want this topic to be discussed.

Father catches the look on Tahmid's face and presses for more information. "Is something the matter with the neighbor?"

Tahmid hesitates before answering. "You *could* say that."

Mother digs deeper, too. "Please. Share."

"Well, he believes himself to be the Jesus of the Bible."

Father casts an incredulous look at his wife before an expression of buoyant laughter erupts from him. He looks at us as if expecting us to join him in laughter at the revealing of the punchline. On the turn of a dime, his face reverts to a somber appearance. “Serious?”

Tahmid’s face appears pained to admit it. “Yes. And a word of warning: I’m almost certain you’ll notice him while you’re staying with us. He even dresses like a first century Jew.”

“How strange.” Mother draws out the last word in a croon.

Father drinks from his glass before setting it down. “So, he believes himself to be the Son of God?”

Tahmid lets out a sigh from deep within him. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“I’d like to sit down with him. I’d show him the error of his ways if he has the means to understand logic.”

“Oh, he is no dullard.” Tahmid rubs his face with his hands. “But I think it not a good idea for you to meet him or be involved with him in any way.”

“Why?” There’s a challenge in father’s voice.

“Because you are my guests. I should not suffer you to be exposed to him or his lunacy.”

A lull in the conversation fills the room. It’s then that I feel the need to share about my experience. “Something strange in the park happened to me when that man was there with a group of his associates.”

Tahmid tries to stop me. “Tahira, please don’t—”

Father shows impatience. “Go on, daughter.”

“One of the men with him spoke in our language with the sophistication of a scholar.”

Father throws his hands up as if to wave away the thought. “It must’ve been some sort of ruse. You know these western cults—they will do anything to get followers.”

Mother’s voice cuts in. “What did the person say in our tongue?”

I share about the tree and that the true light has come.

Father’s silver-haired eyebrows lift. “As I said, a ruse. Do you visit the park often, dear?”

“Yes, almost every day with the children so Tahmid can get his rest.”

“See? They must’ve known you’d be there. Likely, it was planned.”

I rub at my temples, trying to understand the mystery. “I don’t know. It just seemed so spontaneous.”

Father stands up and glares out the window. “Which house does he live at? I will go talk to this man and, if Allah permits, bring him to his senses.”

Husband and I stand with him, Tahmid stepping toward father with as much respect as he can muster. “You’ll only be encouraging his behavior.”

Father’s face becomes defiant, aimed at Tahmid. “My grandchildren are living across the street from a Messiah-wannabe. I must do something! I don’t want his filthy antics spoiling them.”

A knock on the front door. All three of us lean into the front window to see who it is.

“It’s him!” Tahmid’s face displays shock.

Father grants no room for discussion. “Let him in! Obviously, Allah has brought him to us.”

A second knock. Tahmid tries his best to hide his frustration.

I catch mom’s eye, sensing what is about to happen. “Mother, shall we take the children to the park and let the men have their discussion?”

Mother nods, standing. “Sounds wonderful.”

“Are you going to answer the door?” father-in-law asks.

“Yes, yes.” Tahmid maintains a softened tone, but it’s preoccupied. He steps to the door and opens it.

The man stands there smiling, a shawl covering from his head to his shoulders. “Hello, Tahmid.”

After getting the children, we move past the stranger standing at the door to the outside. The stranger’s eyes rest on me, then mother (who responds, to my surprise, with a polite grin), and finally the little ones.

As we walk out of the house into the heat, mother leans into me, her voice barely audible. “Handsome fellow, isn’t he?”

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*Tahmid Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue*

*2:16 p.m.*

The Jesus man stands there, in my home again, patient, polite, and calm. He addresses me. “I know you have concerns about me.”

I introduce the visitor to my father-in-law who stands behind me. They exchange nods.

The visitor addresses father-in-law. “Mr. Azad. I have come to offer answers.”

Father-in-law nods to the man. “What’s the harm in having a discussion, especially if it corrects one on a wrong path?”

The Jesus man’s eyebrows lift with a look of expectation. “Indeed.”

I have a bad feeling about this, but gesture for our guest to step into the living room. “Please come in.”

We sit down, the stranger in the love chair, my father-in-law and I on the couch. And I can’t believe he’s here again inside my house!

Father-in-law begins. “You’ve made some hefty claims since moving across the street, Tahmid tells me.”

The man tilts his head toward father-in-law before a polite smile appears. He speaks, his voice emphatic and calm. “The claims should be verified. But if found to be true, you and others should listen to what I have to say.” He pauses. “But even if you cannot accept my words, the Scriptures, the Bible, are enough and testify to my Father’s offer of reconciliation.”

Father-in-law gestures to me and himself. “We are Muslim and have been all our lives. We have the words of the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, through the Quran. We have no need to listen to you or anyone else. Our bearings are not in need of correction.” His eyes narrow, fixing upon our guest.

I sit back when I realize I’ll probably only be a spectator in this dialogue.

A fleeting, disarming smile appears on the man’s face. “Interesting.” He speaks softly, so softly, that I’m momentarily mesmerized by his voice. I’m reminded of his first visit to my home, and how at ease he made me feel despite his claims. “Should you not verify the Quran, since your destiny will be determined by what you believe?”

“Allah is merciful. We who hold to his dictates faithfully will not be in danger of hellfire.”

“Your book claims I did not die as the sacrifice for the sins of the world.”

“As revealed to us, it only appeared that Isa Masih, peace be upon him, died upon a cross.”

The visitor draws in a deep breath, closes his eyes, lowers his bearded chin to his chest. *Is he praying?* Then, he speaks. “According to Torah, the Tabernacle was established amidst the

Jewish people. The Israelites camped around that structure daily for decades. But to draw near to the One and deal with their sin, they needed to come to him with a sacrifice. Blood and covenant were essential for communion between the Most High and His people, and that has *not* changed.”

“Go on,” father-in-law says with a heavy, wet sigh.

“That history makes it clear that the shedding of blood is essential to deal with the sin problem within the human soul, or judgment will result. The vital question for you is, what have you done with your sin?”

“Allah is merciful. He forgives the faithful.”

“But what does he do with the sin? If he just removes the guilt but does not punish the transgressor, it makes him an unjust judge. He would then cease to be good or holy.”

“Allah knows us in our weakness. Do you scold a child for taking something that doesn’t belong to him? No, you forgive and teach the child not to repeat such things.”

The visitor leans forward. “It is not just a matter of actions, but also of a deadness within each of Adam’s descendants. Sin must be dealt with first before that which is dead within can be made alive.”

Father-in-law leans forward, too, as if to meet the stranger. “In the eyes of Allah, we are but dust. With but a wave of his hand, our wrongdoings are cast from us.”

“The Highest, my Father, is morally perfect. He cannot just cast-off sin because wages must be paid to those who committed the sins. My question remains unanswered, Mr. Azad. How have you dealt with the disease of sin in you?”

Father-in-law looks over to me, his face reddening and knotted with frustration. “I have given you my answer.” Then he slaps his thighs as if to punctuate his words. “But since questions are being asked, who do you think you are claiming to be God’s Son? Let’s entertain the notion that you were God’s Son. Why would you come here to this street and this city?”

The visitor presses his back against the chair before speaking. “I appeared on a desolate road in a rather insignificant country to Saul of Tarsus. I have always revealed myself to those who ask, seek, and knock to know me.”

“The Quran tells us God has no Son. *That* is truth.”

“I am Truth.”

Father-in-law raises a forefinger in the air. “You believe yourself to be something that even your own holy book does not support.”

“Expand on that thought.” The stranger runs his fingers down through his dark beard.

“Show me in your New Testament where Isa Masih, peace be upon him, the Jesus of the Bible, emphatically said, ‘I am God.’ Or, ‘Worship me’?”

A smile touches the visitor’s lips. “Have you read the Hebrew Scriptures, both Covenants?” Father-in-law displays proud defiance. “I have indeed.”

The visitor addresses me, which for some reason pleases me. “You?”

“Only parts of it.”

The visitor resumes his thought. “As recorded by my apostle and eyewitness John, I stood before the Jews and declared ‘before Abraham existed, I Am.’ My declaration was emphatic.”

“Jesus in that passage didn’t say, ‘I am God. Worship me.’ That is my point.”

“The Jews picked up stones to kill me—they understood my statement and my point. I, a man, declared myself to be the Eternal I Am.”

“What we have today of John was obviously corrupted later.” Father-in-law seals his lips with a satisfied look.

“But when the Quran was written, over six hundred years after my coming, your scriptures are emphatic that the *Injil*, the Gospels, should be trusted and followed. And that *Injil* is emphatic from start to finish that I died and rose again as a propitiation for the sins of the world. You see, the sin problem was dealt with through my death, where I absorbed God’s holy wrath and judgment meant for you. This was so Adam’s descendants might be unshackled from sin and made spiritually alive as it was before the Fall.”

Father-in-law stands and paces in front of the couch a bit before stopping and facing the man. He wags a long index finger at our visitor. “You cannot be who you claim to be; it’s absurd. It’s impossible.”

“Even if I was not him, what I say about the sin problem remains valid. You have perfected religion with your praying, fasting, and zeal. But Mr. Azad, you are still dead in your sins. Your sin, and God’s condemnation as a result, remains upon you. What is needed is spiritual rebirth.”

Father-in-law leans toward the man; I see the anger coiling within him. “Your charade is blasphemy. Plain and simple! And you’re leading these poor people on this street astray! I demand you stop this right now for the sake of my grandchildren!”

“It is for their sake, and your family’s, that I have come.”

Father-in-law appears as if he’ll blow a casket. He sits down on the edge of the sofa beside me as if to regroup. His voice is suddenly softer, as if reaching for reason. “Let’s say you are who you say you are. Why would I follow you? Your church is splintered into countless denominations. They do not fast as we do. They do not pray. They are more interested in riches and using God as a genie in a bottle. One of your pastors the other day was preaching dressed in a \$5,000 suit talking like a used-car-salesman.”

Our visitor doesn’t back down. “My Church comprises many families within the Family I established and purchased with my blood, but the majority of them adhere to the most important core truths, and, like any family you know, they have different personalities and focuses when it comes to life, and how they live out Covenant with me.”

“Disunity!” Father-in-law’s mouth twists as if he’s eaten something bitter. “Dysfunctional. Disjointed. That’s what Christianity represents!”

“Imagine what I can see, seeing all that is true, and all that is false. But,” and his face brightens, “my Bride is maturing and alive, and increasingly, she reflects me to a dead and dark world. As for those who use my name but do not know me, don’t worry. I will sort it out on the last day.”

Father-in-law bursts out laughing at that, his entire body shaking. The tension in the air dissipates. A smile spreads across his face. “You really are taking this Jesus-persona to heart.”

Jesus pulls back the sleeves of his robe, revealing scars on both wrists. “I Am that I Am.”

Father-in-law’s face grows deadly serious. “I think my son-in-law was correct.” He shoots me a rare look of admiration. “We should not have opened ourselves to a discussion with you. You are clearly mad.”

The visitor stands. “Thank you for the discussion, Mr. Azad. Shalom.” He throws a polite look to me before heading to the front door. I quicken my step to catch up and open the door for him. Before he exits, he stops, but does not turn his face to look at me.

“Mr. Azad?” He stands there looking outside toward his house.

Father-in-law stands next to me. “What is it?” His voice reveals impatience and not wanting to hear any more words from him.

“Your first child died before birth, piercing yours and your wife’s hearts. Imagine how I feel when a child who should experience new birth does not because of contamination from dead

religion. You pray to a god who does not hear, to a god who does not speak, to a god who cannot save. However, I continue to fight for you and your family.” The visitor pauses before resuming. “Sami is alive in that Other Place beyond the veil.”

He steps out. We watch the man stroll back to his house.

I ease the door closed. “Is what he said true?” It’s then that I see all color drained from father-in-law’s face.

He moves to the sofa and eases himself down, a distraught look on his face. “Yes, but how could he have known that?”

I nod, caught up in the mystery. I ease myself down onto the edge of the chair where the visitor sat before.

“When he visited me that first day—”

Father-in-law searches my face. “He has been in this house before?”

“Yes, when he moved into the neighborhood. He came over with lemonade. I didn’t know then about his claims.”

“And?”

“Well, he told me things that only I know. It shocked me.”

“And?” Father-in-law’s voice grows in intensity.

“A magnet on our fridge fell and broke into three pieces. He grasped my hand while I held the magnet pieces before he left. When I opened my hand, it was no longer broken.” I swallow, my eyes focusing on father-in-law’s face. “What if he really is who he says he is?”

Father waves away my words. “This must be the work of devils. We must not be led astray. We must pass this test from Allah.”

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*Tahira Akhand, at the Local Park*

2:20 p.m.

Mother watches the children climbing the slide, a smile playing at her lips at their activity. Finally, I speak, unable to keep inside what’s been happening. “Last night, I had a dream of myself climbing a hill, leading Tahmid, and finding that man suspended to a tree by nails.”



Despite my fear, I'm glad to have confessed. "Then, I found myself outside a light-filled cave when he appeared in front of me and held me. In all my life, I'd never felt so elated, so alive." I pause, watching for my mother's reaction. To my surprise, there is no change on her face whatsoever. "What do you think, Mother?"

She gives me a fleeting glance before her eyes return to the children. "I'm not sure, dear. But I know that we should be open to what God might be trying to show us, and dreams are often the place where he sets up a show for our benefit."

"Really?"

"The problem with many within our religion is that we have defined our religion with strict boundaries to the point that there remains no mystery to what we believe. Perhaps we know much less than we realize."

"Mother!" I'm surprised, shocked really, to hear these words. But I also find comfort in her own confession.

"Before I married your father, I had dreams, too. But despite what God showed me, I wasn't strong enough to go off the path our family has walked on for generations."

"Did you tell father about this?"

"Yes, but he convinced me it was only a test from Allah."

"But you did not really believe that?"

"That fellow that stood in your front doorway, he seemed familiar to me, probably because I saw him in dreams just as I was about to be married to your father. When our eyes met, it was like seeing an old acquaintance."

"Really?"

"In the dream I had long ago, I was shown a book different from the one we call holy and memorize. When I opened it, a wild river surged from its pages and swept me away, but I never felt afraid. In fact, I felt incredible joy."

"What should I do? Are we in spiritual danger if we listen to that man?"

Mother rests her hand on the small of my back while watching the children. "Go where God leads you. Don't let weakness within you stop you from following what you believe to be true."

"But father won't agree to this. If I choose this path, I might never see you again, mother. And Tahmid, he might divorce me, and take my sons from me. But I know he's also been wrestling with a lot of his own questions."

“If God is leading you, you would be lying to yourself to ignore him. Perhaps this man who has moved across from you is more unique than we might want to admit.”

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*Toby Garrells, 33 Summit Avenue*

*6:44 p.m.*

“Toby, you home?” Mitch yells from downstairs.

I’ve just got home minutes ago myself. My clothes cling to me after a steady bike ride home. I look forward to a cool shower. “Up here. What’s up?”

“Glad you’re not over at that freak’s house. I brought you chicken chow mein.”

“Nice! I’ll be right down after my shower.”

Fifteen minutes later, I come to the kitchen table, and Mitch hands me a plate.

“You should’ve seen what happened at Frank’s place this morning. I had to go to work at ten, but within one hour of his yard sale starting, dozens of people showed up.”

“And?” Mitch’s voice is flat, disinterested.

“People bought things he was selling, paid higher prices, then left without the items.”

Mitch pulls the chair back and sits down. “Why’d they do that?”

“Frank might lose his house ‘coz he’s been out of work over three months. And I think the people who came were followers of Jesus. It was as if the Holy Spirit directed them to come and do what they could to help.”

“Really? Or those people were all in on a scam.”

“Mitch, why do you have to be so cynical?”

“I just can’t accept that that guy across the street is Jesus Christ. How much did your friend raise?”

“Enough to pay months of his rent. He won’t be homeless now!”

“I hope you’re being careful, Toby. It all sounds too good to be true.”

“I am. Tomorrow, we’re helping out Ms. Ayustine, you know, the Asian lady next door.”

“How?”

“Jesus convinced her to let us do something for her.”

Mitch frowns at that. “Now *that* would be more indicative of a miracle, in my opinion, based on how much of a recluse she is.”

“Any improvement at work?”

Mitch swallows a mouthful of food and puts down his chopsticks. “It’s slow-going. It’s like the entire city’s gone comatose—and no one’s selling or buying. It must be the extreme heat.”

“It’ll get better.” Then, I can’t stop from sharing what I experienced yesterday. “When I was at the park yesterday, Jesus opened my eyes, and I experienced something. I guess you’d call it a vision.”

Mitch locks eyes with me. “Ookay, and what did you see?” His voice reeks of skepticism.

“My eyes were opened, and it was as if I was seeing a full-scale war over our city.”

“You saw this over our little city?”

“Yes.”

“Did you eat anything from his house before you went to the park? Sounds like a hallucin—”

“No, I hadn’t eaten anything.” I resist the rush of anger coursing through me at his stubbornness. “He’d actually encouraged us to fast that morning.”

“Then it was obviously heatstroke.”

“Nooooo. I saw what I saw. He really is God’s Son.”

“I really doubt that, Toby. And besides, there is zero chance Jesus would come to our city! We’d be the last place he’d visit!” He grabs his car keys in front of him and stands up. “I’m heading to Shelly’s. You gonna be all right?”

“Yep.”

“What time’s the fix-up for our neighbor?”

“All day.”

“Sounds like a major project. Will Bruno be there too?”

“Yep, but we could use more help. Wanna stop by to help?”

“Sorry, not interested.” Mitch pours sweetened iced tea into a tall travel mug. “Have you asked ‘Jesus’ about mom, dad, Charlene?”

“No. I don’t want to ask him about that.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“If he’s real, you should be able to talk to him about anything, even if it’s painful to talk about.”

“I don’t want to talk to him about that. What happened was a tragedy and doesn’t mean God’s at fault.” I pause, before reconsidering. “But if you want me to ask Jesus about them, I will, for you.”

At that, Mitch leans on the table toward me with a hardened stare. “Don’t you dare speak their names to that pretender.” He heads toward the front door. “Talk later, Toby.”

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*Toby Garrells at Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Avenue  
8:12 p.m.*

Just after eight, I head over to Jesus’ house. Bryan’s truck’s parked in front of Jesus’ house. I wonder who else will be there. From my talk with Mitch, I feel slightly off-kilter and confused.

A quick knock and I enter, nodding and waving at everyone whose eyes catch mine. Jarrett and Bryan are in a heated discussion on the couch. From the adjoining dining room, I see Frank at the table, his back to the wall, Alyssia and Michael opposite him, and Jesus seated at the head. Stepping to the table, I see Patrick with an apron working as usual in the kitchen—the aroma of cooked tomatoes and baked garlic bread filling the house. *Lasagna?*

Jesus beams when he sees me. “Toby, welcome!” He pulls out a chair for me beside him. “Sit down. Fresh-baked lasagna is almost ready!”

“I can’t wait!” Michael shouts, bouncing up and down, his eyes lit with anticipation. With affection, Jesus reaches over and rests a hand on the boy’s head.

“Hello, Lord!” I sit down next to Jesus.

“Your brother poses deep questions about dear family members whose names should not be uttered to me?”

“Mitch is conflicted about your identity, Lord.” My eyes drift to Patrick working away in the kitchen behind Jesus. “I know I can talk to you about anything.”

“Losing one’s loved ones can be crushing, especially at your age. Mitch still carries his burden on his own shoulders. He’s taken his eyes off me.”

“Yeah, I know.” A surge of emotions rise within me. Jesus reaches toward me, squeezing my shoulder.

Frank shakes his head solemnly. “I’m sorry what happened to you. I remember when it was on the news. A real shock, that was. Your father was a friend of mine.”

I find myself liking Frank even more than before. “Thanks, Frank.” I turn to Jesus. “What should I tell Mitch?”

Jesus leans closer to me. “Say nothing. I am working on him.”

“I do wonder, though.” I didn’t plan to take our conversation in this direction, but I can’t stop myself. I express my heart, tears filling my eyes. “Why did it have to happen?”

Jesus squeezes my hand. “The drunk driver, drowning in sorrow and resisting my grace, chose his path. Like all Adam’s descendants, he was designed and designated with the power to choose his actions.”

“But does that negate prayer? Because I always prayed for my parents to be blessed by you and protected.”

“Prayer always changes outcomes when faith and love are intertwined. But more than anything, it should change the one praying.”

My voice nearly wanes. “When the police officers came to our house, I remember how troubled they looked. I wanted to somehow comfort them. It was then they told me my mother and father and sister would never come home again.” I swallow the lump in my throat. “If I had prayed more, if I had remembered to pray for my family before they left, would it have changed anything?”

Jesus’ eyes close as if feeling my pain. Without warning, he reaches over and pulls me to himself in a tight embrace. The house grows still and quiet. The surge of emotion within me shoots up out of me in sobs. He just holds me.

A half hour later, I feel as if a great weight has lifted off me. Everyone has pressed hands on me to pray for me and show their support.

“If only Mitch could share *his* heart and release his pain, too, Lord.”

“In time, Toby, he will.”

I address everyone. “Guys, I just want to say I love you all so much. Since Jesus came, I’ve learned what Christian family looks like. I’m so blessed to know each of you.”

“We love you too,” Alyssia replies.

“Lasagna makes the heart glad!” Patrick half-dances into the dining room and places a monster tray down before us. “Garlic bread to follow. And one more tray of lasagna coming up for those wanting seconds!”

Alyssia raises her hand waiting for Jesus to catch her eye. “Jesus?”

“Yes, Alyssia?”

“Any way you can do a miracle and make this lasagna calorie-free?”

We all burst out laughing, even Frank. And as we enjoy Patrick’s fine food with each other, I wonder how I allowed myself to ever get to the place where I was isolated—almost doing Christian life alone. But I plan to learn from this time and carry it into the future.

Day Eight: Saturday

Ms. Cahva Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue

6:13 a.m.

**A** light knock at my door. I throw on my night robe and descend to the front door. Glancing through the peep hole, Jesus stands there with a tray in his hands. *Does he ever visit without bringing something?*

I open the door, eyeing my neighbor, unable to keep irritation out of my voice. “Morning.”

His eyebrows lift on his open, buoyant face. “Are you ready?”

I maintain caution, unsure if I’ll allow whatever he’s got planned for me to go ahead. “I’m not sure. Coffee?”

“I’d much rather have your extra sweet, lemony iced tea.”

I nod and step aside allowing him to enter. He makes his way to the kitchen table, lifts a chair off the floor and away from the table before sitting.

I retrieve a glass jug from my fridge. “So, what exactly is going to happen today?”

“All good things.”

I nod, overwhelming suspicion mounting. “*What* is going to happen?”

“Take a look out front.”

I go to the livingroom window to see the man who dropped off the dish the other day unloading his pick-up truck along with an orange-bearded, older man and the blond-headed teenager from next door. “What are they doing?”

“Something good for you.”

I whirl to face Jesus, anger igniting within me. “What?”

“They’re going to fix up the outside of your house and yard.”

A screech of brakes draws my eye. A stretched van with tinted windows has stopped and the side door opened. People pour out just as more cars appear and park. “Who are these people?”

“They are all good people who love me and are eager to do acts that demonstrate love to others, such as you.”

“No, this needs to stop!” I dash outside. I wait till the guy at the pick-up truck catches my eye and point to him. “Off my property—and take everyone with you! You got five minutes, or I call the police.”



I step back inside, slamming the door behind me, eyeing Jesus. “Is this your way of relieving guilt, Lord?”

He does not react but keeps a neutral face. As usual, everything’s our fault. God cannot be wrong or complicit in crimes against humanity, even if it’s murder.

He gets up and walks to me. Before I can stop it, he’s wrapped his arms around me, holding me firmly. I squirm but no matter what I do, he doesn’t let me go. His comfort and love smashes against me like tidal waves. I scream into his chest and beat my fists against him. Rage, brokenness, and decades of bile within me become unstuck and surge out of me through my fists! Then I lose all strength before resting the side of my head against the coolness of his wide, robed chest.

Jesus caresses the top of my head. “Let it all out.”

But I can’t give up; I’m just not able. I pull back shaking my head emphatically. “No, no, no! I cannot forgive you. You...abandoned my parents.”

“I did not, Child.”

“When those swine pressed gun barrels against their heads because they believed in you...”

“I was with your parents in that moment, Child.”

I shake my head, heaves of emotion rolling out of something deep and black within me. Finally, I find my words. “They should have denied you. For my sake. So I’d not be abandoned.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“They chose you...over their own child. And because of that, I was left alone.”

He tightens his hold on me. “They were willing to die for me. Because they knew a war rages—one that is spiritual and has eternal ramifications. They knew it was all too real, which is why they could never deny me.”

“It wasn’t fair.” My fingers trace the edges of his silk-smooth robes, his body’s aroma filling my nostrils.

“My love, I am here now to repair decades of separation.” He reaches and lifts my chin. With his other hand, he wipes the tears from my cheeks, a glint emanating from his wrist scar. “Let me begin to show you.” His dark eyes look into me, seeming to know me, and I find myself standing before him willingly.

And then I just do it. I surrender, resting my forehead against his chest. He pulls me closer, and I wrap my arms around him as something new births within me. It's hope and...life surging within me for the first time in decades.

I pull back from Jesus. I find my voice. "I think green tea with honey would be better than iced tea at this hour of the day?"

He nods. As I'm making the tea, overwhelmed by this new sense of life surging through me, Jesus steps outside and shouts to those gathered to resume their work.

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*Tahira Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue*

*9:19 a.m.*

Mom and dad cooked us breakfast and now rest in their bedroom. Husband asleep, I gather my boys to take them to the park. As we step out onto our porch, I'm shocked to see all the activity happening at the second house from mine. It looks like about forty people doing various tasks—a person up on a ladder scraping old paint, a group creating a new flower bed in front of the house, and yet others planting new trees or pulling weeds. It looks like a major overhaul—and upon closer inspection, I notice the people gathered, for the most part, are younger.

We saunter along the sidewalk minding our own business when the new neighbor, the one claiming to be Jesus, approaches with a buoyant smile fixed on his face. He waves at me and the boys. "Hello there!"

The boys stop, curious. I only stop reluctantly, unsure how to react to his approach.

"Would you like to do something really amazing?" He addresses me but gives equal attention to my sons.

"What, sir?"

His voice is calm and measured. "Ms. Cahva Ayustine lives here. Have you met her?"

Timidly, I shake my head. A stab of sadness hits me because I do not know any of my neighbors despite being here several years.

He gestures to the workers. "As you see, we are trying to brighten her life by doing something good for her."

I scan the workers unloading the truck. “This act you are doing is a grand thing.”

“Would you like to lend a hand for an hour? I promise you will have a delightful time.”

Nadir and Mazhar both look to me, their faces showing interest. They love helping others.

I shrug my shoulders. “What can we do? If we can help, we will!” And I replay the dream sequence of him writhing on a tree. His breathing had been labored, the man drawing every breath with difficulty, his whipped and torn back grinding against the beam with every iota of movement. I force the images away from me, turning my attention to the work at hand.

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*Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue*

*10:11 a.m.*

I meander over to the lady’s house. I’m amazed at the activity that’s taking place. Must be four dozen people here—none of them people I recognize. I even see the Muslim lady from across the street using hedge clippers on an erratic bush. Somehow, Jesus got her to join in. It’s incredible what he can do.

Thankfully, my aches from the attack are only slight now with some stiffness. Despite feeling tired from the last few days’ activities, I also have a bump in my step with all that happened at the yard sale. My mind feels at ease, and my heart buoyant that I don’t have to worry about my living situation, at least for 6-8 months. I have breathing room to consider my options.

“Hey!” I approach Bryan, Toby, and Patrick—all dressed in paint coveralls and scrapping away old paint from the house’s walls.

They face me. Bryan smiles at me. “About time you got here. Jarrett hasn’t showed up, so we could use a hand.”

“Happy to help. Say, you guys need cold drinks?”

Smiles appear at my query.

“Be right back.” Fifteen minutes later, I return with a filled up cooler packed with ice, soft drinks, and water.

A hand lands on my shoulder accompanied with a gentle squeeze. I whirl around to Jesus.

“Frank!” Jesus hugs me. With just a glimpse of him, I feel rejuvenated, almost giddy to be here. Alyssia stands next to him dressed to work.

“I brought drinks for everyone.”

Alyssia touches my arm. “How are you, Frank?”

“I’m great. Thank you for yours and Michael’s help yesterday! Where is he?”

She smiles at my question throwing a look to Jesus before answering. “He’s inside.”

“With that lady?” I’m unable to hide my surprise.

Jesus and Alyssia both nod.

Jesus’ eyebrows lift. “Ms. Ayustine’s been too long without children in her home.”

“Really?” I’m trying to understand.

Alyssia laughs. “You should see the look on Ms. Ayustine’s face. I think I’ve found a new babysitter!”

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*Ms. Cahva Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue*

*1:45 p.m.*

When Jesus brought the three boys into my house, Nadir, Mazhar, and Michael (both sets of mothers watching from the front door), I was taken aback and about to order Jesus to take them back outside. But as I stepped to the children and saw their eager faces and the light in their eyes, I stopped in my tracks. So, I allowed them to stay, Jesus watching me with a patient grin.

It had been so long since I had heard the laughter and small talk of children in my home, their sounds strange and alien to the normal stillness within my walls. It made me feel uncomfortable at first, as if I was a stranger within my own home. They’d settled into the living room, huddled together on the shiny dark wood floor, thumb-wrestling coupled with bouts of laughter.

Then I remembered that I have a medium-sized container full of coloring books and sketch pads with all sorts of art supplies in my upstairs spare bedroom. The last time I’d brought them out was for my grandchildren many moons ago. With an excitement I’ve not felt in eons, I bring them downstairs to my dining table.

The three jump up and rush over to investigate. Their faces lit with expectation, they unearthed the container's contents and got busy right away. They drew and colored on coral-white pages all the while examining each other's work—accompanied with laughter and banter.

Then, I found myself having an out of body experience when an urge to bake a chocolate cake took control of me. But it didn't stop there. As lunch hour neared, I prepared sandwiches for everyone working outside and had the children take the sandwiches and ice-cooled water to everyone.

Jesus stands in the doorway. "How you doing right now?" A grin plays beneath his beard. I noticed him earlier spreading a large bag of mulch atop a newly built flower garden along the front of the house.

"I'm quite well, thank you." Then, I'm overwhelmed by something strange inside me—a gratefulness that must be expressed. I face him. "Really. Thank you."

He tries to hold the smile back, but finally it spreads across his bearded cheeks. There's a sparkle in his eyes. "You haven't seen anything yet."

After lunch, I've finished icing the chocolate cake, and I'm letting it cool. I call for the youngest sibling, Mazhar. He looks up sheepishly before getting up and walking over to me.

"Would you like the honors of licking the spoon?" The boy's lips upturn at that, his eyes delighted. I hand him the large spoon, and he sits at the table.

Nadir steps to the edge of the kitchen, eyeing me. "You made the cake for us?"

My lips upturn into a smile. "Yes, Nadir."

"Ms. Ayustine, is there anything I can help you with?" He scans the house, displaying an eagerness to help.

I find myself scanning the house, too. "I don't know. What would you like to do?"

"May I wash the dishes? I do it all the time for my parents."

I frown but quickly relax. "Why not. Thank you."

Michael's standing next to me. "Can I help?"

I nod. "Would you like to help Nadir by drying the dishes?"

"Yes, Ma'am." With gusto, he grabs a dish towel.

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*Tahira Akhand, at Ms. Ayustine's Home, 31 Summit Avenue*

*3:15 p.m.*

I'm astonished at the acts of kindness shown to our two-houses-down neighbor. I'd seen her occasionally pulling a two-wheel food trolley going or coming from the local grocery. I don't think I'd ever seen her with another person. And I'd never talked to her.

"Tahira?" Alyssia, who I've just met, calls out to me. Her son and my sons seem to have hit it off since meeting this morning. I approach her as she's bent over, using her hands to pull tangled, thick mounds of weeds into a garbage bag spread open with her feet. I eye another mound of weeds, grab my own black bag and do the same.

"Who are all these people? And who is he?" I point to the one who the others call Jesus.

Alyssia's eyebrows shoot up. "I don't know who most of these people are, but they all seem to know him."

"You don't really think he's the Jesus from the Bible, do you?"

"As to his identity, I'm not sure who he is. But I remain cautious while I observe and learn."

"What do you think about him?" I'm honestly afraid to hear her answer.

She stands up akimbo, her eyes looking over to Jesus who's spreading bark out. "I don't know what to say—it might sound crazy or that I've joined a cult. But it's not like that at all. Since Michael and I met him just days ago, my life has changed. In big, little ways."

I can see she means what she says. "I am glad you've experienced a positive change. But my husband and children and I, we have our own religion, which we know to be true."

The warm disposition never leaves her face. She gestures over to him. "Do you really think he represents religion?"

I fix my eyes on Jesus who's now moved to the porch to help clear it before it gets prepped for painting. A smile is never far from his lips. He works carefree, with laughter characterizing his interactions with those around him. Every movement, every look from his face, and the shine in his eyes all display a vibrancy I've not seen in any other person. For a fleeting second, my mind replays the dream, which I quickly dismiss.

"Tahira!"

His voice resounds like a clap of thunder from behind and down the street. I whirl around to Tahmid standing on the porch, his eyes locked on me. He does not look happy.

I wave to him, which does nothing to remove the concern etched on his face.

I give Alyssia a sidelong glance, trying hard to hide my panic. “My husband. Time to get my children.”

“Hey.” Alyssia stops my march to pick up my children with a touch to my arm. We lock eyes. She flashes an infectious smile, and I see in her eyes something genuine. “It was great meeting you!”

“You too.” I turn to go. Despite my alarm, it feels good to have met someone from our neighborhood.

I knock on the front door first before entering. “Nadir? Mazhar?”

They jump up, a buoyant look plastered on their faces. I see the sheets of paper in their hands with their sprawling, colorful artwork. They show me their pages, which causes me to smile as I peruse their creativity.

“Children, it’s time to go. Say goodbye to Ms. Ayustine and Michael.”

I see the hopeful expression on Ms. Ayustine’s face. “Won’t you come back another day?”

My reply is honest with a neutral tone. “I’m not sure, but thank you very much for your hospitality today.”

Nadir pipes up. “Mother, we had a wonderful time. Can we please come back another time?”

Finally, I nod, but remain doubtful. “Let’s see.”

Ms. Ayustine, working a puzzle, jumps up from her table. “Wait, I’ll give you some cake to take home with you.” She brings us a plate with half a chocolate cake.

I’m astonished by her act. “Wow! You made this, Ms. Ayustine?”

A pleased smile and proud look flashes across her polite face.

“But the plate?”

Her lips become a smile on her stoic face. “An excuse to come back when you wish.”

I consider all my earlier impressions about her incorrect. For a fleeting second, I rest a hand on her arm. “Thank you.”

We walk briskly back to our house.

A distressed concern on his face, Tahmid meets me as I enter through the front door. “What were you thinking?” I can tell he’s trying to remain calm and keep his anger from boiling over.

I keep my voice neutral and matter-of-fact. “We were headed to the park when we saw people gathered to help our neighbor, Ms. Ayustine. We decided to stop and help, too.”

“The man from across the street was there?”

“Yes. But he is harmless. I—”

“He is *not* harmless. He is a contradiction to what we know to be true.”

I nod.

Tahmid paces back and forth. “Why did you involve yourself with those people?”

“At the time, it felt right, and something...good to do. I am sorry for upsetting you, Tahmid.”

His face softens, and he takes my hands in his. “I know you always do what is right, and good. I love you for that.”

“I love you too, my husband.” We embrace and it feels good that we are at peace. As he separates from me and approaches the stairs, I speak after him, my voice firm, confessing, but emotion-free. “I saw him in my dream.”

At that, Tahmid’s face turns an ashen pallor. He returns quickly to me, takes my hand gently and leads me to the sofa. He plops down as if suddenly exhausted. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tahmid, I wanted to, but I knew how you feel about him.”

“What happened in your dream?”

“He blazed in front of me, then embraced me. And when he did, there came the greatest joy I’ve ever known. I felt accepted and loved.”

Tears brim his eyes.

“What is it, husband?” I rest my hand on his shoulder. He seems so troubled of late—almost all of it linked to that man.

“I’ve been having dreams of him, too.”

I’m shocked at his admission. “What do these dreams mean?”

“I don’t know.” His chin drops to his chest as if too heavy. He looks unsure of himself. That look frightens me. But I’m also driven to understand.

“What if...we just invite him over and ask him?”

His shout causes me to jump. “No. It must be a trick of our imagination. Deceiving devils leading us astray.” He stands up, locking eyes with me. “And please, do not allow our children to be near him again. We must be shrewd and responsible!” He moves off toward the stairs and stops, turning to me. He speaks as if nothing has happened. “Let us prepare for prayer.”

As he climbs the stairs, Alyssia’s words blaze across my mind’s eye: “My life has changed.” And I wonder again what this man’s appearance on our street means and who he really is.



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*Frank Bruno, at Ms. Ayustine's Home, 31 Summit Avenue*

*3:45 p.m.*

Bryan, not my favorite since last Saturday when he disturbed my sleep, but who made up for my irritation by helping me get home from the hospital, approaches me. "Frank, want a drink?"

"Sure." I'm about to finish filling a black bag with long, jagged rose limbs, pushing through the pain in my body, when I see my attacker, Delante, sitting on his front porch staring at his phone screen. I yell to Bryan. "Can you make that two?"

He nods before retrieving two soda cans from the cooler. He smiles as he tosses them to me, ice-cold to the touch. "Thanks, Bryan."

"How you holding up?"

I press a chilled can to my forehead, dripping with satisfying, wet cold. "I'm okay. Pushing through the aches and heat. It's good to be out here working with everyone like this."

He nods. "But don't push yourself too hard, old man." His face displays a teasing grin.

I shake my head dismissively. "Ha-ha."

Bryan wipes sweat from his brow. "I still haven't heard from Jarrett. I thought he'd be here to help out."

I shake my head unsure. "He probably stayed away when he heard hard work was required."

Bryan laughs. "I don't know. Something...doesn't feel right, if you know what I mean."

"Then let's pray for him the rest of the day." I'm honestly surprised to hear myself saying such a thing.

With a wave, Bryan heads back toward the painting happening along the side of the house.

A slight nervousness passes through me at what I'm about to do. I do an about-face and walk over to the bully-slash-drug dealer sitting on his small wooden porch. Immediately, I ask the Lord to forgive me for labeling him.

"Hey there!" I toss him a can before he can react. He's quick to snatch it out of the air.

"What's this?" His face displays an uncertain, confused look.

I throw my hands up and look around as if surrendering. “It’s a scorcher. An ice-cold drink on a day like this makes anyone’s day a little bit better!”

“Did I ask for this?” He’s skeptical, one of his eyes squinting from the sun.

I plead with the guy. “Hey, it’s what neighbors do for each other.”

There’s a pause, before a word comes forth wholly unexpected. “Thanks.”

I’m relieved he accepted it. “Welcome.” I pop the top of the can and drink deeply, a chilled, quenching satisfaction dropping into me. Then I notice his sunken first step. Not too hastily, I step closer. I gesture behind me toward the pick-up truck. “We’ve got the wood. Mind if I fix that for you?”

He lifts his sneaker from the depression and sets it back down. “Nah, I got it.”

“Okay. Just thought to ask.” I turn and walk away when his voice floats after me.

“Sorry about what happened the other night.”

I whiz around just in time to see him stepping back into his house. I consider the nudge I’d felt from God earlier, and I’m grateful I was obedient despite all my reservations, some fear, and a lot of anger beneath the surface—hidden well, but still present. For a second, I consider there might be more to the kid than meets the eye. I close my eyes and whisper a quick prayer for him to the Lord. As I say amen, I drink again from the can, feeling happier than I can remember.

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*Delante Thomas, 29 Summit Avenue*

*3:49 p.m.*

I step into the drab, dull cave of my house, only slightly cooler than the boiling temps outside.

Bruno’s stepping over to me and giving me a cold drink wasn’t something I expected. I think on what I’d said to him afterwards, and why I’d said it. Something on the inside of me, a repressed guilt, maybe, had slipped out before I could stop it. But despite my pride, I also felt something good in saying it. Plopping down on my sofa, I pop the soda can and gulp it down.

A tone sounds, and I see a text message from Alyssia.

*I just saw you earlier with Frank. Why don’t you come over and give us a hand?*

I'm honestly unsure what to do. It would mean being near that Jesus character and Frank and the Asian lady—not a fan of any of them. But then I look around me. What exactly am I doing here, a prisoner in my own house?

I text back:

*If you come over and get me, I'll consider it.*

Not even one minute later, there comes a knock before the door eases open.

"Delante?" Alyssia looks at me through the doorway with an excited look, holding work gloves. She looks like she's just ran a marathon—the strands of her black hair stuck to her glistening forehead. She looks gorgeous in work clothes.

I'm turned on and elated at the sight of her beauty and jump up to greet her. "Hey, how's you?"

She releases a pent-up breath, looking tired but happy. "Good, I'm sure Michael would be happy to see you if you came back with me."

Sensing an openness from her, I step to her and take hold of her petite hands. To my relief, she doesn't resist me. "I remember the look on Michael's face the other night. He wanted to get away from me."

"That's because you frightened him when you attacked Frank. But he's quick to forget."

"I miss you." Gently, I draw her closer to me until she's looking up at me. "Can I get a hug?"

Wearing a neutral but softened expression, she wraps her arms around me.

It's then I feel emotional. "Thanks for not giving up on me."

"I'm not giving up on you."

I cup her chin and raise it. I bend closer to give her a kiss. Our lips touch just as she pulls free, stepping away, heading back toward the front door.

"Are you coming or not, Delante?" She remains pleasant, acting as if nothing's just happened.

"I'm not sure about the prospect of being next to the Jesus-actor and Frank."

"Do it so we can do something good together for a change."

"Give me five minutes and I'll come over. But only if I get to work next to you."

“Okay, but only if you actually work and don’t distract me.” The first genuine smile I’ve seen from her in a long time appears, disarming me. “And Delante?”

“Yeah?” Sounds like she’s about to say something important. Her face is stone-cold serious.

“Don’t make me come back here and haul you over there.” Then, the right corner of her lip curls upward into a playful grin. She pulls the door closed behind her sealing away the bright sunlight from the room. I change quickly when another text message beeps on my phone. “I’m coming, I’m coming!” I lift my phone expecting to see another text from Alyssia.

*Tonight at 8, usual place? - M*

I picture my stash flushing down the toilet. Any change of direction or positivity in my life from the last few minutes is eclipsed by cold, hard reality. Change just isn’t in my future. I text back, business as usual, but somewhat glad my supply’s gone.

*Not today. Get in touch with MrT*

Despite feeling demotivated, I push myself to put on old sneakers, step out of the house wearing a tank top and shorts, a desert-camouflaged, brimmed hat, and stroll over to the neighbor’s lot looking for Alyssia. Everyone looks up at my approach. Some show surprise on their faces, but most remain open and polite. Alyssia’s scraping old paint from the cement-based front porch. A second team, to her rear, are busy sanding. Piled up paint buckets sit beyond the porch.

“Alyssia, what can I do?” Hands in my pockets, I feel awkward.

She points behind me. “Grab a facial mask and paint scraper. Then give me a hand.”

I snap up a facial mask, a pair of gloves, paint scraper, and get down beside Alyssia. The heat beats down on me, but I focus on the task before me. Within minutes, I’m laughing and making small talk with Alyssia.

I reminisce. “My father and I once painted our living room and kitchen.”

“When was that?”

“It must’ve been 4 or 5 years ago.”

“Sounds like a great memory you had with him.”

“My father was so patient with me. He taught me what to do, how to move the brush in such a way that you didn’t need to tape off edges. Just keep a steady hand, take your time, and push the paint where you want it to go.”

“That sounds really nice, Delante.”

“Normally, he’d be working long hours, so I rarely got to spend time with him. But during that one week together, we laughed so much.” I pause my scraping. “Not long after that came his funeral.”

She rests a hand on mine. “I’m sorry, Delante.”

“It’s all right. It’s called *my* life.”

A person’s shadow stretches across where I’m scraping, and then comes his voice, filled with confidence. “Do you think he stopped living just because his body gave out?” The Jesus actor stands over my left shoulder. He doesn’t stop talking. “Your father—he loved you very much. And he loved me.”

I throw down my scraping tool and leap up. I stand nose to nose with him. He does not shrink back one inch. A jolt of blind rage shoots through me threatening to carry me off like what happened with Frank. I can’t help it; the need to vent against this imposter threatens to rise out of me with smashing force.

A cold, wet touch to my arm draws me out of my anger. I tear my face away from the actor to Michael who’s offering up to me a dripping water bottle. In an instant, his beaming face locked on mine evaporates my anger. I know for sure I’ll lose his respect forever if I attack another person, especially this Jesus-wannabe.

“Thanks.” I look at the boy who displays a buoyant smile. “What you so happy about, Michael?”

He looks around at all the activity in the yard before facing me, then shrugging his shoulders. “I don’t know. Just happy.”

I lower myself to him and grip his arms. “I’m sorry I scared you the other night, Michael.”

He shrugs his shoulders again. “It’s okay, Delante.”

“Where you been? I haven’t seen you since I got here.”

“I’ve been helping Ms. Ayustine.” Perspiration lines his forehead, but his face displays a content look. It’s at that moment, looking around, that I realize something good’s being done here for the Kung Fu Hustle lady.

Michael dashes back inside, and I avoid looking at “Jesus”, instead returning to Alyssia’s side. I force myself away from anger’s edge.

Just as we’re about to finish the last bit of scraping, one hour in, a large crack, like a tree snapping, comes from nearby. Frank and someone else’s standing over my porch. He’s pulled free the old sunken step.

Throwing my scraper down again, I leap up and speed-walk over, anger coiling within me. “Hey, I told you that I had it under control!”

Frank looks at me, a softened look on his sweat-laden, bruised face. “Like I told you, we’re neighbors.” The other guy takes away the old wood without looking at me. “Neighbors help each other.” Before I can say anything, he sets down the replacement wood, marking it off with a pencil. “Can I get a hand?”

I throw my hands up in resignation, forcing the storm inside me out with my breath. I glance over my shoulder and see Alyssia watching me like a hawk. Finally, I surrender. “Whatever!”

He points. “Put your weight on the wood here so I can cut the plank.”

I walk around Frank and push my knee down onto the wood and watch as he saws it in two. Then, fitting it in place, he drives nails down through the wood securing the step.

“Almost perfect!” There’s a look of satisfaction on Frank’s face.

Finally, reluctantly, I speak. “Appreciate it.”

Frank raises a hand halting me. “I said ‘almost.’ We’re not done.”

“What?”

He hobbles off and returns seconds later with a paint can, a paint tray, roller, and brushes. “Let’s make it look good, too.”

I stand in front of him, hands raised to stop him. “No thanks.”

He looks past me to the porch. “But it’s not finished.”

“I will do it, Frank. It’d be wrong to take workers away from the lady’s house.” I gesture over his shoulder. “That needs to be done, first, right?” I can’t believe what I’ve just said.

“Ah, right.” His face and shoulders slump. He turns and hobbles back.

“How about sometime next week?” I shout after him but not convinced I’ll actually allow it.

He stops and faces me until almost a smile appears—before he regains control, stopping it. “Late afternoon Wednesday?”

“Let’s see.”

Alyssia approaches and rests her hand against my arm, wearing an impressed look on her face. I like that look.

Another message beeps from my phone. I step away to read the message.

*Desperately need two hits. Please? -M*

I look back and see Alyssia watching. She knows me too well. Just then, the Jesus-man steps around, eyeing all the work being done on the property. His dress style, still odd to me, glistens in the sunlight. I deliberately avoid his eyes; almost certain they would've found mine. I look down at my phone and type a message before firing it off.

*I said I'm busy. Go to MrT.*

I look toward Jesus and his eyes are fixed on me. There's a sad look on his bearded face. I look away, taking off my hat and fanning my face. "I gotta go, Alyssia. This is too much."

"Why? We're not done yet. There's still hours of daylight."

"No, I can't." I make three steps before grasping hands whirl me around.

Jesus stands there, but for some reason I can't explain, I don't feel anger. I honestly feel numb. For a second, his face and his patient look reminds me of my father. "With my help, the darkness can be stopped at the door of your heart."

I throw my head up toward the sky, closing my eyes. "There's really no use me fighting what I really am." I'm surprised at my confession.

He rests a hand on my shoulder. I look to it resting there and see those strange marks in his wrists.

"I can fight the battle for you, if you allow me."

"How?" My reply comes out like a whisper.

"Surrender to me. Then the enemy will not have access to your life." He holds out his hand toward me. "Just take hold of my hand."

I snap out of the moment, surprised that I'm allowing him to act in a role that cannot possibly be true. *But those scars.* I lift my hands and cover my face, squeezing my eyes shut at the whirlwind of conflict churning within me.

“Decide for change.” Alyssia’s voice sounds from my side. “For me.”

“I can’t, Alyssia.” I turn and rush back to my house, slamming the door closed. I lean forward until my forehead rests against the door, my mind in a jumble of knots. Then, I remember my original plan. I get out my phone and pull up the name I want, texting quickly.

*Everything a go? I want you to expose this fraud five minutes ago!*

Within minutes, the reply comes.

*Yup. When I’m done with him, this guy will need the real JC!*

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*Antonio Dustin, Heading to Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*4:45p.m.*

I’ve finished my call with Delante, my assignment in full swing. My man Big Brandon’s driving, and we’re a few minutes from Summit Avenue. I snicker at the way his knuckles are turning white while clutching the steering wheel.

He shoots me a worried look. “You sure about this job?” Sweat-laden, black curls drape down across his wide forehead.

“Look, this guy cannot be who he claims he is.”

“How do you know for sure?”

“Because if he’s truly come back, do you really think we’d be allowed to keep doing business as usual?”

“Yeah, but what if it’s just a stopover? Like a weekend away?”

“Do you even read the Bible?” I’m can’t hide my disgust at his lack of knowledge.

“It’s been a couple years.”

“Well, let me give a lesson.”

“Okay, Bible Man.”

I give him a stern look. “Want me to explain or not?”



“Go on.”

“It says there every eye will see him when he returns. Have you or anyone else seen Jesus Christ in the last week since he supposedly arrived at Summit Avenue?”

“Nope.”

“There it is, then. It can’t be him!”

“But what if it is him?”

“If you were Jesus, would you come to a place like ours? Wouldn’t you go to the nation’s capital? Or New York City? Why would you visit a backwoods, forgotten place like ours?”

“Bethlehem!” This is followed by a self-satisfied, proud look on his fat face.

I stare at him trying to figure out his logic. “And?”

“Jesus was born in a tiny, forgotten town.”

I slam the back of my head against my headrest. “Look who’s trying to be Bible Man now! This guy is most definitely a fake. And when I point my gun in his face, you’ll see it, and the charade will end. Then we get paid.”

“You’re not going to put a bullet in him, are you?”

“The job’s to scare him so people see he’s a fake.”

We pull up a block away and park on a side street. Just a quick jog through woods to find the target’s house.

“Let’s get this over with. And I need you to record the guy’s reaction on your phone.”

“You’re just gonna scare him, right?”

Brandon looks terrified. I affirm silently, but inwardly, I’ll do whatever I need to do. Bullets in the kneecaps can do wonders. And you can’t be soft in our business. “A good scare and we’ll prove the guy’s a fraud.”

We’re hugging the edge of the woods next to his house, scanning for him when we spot a shiny-white-robed person across the street at a house that’s being renovated. He’s tall with wide shoulders wearing robes and sandals, dark haired with a matching beard to complete the look.

I point. “There he is.”

“His clothes?”

I hear the worry in his voice and nip it in the bud. “Have you ever seen a Michael Jackson or Elvis Presley impersonator?”

“True, true. My cousin told me—”

“Wait! He’s coming this way!”

“Antonio, you sure this is a good idea?”

“A job’s a job.”

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*Frank Bruno, at Ms. Ayustine’s Home, 31 Summit Avenue*

*5:11 p.m.*

“Frank.” Jesus calls to me, then to everyone, causing all to stop their work. “Come together, children.”

We all draw together in a huddle, our eyes fixed on Jesus.

“I want you all to pray to the Father for the next thirty minutes.” He gestures toward a tree hugging the right side of the yard with an enormous shade. “Friends, gather there together.”

Jesus is still carefree but more preoccupied than usual. I raise a hand to get Jesus’ attention. “Anything in particular we should pray for?”

Jesus grins and directs his response to everyone. “Listen and pray as the Spirit leads you.”

\*\*\*

*Ms. Cahva Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue*

*5:14 p.m.*

If there’s one thing I know well how to do, it’s preparing food for a large family. I’ve just finished cooking the meat for the burritos that I’ll surprise everyone with when I glance out my window to see everyone standing in a huddle. Jesus is talking to them.

And it’s as I’m looking at them that I see past the group to the treeline behind Jesus’ farmhouse across the way—two men, an overweight white guy and a tall, skinny black guy, skulking about looking like they’re up to no good.

The group breaks up, moving to the left beneath a large tree. Jesus, though, heads to his house. I don't think he knows those two men are there.

I rush upstairs to my bedroom.

\*\*\*

*Delante Thomas, 29 Summit Avenue*

*5:18 p.m.*

My watch tells me it's about that time. In just minutes, the Jesus-actor will be discredited, and life can get back to normal. I'll be happy to see the guy stop taking advantage of people.

But then I think of Alyssia, and I realize no matter what happens, I don't want to see her going backwards, least of all because of me. I like seeing her having happy changes.

The July heat pressing against my face, I look out my window just as Jesus heads to his place. "Your act is about to come to an end, 'Jesus'!"

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*Antonio Dustin, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*5:25 p.m.*

We're standing at the rear door, peeking in through the kitchen window. After getting my partner to start recording with his phone, we move toward the kitchen door on the right side of the house. I go to turn the doorknob when the door opens inward.

He stands there, the hint of a smile on his face. His piercing eyes look through me. "Antonio and Brandon, welcome to my home."

Brandon's eyes shift to me, drenched in worry. "How you know our names?" There's panic in his voice.

I point the gun at "Jesus" and go to seize his arm... Before I can touch him, he just vanishes! "What?"

"Oh man." Brandon's terrified at this point, and I'm with him.

A hand grips my shoulder. I'm thinking it's Brandon.

"Since I created and control—"

I whirl around to the man standing there, unable to understand what's happening. I thrust my gun barrel toward him. "Don't move!"

"—the laws of this dimension, I am not bound by them." An amused grin appears on his open face, the right corner of his lip lifting. His look reminds me of a heavyweight boxer toying with a featherweight. His voice is unhurried, calm. "I'm glad you've both come for a visit, although this is hardly the typical way people approach me."

"Antonio! My phone...his image...it's as if my phone's pointed at the sun."

I ignore Brandon. I go to jam my gun in his chest, inches from him, when he disappears!

Instead of Jesus, an older Asian lady stands there, blocked by the edge of the house. Wearing a no-nonsense look, she points a handgun at me. With enraged eyes, she screams at us. "Don't move, except to throw down your gun!"

She's not bluffing, I can tell. "Hey, hey, I'm cool, I'm cool!" I lob the gun to the brown-dry grass as if hot to the touch.

Simultaneously, Brandon drops his phone to the grass. I roll my eyes.

She shouts again. "Both of you. On your knees, now!"

We obey just as the vanishing guy's voice sounds over me from behind. "Ready for change, Antonio?" The weight of his hands land on my shoulders.

I look up into his bearded face, still showing an amused grin. "What's going on? You disappearing and reappearing." I nod to the lady still standing there. "And the rabid lady with a gun?"

"Oh, you haven't seen anything yet. Here, take a look!" He flicks his hand as if waving away a fly.

Surrounding me are what I can only describe as innumerable winged, tall men dressed in white robes and glistening armor. The swords they hold blaze with blinding, fiery light.

"Meet my friends. They are here for anyone who would be foolish enough to raise a heel against me."

It isn't his voice that draws my eyes to him, but the light pouring from Him, and his scars blazing with explosive light.

"Antonio, *what* is going on?"

I can barely reply. “I-I don’t know.”

Jesus squeezes my shoulders again. “Would you like to go back to your unexciting, mundane life of crime? Or would you like to discover true meaning and purpose in life by following me?”

What I’m seeing reverts to normal. When I look up to his face, I see only compassion there. It’s then that I bend low to the ground at his feet. I notice Brandon already facedown.

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*Ms. Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue*

*5 Minutes Before – 5:20 p.m.*

I rush upstairs to my locked drawer. I pull out the 9mm Beretta I saw the drug dealer lob over the fence at my backyard the other night. Concerned the family with their kids might come home and something dreadful might happen if I did nothing, I’d climbed through the opening in the fence and confiscated it.

Holding it takes me back to the days following my parents’ murder when I trained with the East Timor rebels against the Indonesian invaders during the 70s.

With the gun tucked in the small of my back, I walk briskly outside and march across to Jesus’ house, the peoples’ eyes fixed on me. I can’t sit back and allow what happened to my parents to happen to Jesus. Whether or not he can die again, I don’t know. But I won’t just stand by and do nothing when I have the power to stop them!

With stealth, I move along the side of the farmhouse, keeping my back to the house. Although heavier and not so limber, I know how to carry a weapon. When I reach the corner, I glance around the corner. Jesus stands there.

And then, he’s not.

But the man with the gun is. Instinctively, I level my gun at him. Rage rushes through me in an instant, threatening to take control. “Don’t move, except to throw down your gun!” He throws the gun down onto the ground. “Both of you on your knees! Now!”

Moments later, Jesus and I, with the two men, walk back toward my house. I’ve placed the gun in the small of my back due to the monumental change in both men. “Jesus, what is it they saw?”

Jesus studies me. “You already see clearly what is important. These two just needed a sober nudge. They will never be the same again.”

“Why did you come here to Summit Avenue? Why here?”

“That which seems insignificant and forgotten is oftentimes the most significant and remembered by my Father.”

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*Delante Thomas, 29 Summit Avenue*

*5:40 p.m.*

*What?* I can’t believe what I’m seeing! Skinny, tall Antonio and Big Brandon walking over beside the Jesus-actor as if on a Sunday stroll. I rush outside to meet them. Each of their faces has a strange look that I’ve never seen before. When their eyes land on me, they change direction to intercept me as if they have something urgent to tell me.

But before they can say a word, I halt them in their tracks. “*What is going on?*”

Antonio raises his hands toward me as if to calm me. “Look, all I can say is, he is the real deal.”

I’m beside myself with outrage. “*What happened?*”

“I went to grab him, he vanishes. Then when he was there again, I point my gun at his chest...only for him to disappear again!”

“You can’t be serious.”

Big Brandon, beside Antonio, looks high as a kite with his smile. “Then, he opened our eyes.”

“I’m not in the mood. What do you mean he ‘opened your eyes’?”

Brandon’s face looks like he’s recollecting winning a big-win lottery. “We saw what’s really happening around us—masses of angels taller than Shaq with long swords surrounding a blazing Jesus. And then we saw him as he is. Those scars are real, dude!”

As Antonio reflects, he breathes in with excitement, then exhales as his face illuminates with sheer joy. “Man, it was unbelievable!”

I shake my head in disbelief. They’ve obviously taken product. “What are you on right now?”

Without warning, Antonio grips my shoulders. “Listen, he is Christ Jesus. He could’ve destroyed us, but he showed us mercy. He gave us the chance to follow him.”

Brandon pipes in, his black curls bouncing against his forehead. “And to do life in a whole ‘nother way!”

I rub my eyes trying to understand. *It wasn’t supposed to go like this!*

Jesus stands next to me. “Your father died from a broken heart.”

I don’t even react anymore. I just listen, my eyes fixed on the straw-like, burnt grass in front of me.

The look on Jesus’ face is of concern and wanting good for me. “His heart gave out after months of seeing you hanging with bad crowds and waiting endless nights for you to come home. And then the one time you pushed him down to go be with your gang.”

“Yeah. I deserve hell’s flames for what I did to him.” That moment flashes through my mind. “I’d shoved him to the ground as he tried to stop me from leaving our front porch. When he fell, he didn’t get up right away. But that didn’t slow me. I went to the corner to meet my peeps who were waiting for me. The next day, mom had texted me to come home, that father was in the hospital. The head injury had been minor, but during the night, he’d had a heart attack. Within days, he was gone. I still don’t know if mother’s forgiven me for what I did.”

Jesus rests a hand on the side of my arm. “Do you want to change?”

“But I don’t know how.” My voice comes out almost as a whisper.

Jesus extends a hand toward me.

I’m not sure what he wants. “You want my hand?”

Jesus grins, the humor reaching his eyes. “No, I want your phone.”

I pull it out and hand it to him.

He fixes his gaze on the phone in his hands. “Alyssia?”

“Yes, Lord?”

“Retrieve the hammer and apply sufficient force to render this phone unusable, please?”

“Yes, with pleasure!” She runs off, a spring in her step.

Jesus extends another hand toward me. “And your burn phones?”

And suddenly, I just give up. I stop fighting. I do want to change. I accept that this Jesus—he must be the real deal. “Yes, I’ll go get them.”

Jesus reaches for me, stopping me in my tracks. “Wait a second.”

I look at him. “What is it?”

“Fill your gym bag with enough clothes to last a few days.”

“Why?” But I already know the answer.

“It’s time for you to leave your house until your relational roots are pressing down into the right ground.”

I hear Jesus’ words, but I’m thinking ahead what might happen. “My boss will come looking for me. It could put others in danger.”

“Don’t worry about your boss. I’m your boss, now.”

Twenty minutes later, I open my door to leave when she’s standing there with her hand raised as if to knock.

“Momma?” She’s dressed in an aqua-blue dress and wears casual dress shoes. Her raven hair’s pulled back tightly to form a tight bun. Her light-brown skin glistens from a thin coating of sweat—she’s walked here from her home a few blocks away.

“Delante, son.” I see the concern in her eyes. “I’ve felt a burden for you all day. So, I’ve been praying. How are you, son?” Before I can answer, she speaks again, a smile playing at her thin, cherry-colored lips. “I already see it—a change in you. What’s happened?” Her eyes search me for clues.

I can’t stop a smile from showing.

Her eyes enlarge at that. “My, my. A genuine smile from my son? Why wonders never cease!”

“Momma, I want you to meet someone who moved in across the street a week ago.”

“Oh? And has this neighbor had something to do with your change?”

I nod. “Do you remember the time I went to the altar as a boy?”

“Yes, I sure do.” There’s pride in her voice as she seems to recall the memory.

“Maybe after you’ve met my friend, you’ll understand.” I step out on the porch and take her arm in mine. “Let’s go meet him.” We walk toward the old farmhouse.

As we reach the edge of his yard, she stops abruptly, her eyes fixed on the porch. I follow her eyes and see Jesus standing there, his white robes glistening, his eyes affectionately set on her. Her hand lifts to her mouth. “Oh my.”



I help momma take the remaining steps until we're just in front of the porch—her eyes never move off him. Momma's struggling to remain upright as the reality of the one in front of her hits her.

She manages to break her gaze off Jesus to me but only a split second. "A week ago and you didn't let me know till today?"

"I didn't believe until the last hour, momma."

Jesus' face displays a warm welcome. "Hello, Momma Denise. You've been praying for your son many years. Today, he came home."

"My Lord." She finds her words. "A-Are you here for a short visit?"

"Yes, daughter. And your prayers have engineered profound change on this community that are only now beginning to blossom."

"I see, I see. That's wonderful that you've come, Lord." Then, she raises a veiny hand to me as she stands by herself. She steps forward toward Jesus, her body trembling but resolute on where she must go. Taking her time and studying Jesus, she climbs the two steps onto the porch. She reaches for him. "May I?"

He extends his hands to her. She takes them delicately, studying the scars on his wrists. I swear I catch flashes of light from them.

Momma speaks, sadness in her voice. "I-I'm so sorry...for what my sins...did to you, Lord."

And as quick as momma's held his hands, he's holding her hands with tender care. Jesus gazes into momma's eyes. He speaks with great conviction, almost in a whisper. "And I would do it all over again, just to make sure *you* made it home to me."

"Thank you, my God." And she rushes forward embracing him as sobs erupt out of her.

Jesus looks at me, tears welling up in his eyes, before extending an arm for me to join them. I step forward until he pulls me close to them both. I have never felt so good in all my life—not since that altar experience long ago.

From behind comes Alyssia's voice, filled with sheer delight. She's running toward me wearing a cheek-to-cheek smile.

We embrace and I twirl her around as we share a laugh. I hold her in my arms and lock eyes with her. "Alyssia, I'm so sorry...for everything!"

She displays sorrow on her face. "Me, too. We've both wasted years going the wrong direction."

“And now, I want to go the right direction...with you.”

At that, she kisses me—just a quick one, followed by a smirk playing at her lips.

“I know it’s early days, but what if we...”

Without warning, she presses her long finger against my lips. “Don’t you dare say it. Not yet!” There’s warning in her voice prior to a playful grin appearing. “Not until you do it the right way.”

“Ahh, you want the full romance thingy? Is that it?”

A brief time later, having retrieved Michael from Ms. Ayustine, we walk together toward momma’s house which is about three streets over. I’ve decided to stay with momma for the next few days—possibly longer. And I call my landlord to let him know I’ll not be needing his house any longer. He’s not happy about the lack of warning, until Alyssia mentions she’ll cover one month’s rent.

Momma’s really missed me, I can tell. And I’ve missed her—and her fabulous home cooking.

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*Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue*

*8:39 p.m.*

One of the best two days I’ve had, I’m stuffing my mouth with Ms. Ayustine’s third tasty burrito. When I complimented her cooking, I was caught off-guard by a delightful smile, as I had not anticipated that such a stoic face could radiate such warmth and happiness. We then made small talk as she brought out dishes. And I discovered this lady is not the same lady from even yesterday—changed kinda like me. All because of our common neighbor, Jesus.

I scan Ms. Ayustine’s property and the work that’s been done today. The bushes along the perimeter of the property are trimmed, all weeds removed, several new trees, shrubs, and flower beds planted periodically across the front, sides, and back yard—all complete with a coating of thick mulch. The porch has been revamped including a cleaned, polished rocking chair. In addition, the house has been scraped down and half painted in peach with black accents on the window shutters and gutters. Bryan’s taken days off from his work so we can get the job done by mid-week. With Patrick and Toby, I plan to help. Besides, it’ll probably mean more great food

from Ms. Ayustine. Who knows, I might even get to know her a bit more. I think I might like that. Yes, I'd like that very much.

The fireflies burst against the darkening backdrop, like countless suns going supernova. A rumble of thunder rolls across the distance. I hope a cooling thunderstorm arrives which would be a great finish to such an amazing, fulfilling day.

Jesus had gathered us all together to pray, and pray we had, though little was said about what we were to pray for. A brief time later, two men I'd never seen before came over, smiling and looking like friends of Jesus. They definitely didn't look like church folk. I'll have to ask Jesus about that later.

I study the people. Everyone looks exhausted but also overjoyed at what's been done here. As they say their goodbyes, I learn these people are from different churches, but mostly from the red brick one ten minutes' walk from here. Many of the people just showed up because they felt compelled to come. And I'm quietly impressed by the whole lot. Not only did they redo her property, but they brought rare smiles to Ms. Ayustine's face. Maybe, just maybe, I'll go visit them folks at the church at some point.

I walk over to see Delante and an older Black woman I've not seen before sitting with Jesus on the porch swing. When I reach the edge of the porch, I nod hello to them.

Without warning, Delante pushes himself up off the porch swing and rushes toward me. I think the worst is about to happen until he wraps me with his arms, embracing me.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bruno, for anything bad I ever did to you."

I pat his back, shocked at the young man's change.

He pulls back and looks at me. "Can you forgive me?"

"I forgive you, Delante. But I need forgiveness from you, too."

A brief time later, I wave my goodbyes as I head to my house, in awe of the changes I've seen in both Delante and Ms. Ayustine.

Jesus calls out. "Frank?"

"Yes?"

He jogs to catch up to me. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes, I think I can say I do, Lord."

Jesus nods, but I'm already reeling from his question. Panic shoots through me. I leave Jesus standing there, and walk double-time forgetting my aches and pains. Then I see it. The back door ajar. *Oh no!*

I walk through the back door into a mess—as if a cyclone's gone through the house. Drawers are out of their places from the dining room sideboard, shelves emptied, and boxes overturned. I climb the stairs to my bedroom which is also in disarray. I'm just thinking of one thing, the money—

I lift the mattress slightly to pull the wad of money out. The immediate reach of my hand yields nothing. I lift the mattress to eye level.

*Gone!*

I let the mattress drop, and I plop down on the edge of my bed distraught. Tears sting my eyes—that familiar weight of dread from the previous months now drenching my bones again.

I grab my phone and dial 9-1-1.

“Hello?” Jesus' voice floats up to me from downstairs.

“Up here.” I force my voice not to waver. *But you already knew that, right?*

He comes up, lingering at my bedroom doorway, his eyes looking me over. But I don't want our eyes to meet. I honestly don't know what to think, or how to respond.

“Why?” I finally ask. “Did I really have to experience all of yesterday's and today's goodness only to be slapped down so completely now?”

I look at him, his eyes showing concern and sadness...which seems contradictory. If he knew this would happen...

My heart is torn in two. “I mean, I finally had relief and normalcy again after being so long racked with worry. And now that's all been yanked away from me.”

Jesus crouches down in front of me and rests his hand on my knee. I'm angry, about to explode at Jesus, until my eyes see the large, pinched scar on his wrist. I squeeze my eyes shut, unable to attack my one true ally. And my friend. “It doesn't make any sense, Lord!”

He squeezes my knee, and I'm glad he's here. But the wind's been kicked out of me. It feels cruel and unfair.

Delante's face appears in my mind's eye. “Is this Delante's handiwork?”

“Trust me, Frank. Can you do that a bit longer?”

“What choice do I have? I thought I’d have time to find a decent job. But now, my escape from a homeless life is gone!”

“Just trust.” Jesus stands up. “When you’re ready, come over and stay the night with me at my house.”

“Can’t you tell me who did this? I mean, look at my face—red as a tomato from working at Ms. Ayustine’s house. Meanwhile, someone’s allowed to rob my house—and you knew this would happen?”

“Trust.” He mouths the word without saying it.

I nod, unclenching my fists.

A half hour later, Officer Campbell stands at my front door. He’s tall, thin, with a pale complexion, deep-set eyes, and skin that appears too tightly pulled against the edges of his face. He removes his brimmed hat and, after formalities, scans my house.

“What are you missing, Mr. Bruno?” His voice is low and soothing despite his scarecrow look.

“Money from a yard sale yesterday.”

“How much was taken?”

“Almost \$3000.”

“From a yard sale?”

“It was a unique yard sale.”

“How so?”

I explain to the officer about losing my job months before, about being behind three months’ rent, and the generosity of people who had come to the yard sale and bought items without taking the items home with them. Officer Campbell is surprised by my story.

“Did you know those people?”

I gesture toward Jesus’ house. “My neighbor knew them. He seems to have been influential in getting them to come by.”

“Who else knows about the amount of money you collected yesterday? And where did you keep it?”

“I’ll show you where I hid the money.” I take the officer upstairs and lift the mattress to show him. He stares at the mess of my room, his face growing somber. I then recall everyone who knew about the money. “My next door neighbor, Jesus. And some friends who helped—Alyssia

and her son Michael, who's just a kid. Toby who lives at 33. And Delante across the street at 29."

"Forced entry?"

"No. The door was open when I came home. I did not leave it unlocked. And I don't have an estranged wife or relatives."

"Do you know Alyssia's address?"

I shake my head. "I don't know, but Delante across the street knows. But I can vouch that she wouldn't do such a thing. I just can't believe she'd have anything to do with this."

Campbell grins at that. "In my line of work, nothing surprises me. If nothing else, perhaps she can give me info that might help us."

After the officer leaves, promising lots but not convincing me anything concrete will happen, I head over to Jesus' house. I go to knock when he opens the door.

"Come in, Frank. Take the bedroom upstairs at the end of the hallway. Get sleep and..."

"Trust?"

A big grin appears beneath Jesus' dark beard. "You got it, son."

As I step inside, I say what's brimming my heart. "Eh, thanks for being here. I don't know what I'd have done if you weren't here."

Jesus turns to me and acknowledges me with a polite nod. "Don't carry your load of troubles. Instead, cast your troubles on me, because I care about what happens to you, Frank."

"I know you do. That's the only thing keeping me going."

"In the morning, Patrick will cook you an amazing breakfast. Meanwhile, be in prayer to our Father, and rest in his Presence."

**Day Nine: Sunday**

*Frank Bruno, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*7:12 a.m.*

I awaken to birds singing from the small tree just outside my window. The sweet, full aroma of pancakes, cooked eggs, bacon, and toast tugs at me. After brushing my teeth and freshening up, I dress, anticipation building what Patrick has prepared for breakfast.

I did pray, as Jesus encouraged me, and the truth is, I felt his Presence all night. I don't know what's going to happen, exactly, and I'm not sure it'll be pain free. But I know one thing: I can't get through this season alone. I need God in me leading me and giving me strength.

I come downstairs to an empty living room and dining room, but someone's tinkering in the kitchen. "Good morning?"

Patrick pops his head out from the kitchen doorway flourishing a wide-cheeked smile beneath his curly, orange-red beard. "Breakfast is served, Frank."

I scratch my head. "Where's Jesus?"

"He left a couple hours ago. He likes going for morning walks in the woods behind the house."

"Say, what will you do when Jesus leaves us? Have you thought about that?"

He shrugs his shoulders but doesn't lose his hopeful expression. "I had nothing before Jesus, no purpose, no nothing! Whatever happens after he goes, I'll still be grateful. I believe my life, no matter the challenges, will now always hold hope and purpose."

I nod, taking a seat at the table. "I believe that's true for both of us!" I look over the spread of food—scrambled eggs, baked beans, pancakes in a heap, bacon, and a stack of buttered toast. "Who taught you how to cook?"

"My parents made the dinner table the center of our lives. There was always the aroma of food baking, grilling, or frying. When Jesus found me and brought me here to live, I wanted to fill this house with welcoming aromas. Coffee?"

"Yes, please." I consider Patrick's words about a house full of aromas. "My mom made amazing dessert pies. On the first day I met Jesus, he dropped one off to me. With one whiff, I was taken back decades."

"What kind of pie?"

"Walnut and pecan pie, with molasses and brown sugar."



“I tell you what. I’ll make that for you tonight. Just for you!” He radiates a big smile.

If the cash hadn’t been stolen, I’d have celebrated that pie with joy. But now, I just can’t. I let out a sigh. “Thanks, but could you save that for when its better days for me?”

He nods with a look of understanding, his long, curly beard mashing up against his barrel, flannel-shirt chest.

“But I *am* hungry now.”

“Dig in, Frank. A full stomach always makes one feel better, no matter what’s going on.” He walks over to me and lays a hand on my shoulder. “And we will manage it together.”

And I’m glad to have a friend like Patrick.

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*Delante Thomas, 29 Summit Avenue*

*9:31 a.m.*

Having decided to move home with mom for a while, I’ve dropped by my place to get some things I won’t be able to live without. Later, I’ll visit church with mom for the first time in years. I know it’ll be an all-day event, but I look forward to it. It’s been so long since I felt something on the horizon that isn’t dread. After I finish here, I’ll swing by Alyssia’s place to invite her and Michael to come with us. The thought causes my chest to warm at the thought of us three, plus mom, together in God’s house of worship.

I load my shoulder bag with the last bits and pieces I’ll need for the next few days just as two raps sound at the front door. I dash to the door hoping it’s Alyssia. I yank the door open to two police officers standing there. One’s tall and thin, and the other looks like an oversized bouncer.

The gaunt officer tips his hat to me. “Sir, I’m Officer Campbell. And this is Officer Weber. We’re investigating the burglary of Mr. Frank Bruno’s house at 28 Summit Avenue that took place yesterday.”

I’m careful to keep a neutral expression at that news. “Sure, come in.”

They step inside, and I ease the door closed. Campbell gestures to my couch. “Have a seat.”

A couple hours ago, I’d have protested him speaking to me like that in my own living room. I sit down and prepare for the worst.

Mr. Campbell's face takes on a darkened hue. "I've seen your face before."

"Yes, and before yesterday, I was guilty for most everything I was arrested for."

"Is that so? Can you tell us anything you know about the burglary in question?"

"Nope. I just know one thing: I was changed yesterday." Warmness fills my chest just thinking of my new life, and that it'll be alongside Alyssia.

"What do you mean 'changed'?"

"I've been a bad apple. But after I met Jesus and surrendered to him, everything changed."

The officer shifts his weight uncomfortably, his face displaying a hint of skepticism. "Only a handful of people knew about the money that Mr. Bruno had received through his yard sale. Your name came up."

I remain calm. "Look, you're welcome to look around. I have nothing to hide. I didn't steal anything from Frank. In fact, I was busy all day helping to renovate the lady's house next door."

"You knew about the money?"

"My girlfriend, Alyssia, told me about the people walking up, giving large sums of money and then leaving—most of the people not taking what they bought. Yeah, I knew."

The man's face takes on a perplexed look. "Why would people do such a thing—pay for things and then walk away?"

I give the officer a sidelong look. "You won't believe me if I tell you."

Flashes of impatience appear on his face. "Try me."

"A week ago, a man moved in across the street at 30."

"Go on."

"He told us his name was Jesus of Nazareth."

The officer chuckles at that and searches my face as if waiting for me to say, "I'm joking."  
"You expect me—"

"Go talk to him yourself. At first, I thought him a fake, like some sort of impersonator. But I've seen things that are too difficult to explain."

He draws in a deep breath, not convinced. Probably nothing surprises the officer I assume to be a veteran. "Your girlfriend's address?"

I scribble her address on a piece of paper and hand it to him.

"We'll talk to her, as well. Have a good day." The two officers head out.

Just a half hour later, knocks hammer at my front door again. *Can't you police leave me alone?*

I yank the door open when two bulky white guys shove their way inside, followed by a hulking Black dude I recognize as Barks. Dread fills me at the sight of him as I'm shoved to my couch. I'd been cautious around him, always felt like a wire loose or something wrong with him. The fact he's come in person isn't good news. He's the area's lead when it comes to getting product in and out.

I keep calm, looking at Barks without displaying challenge or disrespect. For the first time in like forever, I pray inwardly. *Lord, I need help.*

Barks stands over me, hands on hips, sizing me up. "Where you been? You forgot how to answer your phone?"

I keep on praying. And I decide to be direct and honest. "I destroyed my phones. I've decided to follow Jesus. I want out."

"You want out 'coz you got religion?" Barks' muscled fingers reach down digging into the top of my thigh causing me to jolt forward—and my throat lands in his thick hand. He squeezes, his face a twisted scowl. "You follow only me! Where's the money you owe me for your flushed stash?"

I manage to say what I need to say. "I don't have it. Gave...Jesus control...of everything."

Barks throws a glance at his two men, his voice scoffing, followed with a predatory grin. "Does he look like he's in control? All I see is a drug dealer with a nothing life and a nothing future. I mean, look at this dump!"

Outside, a sonic boom shudders the entire house. Everyone clasps ears, Barks releasing me in a hurry. Loose dust somersaults down from the ceiling. Shocked looks flash across the guys' faces—me included.

"What the hell was that?" Barks scans the ceiling with a worried look as if it might collapse on him.

Two light taps sound at the front door.

Barks stabs the air with his finger to one of his men. "Check!" The no-neck white guy dashes to the window to look. Barks keeps his eyes fastened on me as does the third guy, his face inked with tattoos.

No Neck looks back at us. "It's...Jesus."

*Wow, he's come!*

“What?” Barks throws me back against my couch before dashing to the window. His eyes widen. “*What* the hell is going on?” He speed-walks to the door opening it, his face distorted with explosive anger.

Jesus stands there, not displaying any worry or concern. “Barkley Owens, did you expect to see me today?”

Barks slams the door in his face. “I ain’t got time for this!”

I blink. And Barks and his two bouncers are gone, replaced by Jesus standing in front of me.

I’m dumbfounded. “W-What just happened? You didn’t just send them to...”

“I don’t like rude people.” Jesus winks at me with a playful grin. “They’re just outside... a bit bewildered.”

I jump up to look out my window. Sure enough, the three are standing in the front yard with dazed, ashen faces.

Jesus opens the door, yelling to them. “The last time you barged through this door, you were uninvited. Now, you are invited. Ready to come in and talk?”

The three of them stare disoriented, pale faced, at Jesus. I can tell their minds are spinning but going nowhere.

Jesus turns back toward me, his face lit with joy. “Searching for lost sheep is a specialty of mine!”

The three stagger back into the house, almost in slow motion.

Barks manages to finally talk. “You’re really him, Jesus Christ!”

“Yes, Barkley. And I know each of you.” He scans their faces. “Welcome, Carl and Marcus.”

Appearing overwhelmed and stunned, Barks looks at me, then to Jesus, and back to me again. “How can this be happening?”

Jesus steps toward Barks, gently pressing his hand against his chest. “Glad we could finally meet in person.”

Barks collapses to the floor, his huddled mass heaving with sobs. Before the two men can do anything, Jesus steps to them, too, and plants a hand against their chests. Both men crumble into heaps on the floor, also crying.

Jesus sits down beside me on the couch. “How’s your day been so far, Delante?”

I am in awe and astonished at the scene happening before me. “You came when I called.”

“Of course. You prayed, didn’t you? While on earth, I love making house calls.” A toothy grin spreads across his face. He rests a hand on my knee.

I take in the scene before me. “What’s happening to them, Lord?”

“I’ve just pressed their future, apart from me, into a split second of time. It is enough to sober anyone, if there is anything within a person that can be redeemed.”

“Their future shown in a second?” I scratch my head, puzzled.

“Apart from me, yes. Let’s pray for our enemies that they would not be our enemies any longer.”

We pray in silence. I’ve done more praying in the last hour than I’ve done since I was a kid.

Twenty minutes later, Barks’ face appears lighter and displays something like cool, calm relief. Tear paths glisten his cheeks. The same effect is seen on the faces of Carl, No Neck, and Marcus, Tattoo-Face.

Barks looks up to Jesus. “All I can say is...I’m sorry, Lord.” Even saying that, Barks is fighting back tears. He reaches over and grabs with two hands the feet of Jesus, his forehead touching the wooden floor.

Lovingly, the Lord reaches forward and rests a hand atop his head. He speaks over him, his voice calm. “I want you to have peace, to know true life. Your father never affirmed you, but I affirm you now. Drink from me and you’ll never thirst again. For so long, I’ve desired relationship with you, Barkley. And to fill that emptiness inside you. And you, Carl. And you, Marcus.” Then he turns to me. “And you, Delante.”

A short time later, the three finally manage to stand up.

“Thank you, Lord.” Barks rubs his eyes with his fingers. It’s almost as if he’s come out of a deep slumber. “What is it I can do for you, Lord?”

“With Delante’s help, you will create a place for ex-gang members and ex-drug dealers to gather in my name in Sterling City. You’ll receive my Spirit to do all that is needed and to be empowered as my witnesses. And you will shake this city and region as my Kingdom comes through each of you.”

Barks’ eyes, softened and tender, land on me. He steps toward me. “Can you forgive me, Delante?”

I nod, pleased to see the change. Without warning, he engulfs me in a monstrous hug.

Another knock. Carl opens the door to tall skin and bones Antonio and Big Brandon standing there—the two I sent yesterday to “intimidate” Jesus.

Jesus speaks from behind me. “Thank you, Antonio and Brandon, for obeying the Spirit’s prompting to come.”

“Hey, hey.” Antonio extends a fist toward me which I nudge with my own fist. “What’s going on here?”

The two step into the living room, and I shut the door behind them. My living room is cramped with all of us here.

Jesus addresses the room. “You will be a fellowship, my church, in the inner city and to those marginalized and under siege by the darkness. According to your plans, you each came to sow destruction. But instead, I have planted life and purpose in each of you. And now you will bring that life and purpose to others who believe themselves abandoned.”

“When should we start?” I ask.

“The fields are white for harvest. You’ll begin today!” Jesus raises both hands toward us. “I now submerge you in my Spirit!”

Without warning, the window I couldn’t open lifts open as wind rockets into the room kicking up dust and loose papers into a whirlwind. Then, fluttering, yellow-orange-red flames rest atop the heads of the guys—their eyes squeezed shut, their hands upraised, their mouths mumbling things I can’t understand. My glance toward them is short-lived as swells of electricity pass through me and rip the breath from me. When I regain my breath and go to speak, unknown languages pour out of me.

Jesus doubles over in joyous laughter. “Drink deeply, children. For today, you will be my witnesses. Be led and empowered by my Spirit despite every hindrance and attack the enemy will bring against each of you. I have all authority. Therefore, go! And I never forsake my own.”

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*Toby Garrells, 33 Summit Avenue  
10:30 a.m., 5 Minutes Before*

I'm sitting at our table eating a bowl of cereal. *Jesus lives on my street and here I am bored! Will Jesus and I go back to my church like last Sunday? Or is something else planned?*

Without warning, an explosion rocks the house, rattling plates, cups and glasses, causing a small cactus to topple over, its clumps of dry potting soil spilling onto the white island counter. I jump up and scan toward Jesus' house and down the street. Nothing appears out of the ordinary.

Drawn out of his bedroom, Mitch dashes downstairs, locking eyes with me. "What was that?"

Three raps at the front door. Mitch goes to answer it. I look on, wondering, and hoping it'll be Jesus. Instead, two brooding police officers stand there. Immediately, I'm reliving the moment they came with news about my parents' and sister's demise.

"Is Toby here?" the officer asks.

Mitch motions for them to step inside. "Wait, did you just feel an earthquake?"

The officer looks surprised too. "Yes, the land shook. Have to admit it's odd."

Mitch brings the officers into the living room where they see me.

"Hello Toby." He introduces me to his partner and himself. "We're investigating a burglary that took place yesterday across the street at 28. I've been told you witnessed considerable sums of money being received by Mr. Bruno during a yard sale?"

*Burglary?* "Yes." I glance at Mitch behind the officers, wondering if he'll react to me being questioned. But his face remains stonelike.

"Can you tell us anything that would assist us with our investigation?"

"I wish I could help. All I know is Frank, who's become a friend of mine, has been fighting eviction from his house. That money that came in because of people's generosity would've given him breathing space until he found a new job."

"Nothing sticks out to you in the last two days that might help us find his stolen money?"

I shake my head before noticing a slight agitation flash across Mitch's face.

The officer faces Mitch. "Do you know anything that might help us?"

Mitch shakes his head. "I don't know anything."

The officer pulls out a business card and hands it to Mitch. "Call us if either of you learn anything involving this case."

Mitch nods. The officers turn back to me, their lips pressed lines before heading to the front door. As they depart, I close the door and walk back into the living room. I'm surprised not to see Mitch waiting for me with something to say.

Thirty minutes later, I'm in prayer having a genuine dialogue with the Lord when I sense the Spirit prompt me to go to the front door. Joy erupts within me when I see Jesus standing there.

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*Mitch Garrells, 33 Summit Avenue*

*11:01 a.m.*

I shut my bedroom door and press my back against it. Shelves of basketball, football, and Chess Club trophies and medals display my name—all echoes of a time when I was still able to be a regular kid. My eyes drift to the samurai mask partially hidden beneath my pile of laundry. A dash of shame shoots through me at my life's recent direction.

A cyclone of queasiness churns in my stomach as I watch the police get in their squad car and drive off. I find my eyes wandering down and across the road as if I might catch a glimpse of the old farmhouse, but it's impossible to see because of the woodland blocking my view. I'm mesmerized, honestly, by the Jesus character's appearance and the events that have happened the past week. The hermit Asian lady next door, suddenly interacting with everyone. Bruno, a friend of my dad's, no longer so much a loner. The drug dealer, Delante, the guy I know all-too-well, suddenly not taking calls. And my own brother growing a pair and defying me. Even the Muslim family, well at least the lady, interacting with people on our street. It's been peculiar, to say the least.

And then there's all the people visiting the "Jesus" guy—and the talk I've been hearing around town including the gang of homeless living at cardboard city.

My eyes land on the central heating and cooling vent. I hated taking the cash from Frank's yard sale. I despise who I've become the last year—all to feed a habit I can't shake. It began as a way to forget and escape. But now, it's just become a prison.

No house sales for months caused me to do what I would've considered unthinkable a mere six months ago—use our real estate agency's house keys to gain access to recently sold properties or places we rent out. When Toby talked about Frank's yard sale and the "miraculous" influx of money, my need to feed the habit just wouldn't let me ignore it.



That man in the farmhouse cannot be Jesus. But I wish he was. If I knew it was him, I'd go over there and curse him to his face for stealing from us my mom, dad, and sis—for throwing our lives into an endless tailspin, for putting unbearable weight on me. And to think my parents actually loved God.

“Hello Mitch.” A deep voice, not Toby's, filters through the bedroom door.

*He's here, that Jesus-wannabe? I didn't hear anyone come in.*

Instinctively, I shout. “Get out of our house! I told you you're not welcome!”

“May I come in?”

I yank the door open intending to grab the guy and shove him out of our house. The Jesus character stands there in his white robes. He's tall, broad-shouldered, and his eyes show not even a hint of concern at my anger. “I said, get out!” My eyes drift down to something in his hand, a picture. I recognize our family portrait.

“Why do you have that?” I snap the picture out of his hand and stare him down. But he isn't troubled at all—his face keeping a neutral, kind look—but there's also something else there.

“I did not stop caring for them just because their lives ended abruptly and tragically, Mitch.”

Even as he speaks, I sense something otherworldly from this man around me, not with an intention to hurt but a genuine desire to help. And I'm standing there frozen, eyeing this man who's shattering my disbelief. His eyes bore into me, not of anger, but of something I've not experienced in months since their deaths, someone who somehow understands me, where I've been, how I've felt, and where I am now.

For the longest time, it's just been me fighting to stay above water—and afraid to give up for the sake of my brother. That had been when I'd met Delante and tried what he was offering. I'd done it out of curiosity, at first, and to escape my problems for a time. But little by little, it'd become my only happiness and only goal. Then the real estate business just dropped off. And there I was wearing a mask, invading people's homes looking for items or cash that might not be missed.

A surge of anger rises within me. “But what about me? They were snatched out of our lives. And suddenly I had to be the adult and raise my brother.” I swallow hard, bottling my feelings so not to cry.

He keeps a supportive expression on his face. Then I notice wetness brim his brown eyes. “There are no easy answers for pain or hardship, son.” His eyes drift down to the picture. “But I

can assure you, because they knew me, they are not suffering today.” He looks back up at me. “And you don’t need to suffer any longer, either. That is why I have come. I know you miss them. But why do you suffer so much today when they do not? The drugs, the thievery, the hidden life—that part of you doesn’t have to take another inch of your future from you again.”

My chin drops heavy to my chest, and I squeeze my eyes shut. “I don’t know what to do.”

“It begins by following and learning of me.”

“I don’t know. I can’t be like Toby with all the praying and stuff.”

A smile brightens his face, and I find myself liking him even more. “Are you praying now as we talk?”

I tilt my head in thought. “No. What do you mean?”

“We are having a conversation, are we not?”

“Yes.”

“If you do talk like this on a regular basis to your Father in Heaven, that will be prayers with potential for power. And I will be most pleased. I don’t like religious jargon and fillers. I prefer a real conversation when we talk.”

“I guess. But what about my addiction? I couldn’t get free from my habit several times no matter what I did.”

“I know you’ve tried, but did you try with me helping you?”

“That is true. I did not.”

“Then let’s begin together, shall we?” Jesus reaches, pressing a hand against my chest over my heart.

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*Frank Bruno, 28 Summit Avenue*

*11:18 a.m.*

After swinging gently on the porch swing on Jesus’ porch, I eventually go to my house. I’m sick of being sick to my stomach about the future. I’m sick of waiting for something to happen. Time to take action. Three months arrears in rent, and no way to extend.

I go to my house, retrieve my pre-packed large suitcase and backpack, and set them outside my house. Before locking and closing the door behind me, I leave the key on the side table. Then, with Attack Cat in my arms, I set him on the ground.

“I’m sorry I’ll not be able to support you, old friend.” Sadness and shame stab at me. His blue eyes set on me, his furry face displays disorientation. He steps to the door and lets out a lengthy meow before rearing up on his hind legs and reaching for the door handle. He’s waiting and expecting me to open the door for him.

“I can’t, A.C. Now, we’re both in God’s hands.”

As I go to move off, Attack Cat springs to me and rubs up against my leg.

“I’m so sorry.” The urge to cry is overpowering. “I can’t even take care of myself anymore.”

Then, Attack Cat returns to the door and just sits there, his eyes fixed on me.

My voice breaks. “G-Good-bye, my friend. Please...forgive me.” Those blue eyes drill into me, breaking my heart. Parking my suitcase, I dash to the step, lift Attack Cat into my arms, and hug him one last time. He lets out the longest meow I think I’ve ever heard from him. “Hey, you can use the cat flap at the back door. I’ve put out enough food to last you a week. And the taps trickling upstairs in case you get thirsty—especially with this heat. Maybe when new tenants arrive, they’ll adopt you.”

As I reach the road pulling my suitcase, I figure heading to the city center makes the most sense. Then, I see Jesus approaching along with Toby and close behind, Mitch? There’s a strange expression on Mitch’s face as he approaches, both hands shoved into his front pockets, his eyes fixed on the road. It’s been years since I’ve seen or spoke to him since I hung out with his father, God rest his soul. Toby carries a suppressed but enthusiastic look—something has happened, but I don’t know what.

Jesus looks to Mitch who finally speaks with solemn reluctance. “I’m sorry, Mr. Bruno.” He pulls out of his back pocket a long, white envelope and offers it to me.

I take hold of the envelope—thick and heavy. “What—”

“There’s no straightforward way to say this. I’ve been an addict. And I stole from you last night.”

Dumbfounded, I yank the envelope open. I’m shocked to be hearing Mitch confess, even more shocked to be holding the lost money. Heat ignites within me, but with pressed lips I contain my anger. “How’d you get into my house? It was locked—”

“As a rental property, your house is managed by the real estate company I work for.”

“And?”

He hesitates to continue. “We have master keys to all properties that we manage—your house included.”

“I see.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Bruno.” His voice is deflated.

I feel anger that he did this, but I can also see he’s sincere. A long-ago scene of him and Toby as pre-teens playing with a water hose on a July day replays in my mind, their father and me sharing a pint on their back porch. I’m suddenly reminded of the sons’ loss in the last year, and how devastating it’s been for them—especially Mitch. I consider how daunting it must’ve been to suddenly be responsible for everything. But he’d *not* been responsible.

His voice cuts across my thinking. “I’ve chosen to follow Jesus now. Can you forgive me?”

“I respect you for coming and telling me about this and returning the money. But what about the police? What should I tell them?”

“The truth. I’m sick of lies.”

Standing there, I realize just how sheltered of a life I’ve lived all my years. At once, I realize it’s time for a bold new direction. I’m not to return to my house of decades. I’m to go as the Spirit leads me—to tell others about Jesus as his ambassador wherever He takes me.

“I will forgive you, Mitch. But on one condition.”

Mitch’s expression brightens. “Name it.”

I gesture behind my shoulder. “See that cat? His name is Attack Cat, but as you can see, he’s as docile as a church mouse. I want you to adopt him as your own and take care of him...’coz I can’t anymore.”

And with only a little inner conflict, I hand the envelope back to Mitch. Uncertainty and satisfaction twist within me all at once.

“Use this to catch up on your bills.” Then, I face Jesus. “You know what I’m thinking, don’t you?”

Jesus rests a hand on my shoulder. “Before you go off, come with me. Let’s talk.”

We approach his porch where Jesus and I watch the siblings go inside the Lord’s house. I can hear Patrick chopping on the cutting board—something delicious about to be cooked. I plop down on the swing beside Jesus. In the still morning air, the swings’ chains protest with metallic

twisting and grinding. The air is crisp, cooler than the past few days. My mind replays the scene the other night when my head rested on his shoulder while the storm passed—one of the best moments of my life.

I finally talk. “I’m nearing the big six-zero, but it’s just now that I feel truly alive.”

Jesus drapes an arm around my shoulders. “Surrender to me does this to a person. When did this occur?”

I consider Jesus’ question. “When I shut the locked door behind me and left the house key inside—it was then that I felt myself free from the house I’ve known most of my adult life. I can now leave it all behind.”

“What else did you feel?”

“Relief, terror, and joy, all at the same time. But sadness for Attack Cat.”

“Once upon a time, I lived without a place to rest my head each night. But the Father always met my needs.”

My eyes drift to Attack Cat, still sitting by my side door. “Sounds exciting, living in that realization. Just living day by day, without bills, without constraints, and just trusting Father God.”

“It is exciting for the first days. Until the cold bites at you, or the sun’s heat makes you sweat until there’s nothing left to sweat. Or till hunger gnaws at you. Or the mosquitos feast on you. It is not an easy life. Which is why I have a counter proposal for you.”

“Are you saying I won’t be able to hack it if I keep walking with my suitcase?”

“I have something better in mind. But first, I’d like to hear from you what you’d do if you could do anything.”

“I suppose I’d want to keep what you started here going, not allow it to disappear. I’d—”

“Jesus!” comes Delante’s voice. He’s running toward us. Five brute-looking companions follow him close behind.

Jesus looks at me, undisturbed. “The enemy always responds, usually with bullying tactics.”

“Huh? What’s going on?”

Delante speaks. “Snake Eyes, my leader, will be here within the hour with his goons. They said they’re gonna skin us alive! And they want to ‘talk’ to you.”

Jesus stands up and stretches his arms, untroubled. “Then they will arrive just in time for the gathering of my people.”

All the men, and I, look at Jesus. I scratch my head. “Jesus, those guys aren’t coming for a church service.”

Jesus lifts his forefinger in front of his mouth. “Shuuush.” A smile touches his lips. “They don’t know that, yet, but it is their destiny.”

It reassures me knowing that nothing wrong can happen with Jesus around.

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*Toby Garrells, at Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

11:32 a.m.

Seeing an agitated Delante outside, along with five of his associates, Mitch and I step out onto the porch to see what’s happening, followed by Patrick.

Then people start trickling onto Jesus’ front yard, row after row, all accompanied with chit-chat. There’s an air of celebration amidst the mass, as if about to attend a grand picnic or watch a celebrity performance. Many of the people are from my church, but most I don’t recognize.

A hand shoots up, and I see Pastor Douglas and Pearl, his wife, accompanied with dozens of people from Daxen Street. And then I see Sebastian, standing tall, wearing a carefree smile. Just the sight of him reminds me of why Jesus came.

Just then, Bryan pulls up in his truck.

Jesus stands next to Frank. “May we use your tables?”

“Of course, Lord. I got eight in the shed ready to be used.”

Then to Patrick. “Is the grill ready?”

Patrick beams, anticipation displayed on his ruddy face. “Yessir, a feast is ready to be served to these wonderful folks!”

I nudge Frank. “Let me give you a hand.”

“Me, too,” Mitch says, tapered excitement in his voice.

I stop Mitch for a second. “Why not call Shelly so she can come and meet Jesus while he’s still with us?”

“Good idea. I’ll text her to come now.” He pulls out his phone as we head toward Frank’s backyard shed.

Jesus' voice stops me. "Toby?"

"Yes, Lord?"

"Make sure you and the others pray as you work. The darkness approaches with rage, but shields of faith can keep at bay even the fiercest foe!"

"We'll do."

As we approach the back shed, Frank leading the way, Bryan approaches. "Looks like over a hundred people have come."

I scan behind us, even more people arriving. "If you haven't heard, guys, things could get a little dicey in the next hour."

Frank slides open the metallic shed door.

"What's up?" Bryan asks.

"Some goons are on their way, former associates of Delante. Jesus didn't seem worried, but he did say to keep praying. Let's be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading on how we should pray."

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*Snake Eyes, aka Urkel Johnson, Headed to Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*11:37 a.m.*

"They've turned into a cult!" I punch at the dash as we speed toward Summit Avenue in my sleek black hummer. "Or, they've had a party and used supply!"

Marcel throws me a sidelong glance as he drives. "I don't know, boss. You really think they're imagining Jesus?"

"I've known Barks and Antonio for over ten years. Something's caused them to go over to crazy land."

"But for all of them to hallucinate and see the same thing?"

"Power of suggestion."

"So, what's the plan, boss?"

"Pain. We bring lots of pain, which can be a great teacher!"

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*Theodora Alexander, at Home, Across Town*  
*Earlier – 11:19 a.m.*

Pacing my living room, I'm waiting for Alyssia to answer her phone.

Alyssia finally picks up. "Theodora? Everything okay?"

"Begin to pray."

"What's up?"

"Not sure, but I just know that as long as we pray, it will be better, whatever the darkness has planned."

"Michael and I will begin praying now."

"Good!"

"Keep me informed. We're headed to Jesus' house now. Will you be there soon?"

"Yes, see you shortly!"

Within 15 minutes, I've reached Jesus' house via taxi. Drifting fluffy clouds make today bearable, versus the simmering onslaught we've experienced the past weeks. People have amassed in the front yard. Some appear dressed in their Sunday best, while others have come as they are. Many of the people appear homeless, but all wearing looks of expectancy and interest on their faces. And I see some rough characters in the midst, but quickly discern that there's a noticeable change on their faces and in their demeanor. Most definitely the handiwork of the King.

Jesus sits on a thick log beside a large tree alongside the left side of the property that hugs the treeline. When he sees me, he acknowledges me with a kind nod and a fleeting smile. I can tell, however, that he's more preoccupied than I've seen him before. I think I know why. I remain prayerful. Something's about to happen.

Jesus stands, opening his arms. "Welcome to each of you. I invited you to come and celebrate, and celebrate we shall. But not for the reasons you might have thought. Today, we will celebrate the expansion of my Kingdom in the lives of everyday people—especially those forgotten and



marginalized.” His eyes move to the street people and lingers there for several seconds. He gestures to shade. “Please, come closer so you can rest within this tree’s massive shade.”

They move closer until they’re seated on the grass in front of Jesus. Then I notice Patrick and the other men passing out water bottles starting with the street people, then to the church folk and others seated at the rear.

Jesus resumes speaking. “If you truly know me, acknowledge the burden you sense upon you now to pray. My people, you must keep your eyes on me, even when I am not here. The enemy does not realize the power of the Spirit Who now binds us together in a way that is more powerful than anything the enemy holds within its arsenal. Trust in me, even when you cannot see, when you cannot hear, when you feel overwhelmed by evil. Trust me that I will always be nearby. My Spirit gives you power, and the onslaught of Hell, though great, cannot overwhelm my Church. Be led of the Spirit who loves you and shepherds you. Do not be a spectator through this life but be continuously led by my Spirit to be a doer of my Word.”

A flash of light causes me to turn away.

And he’s gone.

Everyone panics as all eyes search for Jesus. A cacophony of voices, some distraught, some fearful, others perplexed, builds within those gathered. And its then that I feel like a schoolteacher about to reprimand a classroom full of students on day one. *I must say something!*

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*Ms. Cahva Ayustine, 31 Summit Avenue*

*11:49 a.m.*

I still feel the new arrangement within my heart toward Jesus. It surprises me, but it’s good. I hadn’t cried like that since the day my parents—

Scanning out my front window, I see people have shown up in droves on Jesus’ front yard. Some have prepared and brought lawn chairs, others beach towels to sit on. I consider how lucky I am that Jesus came and sat at my table.

I decide to go be a part of the crowd. This *is* my street, after all.

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*Tahmid Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue*

*11:51 a.m.*

Hands shake me from my sleep. Tahari stands over me wearing a troubled look. “Something’s happening across the road.”

I sit up, concerned. “What is happening?”

She steps to our window and points, drawing me by the strength of her will. “Look.”

I spring up to see the front yard of the Jesus man filled with people, and the supposed Son of God seated beneath a leafy tree. “What is going on? What is he doing there?”

Tahira reaches for my hand and holds it gently, watching the gathering without saying a word.

*What are you thinking, dear wife?* I face her. “What if we take a family holiday? It is the summer, after all. We’ve been under a lot of strain lately.” As if not hearing me, she keeps her eyes fixed across the way.

“I keep replaying what that young man said in our language about a tree.”

“Nonsense!”

She jumps as if I’ve just slapped her. She lowers her face and tears slip down her cheeks.

Immediately, I regret wounding her. I soften my voice, imploring her to listen to me.

“Tahira.”

She looks up at me, her almond eyes filled with hurt and confusion.

I say what I must. “We know Isa Masih did not die on a cross, but it only appeared that way.”

She shakes her head, and suddenly she is not crying any longer. Her voice is charged and emphatic. “How long will we deny him? After all we’ve experienced this week?”

“You cannot be serious. That man cannot be who he claims to be. And what would your parents think?”

She squeezes her eyes shut as if suffering a migraine. “They’ll have to accept and respect our decision.”

I pace back and forth, my eyes glancing out at the front yard across the road. “Where are your parents now?”

“They walked to the park an hour ago.”

“Okay. At least they’re missing all this.”

She lifts a hand to her forehead as if fatigued and steps away from me, until I catch her arm and stop her. “What is going on with you, Tahira?”

There’s visible pain in her eyes. “My heart is torn. But I can’t pretend anymore, even if you choose to pretend.”

I’ve never seen her like this, and I refuse to crush her spirit, even if I disagree with her. “Fine, but we must move forward together. And if we are not both convinced, will you agree to remain on our current path and devotion to Allah?” I must convince her that the man across the street, and the claims he’s made, cannot be true.

A fleeting smile appears, still torn by uncertainty, but also relief. “Agreed!” Her face lit with unexpected joy, I can’t recall seeing her this buoyant in a long time.

We leave Nadir on the sofa reading a book to Mazhar, and we’ve promised to return shortly. I can tell from Nadir’s face that he senses something amiss based on our change of routine.

We head across the street, my agreeing to this path troubling. For several breaths, I’m tempted to beg Tahira to return to the house with me. But I know I must follow this through to the end, or risk losing my wife and watching my family break apart.

As we arrive near the back of the gathering, we notice everyone looking at us with mixed expressions of surprise. A few say hello, and we respond in kind. Awkward does not describe my feeling, but we do our best to appear unfazed by the attention.

When Jesus sees us, he promptly stands to his feet, beckoning for us to move toward the front. Again, I want to protest and stop my wife, and return to our orderly life with its precise, orderly boundaries. When we step closer, a young couple offers us their lawn chairs. I protest, but they won’t have it any other way. Grateful, we sit down and rest our eyes on the man who calls himself Jesus.

He speaks, encouraging his people to be in prayer, to trust, and to recognize the Holy Spirit in their lives. All this is alien to my ears, but I remain respectful. He pauses and takes in the whole gathering at once. Then, a sharp flash, almost painful, causes us look away, like the glint experienced when a car speeds by on a sunny day. No warning. No sound. The man is gone!

Confusion and fear sweep over the crowd. But for me, there is no more confusion or fear. Tahira’s voice cuts across my thoughts. “Tahmid, I cannot believe on him unless you too will believe.”

I take her hand in mine. I cannot deny any longer. “I believe, dear wife, I believe. Please, would you fetch the children so they can be part of this?”

She rushes back across the street. My eyes watch her enter the house just as three vehicles arrive, all waxed to perfection with gold rims and tinted windows. Deep-bass rap blasts from the vehicles, which stops abruptly as a group of men dressed in black leap out of their vehicles and approach the back of our gathering.

“Oh no!” I pray for my family and for everyone here. Strangely, I’m unsure to whom I am praying now. My mind cannot help but see the same face I saw often in my dreams, that of Jesus.

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*Delante Thomas, at 30 Summit Avenue*

*12:11 p.m.*

When Jesus blinks out, I see the faces of those gathered, including my friends’ faces. To my surprise, they don’t look too bent out of shape, though the same can’t be said for the church folks who are moving about as if disoriented. That is, until the lady with the silver-rim glasses talks to them, the same lady that gave Alyssia her job. She’s quick to step in front of everyone, standing on top of the log where Jesus had been seconds before.

“Folks, hello? Jesus didn’t come to our city for a vacation. He came for a purpose, for a short stopover, to deliver something inside us. In the last moments, he told us to follow any burden pressed down upon us, that is, to pray. Let’s obey him now, not surrender to uncertainty, fear, or confusion.”

“Amen!” A man, who looks like a minister, claps his hands. Toby stands next to him with Mitch—shocked to see that guy here—plus the guys who helped fix up the Asian lady’s house—Frank, Bryan, and Patrick. To my surprise, I don’t see Alyssia here. I want to text her, but my phone’s surrendered to Jesus. *Where are you?*

Barks comes up to me, tapping me with the back of his hand. “Hey, we just witnessed another supernatural event!”

I nod. “Yeah. Hey, you know Snake Eyes’s on the way. And you know how crazy he can be.”

Barks steels himself, a sly grin appearing. “We’ll make our stand—do or die.” He goes to walk off before stopping and turning to me. “Before, we didn’t care if we died for doin’ evil. But now, we can die for something, or rather, Someone. And if we die, it will be worth our lives!”

In a flash, I think of Alyssia, Michael, and my son to come. “Let’s not die, if possible, fam. But I like what you’re thinking, and I agree. Let’s keep praying like Jesus and the lady said.”

“Already there!” He walks off toward the other four.

When they arrive, it’s as if I’m in slow motion. Familiar pristine vehicles with shiny rims and tinted windows pull up led by a sleek, polished, black hummer on our street. Just days ago, I might’ve been riding in any one of these vehicles.

Snake Eyes leaps out of his hummer before it comes to a halt. He removes his sunglasses, and I see the look in his eyes—one who’s on edge. Built like a tank, his head is shaven, and his face tattooed and tanned.

We’re the closest to him and the guy’s charging in our direction. Barks takes the lead, moving to intercept him. That is, until Snake Eyes seizes his head in a clutch with both hands and knees him in his mid-section. Barks collapses to the ground. Another thug, following close behind Snake, delivers a kick to Barks’ face, and he’s out. The other guys following Snake scatter through the crowd of people. The church folks look terrified and timid.

Snake’s focus on me, he shouts, his face grim. “Where is the Jesus-wannabe?”

He gnashes his flawless white teeth as he steps closer. Before he can reach me, though, Toby steps in front of me, along with Frank with his bulldog stance. To my utter shock, the old lady, I forget her name, takes the lead. I can’t believe these guys are putting themselves in danger *for me*.

The old lady directs her inquisitive, motherly voice at the man. “Hello there, Mister—?”

He pauses his charge, giving her a sneer. “Eyes.” But then he pushes past her, his eyes searching. When he doesn’t see him, he returns to stand in front of her, his eyes scanning the crowd. “Where is he?”

“It is good you’ve come looking for Jesus.” The old lady’s persistent, for sure.

“Move it, lady.” He pushes past her again like a bull plowing through wheat. Two of his men rush in shoving Toby and Frank out of the way.

He stands in front of me, his eyes lit with anger. “Where is he, Delante?”

As I think of what to say, I notice a huge change with the church folks. They're now hunkered down and praying, their eyes open, their mouths moving silently. When I don't answer him quick enough, he seizes my neck and puts me in a full nelson and applies brute force. "You one of these people now? Have I heard correct?"

Horrendous pain spikes through my neck. I force my words out through gritted teeth. "Yes. I can't live like I was before."

"Stop it!" Frank shouts, but before he can say another word, one of Snake's goons pushes him to the ground and stands over him. Toby protests until he, too, is thrown down. Mitch leaps to defend his younger brother when a punch connects with his jaw sending him sprawling to the dried-out grass.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!" A red-faced Patrick, standing near the farmhouse porch, waves his spatula in the air.

Snake Eyes ignores him. "I know all of you! Delante, drug dealer-in-chief." He gestures to Toby's brother. "And Mitch Garrells aka Mr. Uppity with veins crying for supply almost every day." He points at Barkley who's just coming to, looking groggy. "Barkley, my enforcer and strong arm for years. How many did you put in the hospital or worse?"

My neck bent unnaturally, pain shoots through my neck feeling like it'll snap. I watch Patrick take a step toward Snake Eyes. "We know what we all once was." Then a smile breaks out through his red beard. "But Jesus came looking for us and rescued us."

Snake thrusts me to the ground. Before I can block, he kicks me in the stomach. I fight for my next breath even as pain engulfs my mid-section. I look up just in time to see Snake staring down Patrick who's facing him defiantly.

He pulls out a sleek, black gun and presses it against Patrick's temple. "I've come to find Jesus myself." There's warning in his voice. "So take me to him!"

His goons stand around watching for anyone foolish enough to be defiant.

Snake throws a rabid look to me just as I find traces of breath again. "The whole lot of you's crazy. Especially you, Delante! 'Coz you're in fantasyland if you think any religion trumps the reality of this here gun."

The old lady's voice cuts through the air. "That's enough! Haven't you inflicted enough pain?"

Snake's face twists into an angry scowl. "Lady, I haven't even begun!"

“You *are* joking, right?” comes the voice of...Alyssia?

I go to get up until Jake, one of Snake’s men, grabs me and throws me back to the ground. My eyes stay on Alyssia. I reach toward her, all but helpless. I find myself praying, just like I did when my house was invaded.

A flirtatious smile spreads across Snake’s face. “Oh, if it isn’t the city skank.”

Fearless, she marches up and stands in front of him. “Yeah, I have a history, Snake. You’re an expert at reminding everyone.”

He’s amused by her. “Are you now a Jesus Freak like the rest of ‘em? At least what I sell is honest. People either want it or they don’t. That pretender, though, is selling religion to gullible people who don’t know what they want. Look at your boyfriend there.” He stabs the air with his finger toward me. “Pathetic loser who now wants to be chained to a church every Sunday for eight hours, do his religious duties, and earn his golden ticket to Heaven.”

“I said that’s enough!” The old lady stands in front of Snake again with a look of defiance, thin, veiny hands pressed to hips. “This is not religion you’re attacking, mister. You are attacking God.”

Snake looks her up and down, somewhat impressed. “It’s all the same to me, sister!”

I see the look on the old lady’s face change to sadness. Without warning, she reaches to hug Snake, who, shocked, looks as if he’s been stung by her touch.

He pushes her away and steps back. “Nope, don’t need that!” But before he can make space between her and himself, she’s coming at him again, reaching for him with gusto. Surrounded by people all around, though, he can’t escape her reach. She clings to him with her thin arms again, hugging the startled man.

She’s crying now. “I see your empty life. It doesn’t have to be this way.”

He brushes her off again just as more arms from around him grasp him. There’s a change on the people’s faces: suddenly not afraid nor timid—but driven, but by what?

“Leave me alone, freaks! I’m warning all of you!”

Snake’s goons have backed off looking unsure about this whole affair. I watch Tall Thin Antonio and Curls Brandon trying to maneuver toward Snake. Barks, with No Neck Carl and Tattoo Marcus, move from the opposite side trying to position themselves where they can be the most useful.

Without warning, a gunshot pierces the air.

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*Cahva Ayustine, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*12:14 p.m.*

I'm still shocked at Jesus' vanishing. Then, as if the day couldn't get any worse, vehicles screeched to a halt, their bone-splintering bass beats filling the air. Six goons spilled out, headed toward those gathered.

Instinctively, I watch for my chance and escape back to my house. I grab the 9mm Beretta from upstairs, make sure a bullet's chambered so it's ready, apply the safety, insert it into the small of my back, and conceal it by draping my t-shirt over it.

My mind returns to decades ago when I used my energies to fight those who had murdered my parents and our people. Stepping back outside, I zero in on the leader of the group. His black t-shirt clings to his muscle-bound body. His crazed eyes are focused, appearing as if he's on a hunt. Without drawing attention to myself, I move to intercept him. Being old, I don't fear for my life. I won't let innocent people be hurt, not like my parents, if I have anything to say about it.

The man pushes through those gathered. Within less than a minute, a silver-haired, elderly woman stands up to him. I've not seen her before. He hesitates—possibly something human still exists within him after all. His underlings patrol the edges of the gathering.

Many of those who helped fix up my yard yesterday are here—their lips moving without sound. *Praying?*

The lady again stands in front of the leader. She reaches for him as if a mother greeting her long-absent son. He brushes her off, but she doesn't stop reaching for him.

I'm within arm's reach of him when I see the gun held in his hand. *No!* I'm about to reach for my own when his gun crackles. The thin lady in front of him slumps to the ground.

The teenage neighbor, the younger one who helped around my house yesterday, instinctively seizes a lawn chair, swinging it overhead at the attacker.

Screamed warnings come from his men. "Watch out, Snake!"



But he's not fast enough. The folded metal chair strikes his forearm. With a groan, stunned, he drops his gun. But just as quickly, he's reaching for the weapon. Is he about to shoot up the gathering? That is, until multiple hands yank him backwards onto the ground. The church folk—they've done it! They've done something besides just pray!

I reach down and secure the gun, then lower myself keeping my eyes set on the men who came with this one, watching to see what they do. Surprised again, I watch half the accomplices also dragged down by heaps of people, along with my neighbor's help—the one called Delante—along with his street friends. The rest of the goons reach their cars and speed off.

A palpable anger rises in the crowd as faces turn toward the shot woman lying still on the ground.

I find myself praying. *Jesus, why did you have to vanish, just like you did so long ago when my parents, when I, needed you?*

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*Tahira Akhand, 27 Summit Avenue*

*12:24 p.m.*

When the shot rang out, I rushed the kids into a huddle behind the sofa. Then, I crawled over to the living room window and looked out, needing to know Tahmid's safe. I'm worried, too, that my parents might return in the middle of this craziness.

Unable to see adequately and growing more apprehensive by the second, I crane my neck, keeping behind the drapes. Several of the men jump into their cars and speed off.

Then I see Tahmid standing over the others wearing a distraught look. Groups of the gathering have huddled across the front yard. *What is going on?*

"Nadir, please watch over Mazhar. Do not leave the house. I'll be right back."

Locking the door behind me, I rush toward the crowd, zeroing in on my husband. "Tahmid?"

He turns, his face brightening when he sees my approach. But then his gaze returns to a spot in the grass where many are clustered. As I step into his embrace, he looks down at me with eyes full of conviction.

“We must walk a new path now.” His eyes return to the downed woman. “We will now follow Isa Masih, Jesus the Christ, because he is true.”

The nearby attacker shouts expletives to be let up—but the people keep an iron grip on him.

I nod, realizing our lives are about to change in ways unimaginable just one day ago. I clutch onto my husband as sadness gnaws at me for the shot older lady.

And my mind imagines the look on my parents’ faces when they discover our paths have changed.

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*Delante Thomas, at Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*12:27 p.m.*

With Snake pinned to the ground, I rush to Alyssia, who’s face is a mask of shock, resting on her knees, perched over the lady. Blood oozes out of her side onto sun-burnt, straw-like grass, glistening in the sunlight. The lady’s unresponsive, her complexion a bloodless pallor. An Asian guy pushes through the people identifying himself as a nurse. He strips off his t-shirt and lowers himself before pressing it against the lady’s side.

He addresses the air. “Someone. Call an ambulance.” He feels for a pulse. “No pulse.” Looking about, he finds Frank who he apparently knows. “You know Jesus. Where is he?”

Frank shrugs his shoulders. “I-I don’t know. He was here and then vanished.”

*Release my life into Theodora.*

The thought drops so strong within me, but I push it away. There’s no way God would ever use someone like me, not after what happened between me and my father years before, and after all I’ve done the last two years. I don’t think I’ve lived a day since without feeling shame about my actions against him. Even with reconciliation with Jesus the past day, the shame seems too heavy to lift out of my heart.

My eyes shift to Alyssia. Things had been going so well for her. Jesus in her life. The new job because of this lady. But it looks like this lady’s now gone.

*Release my life into Theodora*, comes again within me. And I realize that if I don’t heed God’s words now, I might never heed them again. I must obey him.

I place my hands on the lady's shoulder. "Right now, I release God's life into Theodora."

Alyssia's eyes stare into me, confusion and hurt there. "What are you doing, Delante?"

The guy nurse looks at me as if I've gone over the edge.

I look up at both fighting to hold back the tears in my eyes. "Finally, I'm listening to *his* voice."

A roar of unified prayer rises from those gathered, reminding me of my days sitting in a pew during one of mom's revival Sundays. From the distance, sirens wail.

Then, it happens. The old lady's body convulses beneath my hands. Her hazel eyes spring open fixing on me—as if jolted from a deep sleep. She winces in pain, a faint voice heard. "My side...burns like a red-hot poker..."

"It's all right, Theodora." I manage a smile while masking my own shock. "It's very clear God's got you!" I glance over to Alyssia who looks beautiful and relieved, tears slipping down her caramel cheeks. A touch of pride passes through me that I know this woman, that I can, if I do things right, live the rest of my years with her, Michael, and our soon-to-be-born son. But my life needs to stay changed if I'm going to have a life with her.

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*Frank Bruno, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*12:49 p.m.*

I saw the drama unfold including the point-blank shooting of Theodora. Then this church I had derided for so long rises like an army, rushing in, grabbing the attackers, and pinning them to the ground. All this done while people prayed—complete with looks of terror and shock and otherworldly focus. These had come to Jesus' house expecting a picnic, not a shooting. To my utter shock, Delante speaks strange, alien words over the downed lady. Then, her eyes pop open. Just seconds before, Rhyle, the nurse from the hospital, said he couldn't find a pulse. He'd pressed his t-shirt against the wound. Astonishment does not describe the reality that it wasn't a preacher or Toby praying for her—it was Delante.

*Lord, where are you? The people need you. Please don't leave us like this.*

Bryan stands next to me. "Crazy, eh?" His eyes sweep over the scene. "Where is he?"

“We’re all wondering the same thing, my friend.”

Toby’s voice cuts in, his brother and Patrick behind him. “What would Jesus want us to do right now?”

I grin. “I suppose he’d not want us to act like children.”

“Shall we pray, then?” Toby asks.

All of us agree. Toby continues, head bowed. “God, teach us right now how to be dependent on you—whether we see you or not.”

“I like that mature, thoughtful idea very much.” A familiar voice sounds from the edge of the woods. Jesus stands there, beaming. Within seconds, the gathering also notice him and rush toward Jesus until he raises his hands halting them. “Be at peace.”

Although they stop, I go to Jesus’ side. He is, after all, my neighbor.

“Impressive, aren’t they?” Jesus surveys the people, a gleam in his eyes.

I scratch my head still unbelieving. “I’m shocked by all I just witnessed.”

Jesus steps past me and approaches the fallen lady, Theodora. He kneels, at the same time resting a hand on Delante’s shoulder. “I’m proud of you, Delante. Your obedience to the Father through the Holy Spirit delivered resurrection life into Theodora. The Father is well-pleased with you.”

“I knew that voice wasn’t me. I couldn’t have thought up such a crazy idea, but I knew I had to obey.”

Jesus nods. “Before, you held a phone to take orders from people addicted to drugs. Now, you will hold my Spirit within you, and you will take his orders all hours of the day and night.”

Something like relief washes over Delante’s face. “I like that. And I’m ready to live for something more.”

Jesus’ eyes shift to Theodora. “Arise, daughter.” He takes her hands and pulls her gently to her feet. Confusion clouding her eyes, she probes her abdomen only to find a reddened indentation. My eyes dart to the rust-coated grass. She had definitely been shot. And now, Theodora talks to Jesus as if nothing’s just happened.

The nurse, after seeing the wound no longer there, slips to his knees.

“Glad you came, Rhyle.” Jesus rests his hand on his head. “As my servant, you will bring healing to many in my Name, even while working amidst the sick.”

Rhyle looks up. “Thank you for awakening me at the hospital, and for saving me.”

An infectious smile appears on Jesus' face. "As my people, you must do the same for others swallowed by darkness. Get their attention and direct them to me." He turns to the people round about. "If you want my life and joy to flow through you, you must let me pour through you to others as I lead you."

Police cars pull up, their siren-lights flashing red and blue. Officers handcuff the assailants, including the leader. Statements are taken and within a short time, they depart. And it's almost as if the thugs had not even shown up.

I'm standing beside the Lord when he addresses Patrick. "Son, ready to put smiles back on the people's faces?"

Patrick's face brightens. "Yes, Lord. As you instructed me, we're ready for the ultimate BBQ."

"Very good." Jesus addresses the people. "Despite the enemy's attempts to disrupt this hallowed time, we will not give him even one inch. Go fellowship and eat!" The others move off.

Jesus turns to me, concern etched on his face.

"What is it, Jesus?"

"Jarrett needs us. As I work, so the enemy works. Bryan?"

Bryan turns and approaches, eager to help. "Yes, Lord?"

"May we use your truck once more?"

"Of course."

"Patrick, please serve the people—and pray. We will be back shortly." Then he turns to Toby and Mitch. "Direct all of our friends here to lift Jarrett during the next hour."

"Got it!" Toby jogs off with Mitch close behind to talk to those gathered.

Jesus places an arm around my shoulders. "Frank, feeling strong enough to accompany us?"

My heart lifts at being asked to go with him. "Sure thing!"

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*Frank Bruno, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*1:29 p.m.*

We get in the truck and head toward the city center, me seated between Bryan and Jesus. Unlike the last weeks, today's temps aren't overwhelming which is a relief.

I give Jesus a sidelong glance. "Is Jarrett in danger?"

"Yes, any time one of mine courts their old life, there is danger."

Speeding down the road, we see a man on the side with his thumb raised. Jesus points to the man. "Bryan, please stop to pick up that hitchhiker."

After stopping ahead of him, the man, with blond hair and an older, handsome face, hops into the truck bed. "Thank ya'll for the ride."

We pull back onto the road when the stranger's southern accented voice sounds through the slid open window behind me. "Out trying to save a soul, are we?"

Jesus does not answer, nor turn his face toward the stranger.

"It's been a long time since I was within arm's reach of you, Jesus."

There's an edge to his voice. His heated breath flutters against my nape causing my hairs to stand up. I don't like that he's behind me. If not for Jesus being beside me, I'd be scrambling to get away from him.

"Why did you pick me up, if you're not open to friendly talk, Jesus?"

Jesus finally speaks. "Even an enemy such as you will not elicit ill actions from me."

*Enemy? What, who?*

Jesus' voice cuts through the air. "Bryan? Keep a steady hand on the steering wheel. Your eyes are about to open, as are Frank's."

"Like before?" I ask.

It's the middle of the day, but then it morphs into an oil-black tunnel—no visible light at all. Well, that's not true. The Lord beside us is shining with a piercing white light, but the effect of his light remains contained within the truck. I'm tempted to tell Bryan to turn on the headlights as we speed along, but then I realize he can see the road clearly, despite what surrounds us. I lean forward and see the tunnel walls moving as we speed past—creatures with beady, red eyes staring back at me, their masses crawling over each other forming an arched ceiling of moving parts like a nest of cockroaches. It's then I grab at the rearview mirror and tilt it to see the stranger. Gone are the blond hair and kind face; instead, an emaciated creature with viper-like eyes, giant, folded wings, and stretched hands with clawed fingers meets me. No wonder I'd felt uneasy when he spoke.

The stranger hisses, but words are heard, directed to Jesus. "I should kill you again." His words cause the mass surrounding the truck to scream in glee, their haunting cries causing my heart to skip a beat.

Jesus speaks, his voice calm. "You did your best against me once long ago, yet I defeated you."

"You cheated. No man should rise from the dead, especially when you stank with mankind's evil transgressions upon yourself."

"All of the Curse died with me. And the third day, the Father confirmed and sealed the redemption by raising me bodily to life. The First Adam died in his sin. As the Last Adam, I resurrected, neutering the Curse once for all."

"Funny how you've not neutered my power. And all your effort to reach lost sheep. And for what? They'll all forget you when they cave to their hidden sins."

"I work and will continue to work until the sheep are safe at home."

"Why do you waste your time going after lost causes?"

"I see the future. You do not."

"I see the past, and I see that your efforts are largely lost despite all your power and demonstrated love."

Jesus does not reply to the stranger, but I see the Lord lower his face and close his eyes. His mouth moves. Is he praying? Honestly, I can't believe I'm in this truck, the devil sitting behind me, and the Lord on my right side.

I'm still seeing the dark tunnel around us when the smell of spoiled meat and sewage saturates the truck cab.

Bryan shoots us both an alarmed look. "What is *that*?"

The stranger speaks. "What of this one with the hobble in his step and the bruised face? Has he confessed to you *all* his sins?"

As he speaks, clawed hands snap out toward me from the tunnel walls. In all honesty, I'm shocked to have become the focus of this conversation. I've known since the first or second day that Jesus could see my thoughts, but maybe I didn't fully believe that he could do those things. Maybe I believed my past sins, buried deep within me and my past, could stay buried for fear of what he'd do or say if he found out. Would he stop speaking to me? Would his friendship with

me end? Would he stop protecting me and allow these dark brutes to snatch me away into oblivion?

Jesus speaks, his voice calm which somewhat reassures me. “Accuser, I am a friend to sinners. And I win them, regardless of their pasts.”

“I should think it would matter. He is not qualified—”

Jesus’ raises his voice an octave, interrupting him. “I call them to me, and I qualify all who heed my call.”

I can’t not speak. “Jesus, I think you know better than me about my past. It almost ruined my life save for my first and only boss who gave me a chance to prove myself, despite my record.”

Jesus reaches and squeezes my knee. “I know you are sorry, and I know that you changed directions after that episode in your life. All is forgiven, son.”

Bryan throws me a glance. “What happened?”

That voice comes from behind. “Yes, do share!” This is accompanied with hands clapping. “All the juicy tidbits.”

I look down, embarrassed, not wanting to relive my past.

The stranger’s voice says something under his breath. “Want help?”

“Be muzzled, devil!” Jesus keeps his face forward. “If I cannot remember his offense, on what ground can your accusations stand?”

The stranger’s icy breath flutters against the back of my ear. “Why do you go after this Jarrett fellow—the same one who stole from you?”

“He didn’t—”

“Ah, but he did.” His voice anticipates victory. “The neighbor, Mitch, did not enter your home alone. Have you counted the money, to make sure it was all there?”

The realization washes over me. But I’d given the money back to the boys—no longer an issue for me. And even if Jarrett did steal from me, what right would I have to respond in an angry manner? That money came from God’s undeserved goodness to me.

“Look, I just know that until Jesus arrived on my doorstep, my life was a dead end. Now if Jarrett’s facing his own dead end, then I’ll be doing all I can to help him—regardless of anything he’s done against me.”

Bryan slaps the steering wheel with both hands. “Amen!”

The stranger hisses. “Shut up, fornicator!”



“Be gone!” Jesus commands, leaving no room for debate. I turn around to see the stranger gone. Facing forward, the tunnel walls have vanished, replaced with a road stretching in front of us.

Jesus points. “Up ahead is our destination.” Threatening clouds backdrop an old, three-story house by itself on the right. The surrounding grounds are unkempt and overgrown. A burgundy car sits in the driveway missing all four tires—held up by cinder blocks.

We pull into the driveway. Bryan leans forward, his face downcast. “Jesus, what he said about me is true—”

“I know. But if you follow me, I will lead you to walk by my Spirit and not according to your old appetites. Your story is not over. But you will have to make bold choices and learn to resist the fallen ones and the patterns of your old life.”

“I feel like a hypocrite. Here, I’ve experienced you here with us from day one, yet still ran back to my old life.”

Jesus locks eyes with Bryan. “Are you ready for what I have for you?”

Bryan nods. “I am. I want permanent change.”

“Receive my Spirit now, so that you will be empowered, not neutered and driven by every wind from every direction.”

Bryan shuts his eyes and his face changes from troubled to triumphant in seconds. A strong wind whips through the cabin of the truck. Bryan lifts his hands. His lips speak barely heard unknown words, but it’s flow and expression are beautiful and moving. I, too, sense the Spirit. I sense my love for God and my desire to live for something more anchor deep within me as I respond to his presence. When I open my eyes, I’m seeing Jesus already out of the truck, blazing with light, and throwing jabs at the dark cloud of creatures, pushing them back. Obviously, I’m seeing in the Spirit again.

Jesus looks back at us. “Come on, boys! Let’s do some rescuing.”

Bryan’s in awe when he opens his eyes at the sight before us. Getting oriented, we manage to climb out of the truck and accompany Jesus. I’m not blinded, but I should be. Jesus is brighter than anything I’ve ever seen.

Following him, we watch Jesus enter the house into a foyer with four doors, two on the left and two on the right, and a wooden staircase straight ahead. Moldy decay assaults our nostrils

along with the faint scent of cigarette and marijuana smoke emanating from the walls, floorboards, and scant furniture. Whoever would come here would be coming to feed a habit.

Jesus pushes open all the doors, shouting to the air like a commander. “If you want to be free, come to me now!”

We see in each room people slumped on sofas and mattresses without bedframes. Some open their eyes and jump up to run into his embrace. Others, though, throw up their hands as if blocking the intensity of a spotlight, clearly not wanting freedom from their habits.

Darkness, thick and cold, lingers at the corners of each room, as if red-eyed vultures intent on not giving up their prizes.

Jesus speaks to us, his voice commanding. “Tell these people the Good News.”

For several moments, we share with the people, and they respond by praying to change their mind, and put their trust in Jesus through relationship.

For the next hour, we clear the house. Then, Jesus leading the way, we come to a third-floor room where we find Jarrett lying comatose on an old, soiled sofa. A musty chemical and smoky odor hits me as we step inside. A single, dimly lit light bulb hangs from the ceiling. A yellowish, gray haze fills the room. Empty liquor bottles litter the rough-planked floor.

Jesus reaches and grips Jarrett’s hand. “I’ve come to bring you home, Jarrett.”

As Jarrett opens his eyes, he sits up and slams his forehead into Jesus’ robed chest as sobs seize his body. Finally, he speaks. “I’m sorry...for taking the money.” He’s barely understood between his cries, but the sorrow is evident. “After all I experienced with you the past days, I still went back.”

“It’s all right, son.” Jesus’ voice is soothing and calm.

“Even after experiencing your Spirit and seeing all that I saw, I still failed you.”

Jesus holds him with a determined, loving expression on his face. “I have you, Child. You’re safe.”

“I still came back here...”

Jesus reassures him. “Shush, no journey’s without danger. Let’s get you out of here!” Jarrett clings to Jesus, his head resting against Jesus’ shoulder. “Frank and Bryan came with me to rescue you.”

Jarrett manages to lift his head enough to look behind Jesus. He gives us a weak smile, a veneer of tears coating his eyes.

Bryan offers a stiff hand toward him. "Come on. No more doing life on your own, brother. We'll be there for you from now on!"

Jarrett grabs his hand before fixing his gaze on me. "I'm sorry what I did to you."

I wave the words away. "Don't you worry. All's forgiven."

Heated wind swirling through the truck cab, we head back toward Summit Avenue. Behind us leaning against the back of the truck bed, Jesus holds Jarrett as if caring for a wounded soldier.

Four of the young people from the house have also returned with us. Thin-framed and pale in appearance, the two adult men and two women, all in their 20s, have discovered a new appetite for something more after meeting Jesus. When we invited them to come with us to the cookout, they accepted the offer with broad smiles and keen interest.

As we near the house, Jesus addresses us from the truck bed. "My time with you will soon end. But you must remember that the Holy Spirit is here to keep you rooted in me and keep your love for the Father robust."

I look back at Jesus. "Why do you have to go?"

"That's just it, Frank. You can continue to do what we've started. When I go, it is so you will step into your place in me, to mature, and to grow roots as you survive storms."

I look at Bryan, and I can tell he's as sad about Jesus leaving as I am.

Jesus' voice grows somber. "By the way, guys. When we get back, our hitchhiker friend will be stopping for lunch. Be in prayer."

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*Toby Garrells, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*2:41 p.m.*

Jesus returns sitting in the back of Bryan's truck holding Jarrett who looks worse for wear. I run to meet them. In the truck bed with them are four adults I've not seen before. They look shellshocked, as if they've just survived a tornado. But it's the troubled faces on Frank and Bryan that tell me something's up.

"What is it?" I ask Frank as he gets out of the truck.

“All I can say is, get ready.”

“Huh?”

“Jesus is about to leave. But before he goes, he told us a visitor is coming.”

“Who?”

Frank’s jaw stiffens. “El Diablo.”

His words seem fantastical yet look what’s happened here the past week.

After Jesus has made his rounds greeting the people, he sits at a table and calls for us—Frank, Bryan, Jarrett, Alyssia, Delante, Theodora, Mitch, and me.

Jesus gives us a steady, fixed look. “The Enemy is about to sit down at this table. You must keep your eyes on me no matter what he says.”

The warble of a whistle sounds from down the road a ways. A blond-haired gentleman in his 50s approaches wearing a Miami Vice-looking white outfit, with a brimmed, straw-colored hat and round-rimmed sunglasses. He walks with bravado but equal parts nonchalant, as if on a Sunday stroll. I sense something off about him.

“Hello, Jesus. Mind if I sit for a spell? My, my, what a scorcher!” Sitting down opposite me, he wipes his face and the back of his neck with a white cloth.

Jesus leans forward eyeing our guest. “Say what you need to say, Deceiver. Then, you will leave.”

The stranger removes his sunglasses. It’s then I see his striking blue eyes—now directed at me. He takes in a deep breath and releases it, as if savoring his next words. “How’s your wonderful family, young man?”

I don’t feel like dancing around with words. “I think you know what happened to them.”

His mouth stretches into a thin line. “Have you read Psalm 91?”

“Yes.”

“Not exactly true for everyone, is it?”

“I believe it is true, even when terrible things happen to good people like my parents and sister.”

He rests his elbows on the table before rubbing his hands together. “We saw...everything.”

I glance to Jesus, who’s face radiates reassurance. Strength passes into me.

The stranger reaches over to my paper plate, long fingernails tapping on it. “You gonna eat that? Wouldn’t want it to go to waste.”

I slide the plate with the tall hamburger and potato salad toward him without saying a word.

“Why, thank you.” He brings his nose down to the plate and takes a whiff. “Patrick’s fine cooking, am I right, Jesus? I smell his mammal hands with a tinge of long-ago-spilt liquor.”

Jesus shoots the stranger a look of defiance, his voice no-nonsense. “You’ve not come here to taste Patrick’s food.”

“True, that!” A stretched, predatory smile pushes out the man’s cheeks. “If you hadn’t started your work here, Jesus, I’d have left this city alone. But since you had to fan revival flames, beginning with losers like him,” pointing to Frank, “and that guy,” pointing to Delante, “I had to marshal my forces and come here myself to stop you.”

Delante’s bravado is gone, replaced with the face of a man now only learning.

The stranger locks eyes with the ex-drug dealer. “Appreciate the team-up the last few years. The death and destruction have been...thorough, thanks to you.”

Delante locks eyes with him. “Any business we shared, I regret. And the next time you see me, it’ll be me conducting the King’s business dismantling yours!” I like Delante’s pushback.

The stranger sneers. “Let’s see, shall we? Time is like an ocean’s tide wearing down seemingly immovable objects.”

Jesus clears his throat. “He cannot lose if he abides in me!”

“If, indeed.” A smug grin appears on the stranger’s face. “So anyway, Jesus, I was drawn here because I couldn’t allow you to run amuck, now could I?” He throws Jesus a reproachful grin.

“You cannot stop what I am doing. The light burns in the darkness, and those in the darkness are drawn to truth and reconciliation when they realize the Father’s love.”

“‘When’, another interesting word.” The stranger picks up the hamburger to his mouth and takes a massive bite. “Hmm, hmm, good!” He chews, the table quiet, before putting it down on the plate.

“So Toby, do you know what happens when a human body collides with sharp metal and glass at a high rate of speed? Your father and sister died quickly, like candle flames snuffed out. But your mother, your poor mother. Oh you do want to know the details, don’t you?”

He eyes me, wiping the corners of his mouth with a napkin. His words have smashed against me causing my thoughts to shift and scatter into a jumble of confusion. I glance at Mitch who stares at his hands in front of him, his eyes reddened. It’s then that I notice on the tablecloth a

large butterfly, its wings silk-black with blue speckles throughout. It opens and closes its wings soaking the sun's rays.

"Well, do you want to know or not?"

"You don't know anyth—"

"Oh, but I do. We sit here in front of Truth personified. Jesus there will not contradict me. Your mother, from the force of the impact, was shoved between two pieces of twisted metal as if salami meat. For the longest minutes of her life, she agonized, most of her body's bones shattered, her last thoughts only indescribable anguish."

I see the butterfly again, its antennae probing the air. Delicately, it totters toward Jesus. Without warning, the stranger's hand abruptly smacks at the insect. Equally fast, the hand of Jesus blocks his assault on the beautiful creature.

The stranger's mouth twists, an amused grin showing. "Why stop the inevitable? Whether its winter or a semi's windshield—you can't stop death and destruction coming for this creature."

Jesus says nothing. The stranger's blazing eyes shift back to me. "Your mommy moaned in agony for an eternity before her cries were finally choked off by blood pooling in her throat and mouth. Consider," he whispers, disgust in his voice, his face a scowl, "Jesus saved that there insect, but did *nothing* to save your poor mom." A look of pure hatred shows on the man's face toward Jesus. "I would've put the poor lady out of her misery." Then back to me. "Praytell, what did he do for her? What did he do for your father and sister?"

I fix my eyes on the stranger, unafraid. A question arises from within me. "Since you know so much before she died, did she say anything?"

"Oh, you mean, between her gnashing teeth and unimaginable screams?" The stranger's face takes on a charming, southern gentleman look again. "Nothing of importance."

"Answer the question, Accuser." Jesus, gently stroking the butterfly on his arm, gives no room for discussion.

"One minute you muzzle me, the next minu—"

"Speak, but without deception, Devil!"

The stranger removes his hat and fans himself while looking away, his face turning a deep red. Spittle flies out of his mouth as he finally speaks, dismissively, replacing his hat on his head. "She prayed."

"What did she pray?" I stare into the stranger's lined, sun-kissed face.

“Hmm, not much. We heard her speak your name, and Mitch’s...”

My heart races within me, the added information swimming through my mind. “She was suffering, yet, she managed to pray for me and Mitch?”

The stranger jabs the air with his forefinger. “He could’ve stopped the whole thing!”

I consider his words. Then, I’m seeing as I saw in the park days ago. My mind’s flooded with images of Jesus, this Jesus I’ve come to know well the past days, hanging on a tall, rough-hewn cross atop a dome-like hill. I’m standing below a bloodied Jesus, and it’s just then that I hear him speaking under his breath one name after another, with great difficulty. A coughing fit racks his upper body. Blood drips from his mouth onto his partially pulled beard.

I tear my eyes away from him to see a dark mist of demons surrounding the cross as far as I can see, taunting him, gleeful at this spectacle of him bleeding, alone, exhausted, and nearing death. But he keeps speaking names of people, his head lolling from side to side, fighting for each breath. Then I see it, the outline of a great hand surrounding Jesus even while he’s pinned to the cross. It’s then I remember the hand of Jesus preventing the stranger’s smashing attack against the butterfly.

Tears well up in my eyes at what I’ve just witnessed. I direct my words to the stranger. “Tragedy’s a big part of this world’s make-up. Even the Son of God could not, with all his power and goodness, escape it when he lived with us.”

Jesus’ voice is strong and filled with praise. “Well said, Toby.” Then he turns to the stranger. “Yes, the butterfly will succumb to death, just as I did once. But my death sealed your fate and your armies, Devil, which opened the floodgates of reconciliation and life eternal to the sons of Adam. And Toby’s mother, along with his father and sister, though they suffered for a brief time, suffer no more. And because they lived in me, they live even this minute beyond this realm of pain and suffering.”

In response to Jesus’ words, the stranger scrunches his nose as if he’s just smelled something foul, and he looks away, removing his hat and fanning his face. He suddenly looks unwell, as if suffering from sunstroke.

The butterfly has made its way over toward me, its wings rising and falling. Its antennae probe the air.

Without warning, the stranger slaps at the butterfly as if it were a pest. He lifts his hand leaving it crushed, twitching.

I and everyone at the table jumps, except Jesus.

A satisfied sneer crosses the stranger's face.

I'm shocked and taken aback that he did this. Enraged, I smack the table with both hands, my eyes fastened on the stranger. "Why did you do that?" Everyone at the table joins me in speaking their outrage.

The stranger points to Jesus. "It's his show, folks. Ask him!"

I don't entertain his words. I don't need to look at Jesus, because I trust him. I force myself to calm down. Then, I speak what's on my mind. "I'd like to think when my mother suffered that God was with her, because He knows intimately about suffering, and even death!"

"Then you don't understand what betrayal is, son." The stranger forks potato salad into his mouth.

A sudden flood of gratefulness washes over me. "Jesus? I just want to say...thank you."

Jesus acknowledges me with a tilt of his head. "You saw the Father's hand, that He protected me. But remember, His hand also laid on me the sin of the world, so all that come to me could experience new birth and reconciliation."

The stranger scoffs. "Nice words. But hardly an answer as to why he did not save your family."

I respond. "This week with him cemented what sort of person he is. So, your words mean nothing to me. And one more thing, Devil."

A look of disgust shows on his face. "What?"

"My mom prayed for me and Mitch, even though she realized her life fading. She was like Jesus, looking past death for the benefit of others. That's incredible love, something I think you can't comprehend!"

"I comprehend facts, not sentimentality." The stranger takes another bite from his burger.

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*Frank Bruno, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*2:54 p.m.*



“We’ve got you figured out, Devil.” I interrupt the conversation and stop him mid-chew into his hamburger. These are our last moments with Jesus, and I’m annoyed that this fellow’s interrupting what should be a perfect day having a perfect cookout on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. “You might as well get going now so we can have some peace and quiet.”

The stranger leans toward me with a satisfied grin, his voice a course whisper. “Based on your past, I’ve got you figured out, too.” He’s about to say something more when Jesus interrupts him.

“*A-hem.*” Jesus holds a forefinger in front of his lips. “What did I say about that before?”

The stranger’s face reddens, and he throws an annoyed look at Jesus. “Let *him* decide what is off limits.”

I dismiss the stranger’s threat. “Lord, let him swing at me if he wants. I can take it.”

The stranger looks to Jesus, who nods permission. The man forms a predatory smile as if savoring his next words. “I know all about you. But what about all these fine folks sitting here? Are you going to pretend you’ve changed?”

I look to Jesus. “Can he read my mind?”

“No, but he’s studied the sons of Adam since the beginning.”

“I see. Well, let me tell you somethin’, Devil. I didn’t know you existed in my past, never could’ve imagined it to be true. But as far back as I can remember, I now see your fingerprints over my life and my mother’s life. I lived in a suffocating black hole for years, and I know you made sure to deepen it with every opportunity. You darkened my eyes from all hope, drove me into despair every chance you got. And because of your influence, I added gray hairs to my mother’s head during my wild days.”

The stranger leans toward me, his eyes narrowing into slits and fixing on me. “Can you really blame me for...*everything*?”

“No.” I lower my head into my hands. “I know I can’t. I’m responsible for my choices.”

“Finally, something of substance from you. Shall we disclose some of the choices you made? Confession is good and all that.”

“What is he talking about?” Alyssia asks.

I hesitate. No one on this street knows about my past.

The stranger smacks the table, causing me to jump. “Answer, Frank!”

My insides feel hollowed out as I blurt out my words. “I hurt someone when I was younger.”

Alyssia’s voice is sympathetic. “What happened?”

“I drove to Chicago with friends when I was sowing my oats. While there, I drove drunk and collided with a car. The driver was a mother of three.”

The stranger leans toward me. “And?”

I swallow a lump in my throat. “She died.”

A smug grin shows on the stranger’s face. “Now, don’t you feel much better?” He scans the faces of those around the table. “How ‘bout the rest of you?” His eyes land on Toby.

Toby gets up from the picnic table and speed walks toward Jesus’ porch. I knew if I shared, he’d hate me, especially after what happened to his family. I go to get up to go after Toby, but Jesus raises a hand for me to stay put.

Bryan adjusts his cap before speaking, his voice calm. “We’ve all made mistakes, some huge, some less severe. Jesus isn’t here to make bad people good; he’s here to make dead people alive. It’s his power that changes us as we surrender to him.”

A sneer shows on the stranger’s face. “How’s that working out for you? The change and all?”

“God is working in me. I’m not as fast as others, but I’m getting there.”

“Excuses, excuses. To say God is working is another way of saying, ‘not so committed to God.’ Isn’t that correct, Jesus?”

Jesus faces the Devil, his jaw set. “Forward momentum is always welcomed. A garden infested for years with weeds takes work and lots of time before it can produce a harvest.”

“You are too soft, Jesus. No wonder your Kingdom is so fragmented.”

Alyssia breaks in. “Frank, Bryan. We’ve all—”

The stranger dismisses her words with a wave of his veiny hand. “Oh, you’re one to talk.”

Alyssia’s face hardens. “Wait, who do you think you are? I’ve been born again, entered Covenant with Jesus. You have no right to accuse me!”

“Blah, blah, blah.” The stranger waves off her words again. “Let’s just see how you are after the honeymoon period. What, praytell, will happen once he’s gone?” He points at Jesus. “And you, and you, and you?” He points at each one at the table. “Won’t last a month after my forces come for you!”

Theodora slams the table this time. “Hey, Devil. I’m not going anywhere. Alyssia and everyone at this table will be just fine because we will have each other to face your armies. You will not find easy victims!”

Despite the lady's words, I notice the atmosphere's changed, thick with dread as if watching a dying person's last moments. It reminds me of the days after I killed that poor woman when the darkness coiled around me. And how that same darkness intensified when I went to prison, driving me into hopelessness.

I direct my voice to everyone at the table. "Jesus, I fix my eyes on you, not this picnic crasher. Guys, stop listening to our 'guest'. We don't look backwards. And we don't pretend we've got everything sorted out. But we will look to Jesus from now on because we've experienced so much over the past week." I close my eyes and praise God inwardly, overwhelmed with gratefulness. "I know my poor choices cut short a woman's life so many years before. I paid the price in prison which changed my life trajectory. But then everything changed again when Jesus stepped into my house."

Hands grip my shoulders, and I glance up to see Toby, his eyes closed, his mouth praising God as well. I glance around the table, and all have now focused on God.

And then voices from all around us at the cookout join. People sit or stand with raised hands, eyes closed, mouths moving, speaking or singing praise to God. I even see Michael, Alyssia's son, over on the side with other children, their hands raised, their eyes squeezed shut, determined, focused faces worshipping God.

The stranger jumps up and pushes away from the table as if stung. "Stop it! How rude of you! All of you... *Stop!*"

I continue to worship, pleased our actions are making a difference. "Ignore him! Set your eyes on the Lord!"

The stranger's voice screams out, all impressions of a southern gentleman replaced by an enraged, rabid face. "God doesn't deserve worship."

I push up from the table and use Toby's shoulder to hoist myself onto the bench. I yell out to all the folks. "Let's keep our eyes on the Lord."

With significant effort, the stranger steps back toward the table. "I came to have a discussion, to be a mirror so you could see reality. Don't be deceived. You can still go back to your old lives and be happy. I'm not a killjoy! I give the choice of happiness."

I lift my voice even higher. "Worship the Lord." Patrick's nearby, his hands raised, one hand clutching a grill spatula. Mitch has collapsed to the ground in worship, his face buried in the

grass. Even Cahva stands with eyes shut, her focus clearly set on things above. And the Muslim family, apparently not Muslim any longer, stand with hands raised to the Lord.

A grunt escapes the stranger's mouth as he crumbles to the ground—and then my eyes open. He's a slithering, dark serpent with wings, and fangs protruding from his gaping mouth. Red eyes blaze in rage and consternation, but he has no power here.

I shout, seeking to end this visit from the enemy. "The Devil came to muddle up what is so clear and true. Our unified praise to the One has put him in his place."

Jesus stands and approaches the stranger, a told-you-so expression on his face. "I think it's time you left us. And the true mirror for my children is my Word, the Bible, in concert with my Spirit, *not* you!"

All our eyes watch the man writhe his way out to the road. Once there, he manages to climb to his feet before staggering off down the road like a drunk.

Alyssia stands akimbo, her eyes fixed on the stranger. "Is that the last we'll see him?"

Jesus returns to the table, resting a hand on her shoulder. "The short answer is a war exists. Until I return in full, the war will continue. But the victory is already established with my death and Resurrection."

A knowing look crosses her face. "Well, I think I've learned a valuable lesson here just now."

Jesus sits again. "What is that, daughter?"

"Praise is more than a song. It can be a weapon."

Jesus throws his head back in laughter. His laugh is so rich and full that it spreads to the rest of us, and we're all caught up in the moment. "Very good, Alyssia. A weapon of mass destruction to the enemy is praise and worship mixed with unified prayer from my people."

Without warning, Jesus reaches, resting his cupped hand on a spot on the table in front of Toby. As he lifts his hand, the butterfly, and half-a-dozen more besides, flutter up into the air. Everyone at the table's caught up in wonder as clapping erupts.

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*Cahva Ayustine, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*3:05 p.m.*

I'm mesmerized by today's events with the lady raised to life after being shot dead. Jesus, well, I know he is who he says he is. He's demonstrated that to me, and I've experienced a paradigm shift. Even looking at my house, the yard immaculate, half the house painted with the rest to be painted the next few days, fills me with warmth. I'd used my house as a refuge not realizing it had become a prison.

Frank throws me an easy-going smile. I look away, unsure if I want to have him in my life as more than a neighbor. I do admit I've met a new friend in him. But I heard the discussion at the table—you think you know people, but do you really? Then again, what about my own life? Few could fathom what my life was like before I came to America. Few could've imagined the things I've done to others in the name of rage, revenge, and war. No, I can't point a finger at Frank. In fact, maybe, just maybe, he'd understand me and my past...just like Jesus.

Jesus, seeing me step toward Frank, flashes a kind-hearted grin to me before nodding as if granting his approval. I wave him off with a smile.

"Hello, Mr. Bruno."

"Oh, you can call me Frank."

"Well, Frank...I just wanted to thank you for helping out in my yard yesterday. It looks amazing."

A softness appears in his eyes when he looks up at me. "My pleasure, Ms. Ayustine." Then, before I can say anything, he scoots over offering a space for me. "Care to sit for a while?"

I'm about to decline until the man named Patrick hands me, with an infectious smile, a paper plate with one of his delicious, tall hamburgers.

"Thank you."

He chuckles, nodding. "Happy to serve smiles."

I find myself liking him. In fact, I feel as if I like all the people on my street, now. And, to my surprise, Frank too. *I wonder.*

I sit down beside Frank.

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*Frank Bruno, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*3:25 p.m.*

After the visitor crawled outta here, things returned to some sort of normal. Delicious scents of cooked hamburger, hot dogs, charcoaled chicken fill the air. Lively discussions come from all directions.

Then, Jesus stands next to me. “Would you walk with me, Frank?”

“Sure, Lord. Patrick, save me a plate?”

“Okay, Frank.”

We walk toward the treeline. “That was impressive the way you led the people earlier. You demonstrated how to put the enemy in his place.”

“I was just sick of him ruining our last day with you, and a perfect cookout. And he reminded me of my father who only ever talked about what I didn’t do and how much of a failure I was.”

“You’ve come so far, Frank.”

I throw him a grin of appreciation. “*We*’ve come so far.”

Jesus fully smiles at that. “I’m glad you caught that. And that’s how you’ll overcome and succeed in the seasons ahead: you and me together.”

“I like that, Jesus.”

“My last question to you before we went to rescue Jarrett remains unanswered.”

“Remind me the question, Lord.”

“What would you like to do around here, if you could?”

Approaching a large log, Jesus sits down, and I follow suit. “I suppose I’d want to make sure Patrick has a home and a purpose, and that the homeless folks wouldn’t be forgotten. I’ve not forgotten what you showed me while I was sitting at the picnic table at the park—about the darkness oppressing our city. A war rages, and I want to do my part to combat that darkness.”

Jesus nods. “Indeed, Frank. There is a battle for the souls of humanity, to keep them from experiencing my freedom and becoming adopted children of my Father. But where there is apathy, and where the focus isn’t on me, darkness will always fester like an unchecked cancer.”

“I’m sold, Lord. If you want me to arm wrestle the Devil every day, I’m all yours.”

“You will, indeed. But always, you must wait each day for my strength and wisdom before facing our foe.”

I nod, understanding. He withdraws from his robe a long envelope and hands it to me. Funny, I never saw he had pockets.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

I hold the envelope in my hands, not wanting this moment to end. I let it dangle while I take in my surroundings. A gentle breeze brushes against us, causing an expansive web above us to sway. The sun’s golden beams cut through the canopy of trees all around us. I notice a look of anticipation fixed on Jesus’ face.

“I could just stay here with you like this forever.”

Jesus leans toward me. “This is how you will regain focus and strength, by spending time with me—even when I am not here physically.”

I nod before tearing open the envelope. Inside is an official-looking page. I’m reminded of another envelope when I learned my job for three decades would end. I unfold the letter.

“Official deed? To what?”

At my question, Jesus stands. “The farmhouse...*and* your house.”

“What?” My heart races at his words. “Farmhouse? My house?”

Jesus nods. “The former owner, Mr. Paul Barclay of Chicago, hasn’t been here in decades. But he was excited that his childhood home, his family home going back decades, would be used for my purposes and my Kingdom. Today, its ownership changes hands.”

“Mine?”

Jesus grins. “Ours.”

And for some strange reason, I can only think of Attack Cat, that I don’t have to worry about him. Life can go on for us together.

A smile appears on Jesus’ face. “Attack Cat will be happier around you, this I know.”

“Did he tell you that, Lord?”

Jesus reaches to my shoulder and squeezes, pleased at my reaction.

And I try to somehow understand this incredible turn of events. “I can’t believe this. Thanks so much.”

“So, what do you think you could do with two houses?”

“Well, your house—”

“Our house.”

“*Our* house—it’s big enough to be a halfway house for those who want to go clean and sober, to try to re-enter society, and for those who are just out of luck and need a helping hand. It could be a place where people are introduced to you.”

“Yes, and these woods?”

I search Jesus’ face to understand. “What?”

“All one hundred acres are included in this deed.”

“So, I can add to what’s already here. But what about the neighbors? They won’t like a house full of less than stellar individuals coming and going.”

“I have been working on all of this street, haven’t I? They will be more than happy to see people’s lives changed. And many of them will be instrumental in the work. Some, like Tahmid who will be a business owner, will give work opportunities for people to start fresh.”

“Ah, but I left the key to my house inside.”

Jesus groans light-heartedly. “Oh, ye of little faith!”

We stand up and walk back.

My mind’s racing now, trying to comprehend what’s just happened to me. “Maybe Patrick could be the home chef and live on the premises to oversee the work.”

“And Patrick will do more than cook. He will knock down barriers so many people come to me.”

“I remember what he did when we visited Daxen Street. What about Delante assisting us?”  
The back of Jesus’ farmhouse comes into view ahead of us.

“Delante and his friends will be an immense help to this work. But he will also be busy in the heart of the city, helping people get free from destructive lifestyles and escape the grips of crime and vice. I will establish a new gathering there, just as I have here.”

“I really like that.” I pause. “But how will a brick-and-mortar building with music and pews compete with pimps, drug dealers, and gangs? Won’t they be snuffed out?”

Jesus’ eyes drift over the gathered people in the front yard. “Let me show you what I see.”

Without warning, I see the people of God blazing with piercing light. I see angels moving about them, powerful, tall warriors with glistening swords as long as a man is tall. Along the perimeter, more of their kind face outward, their stance sure and immovable. Then, my eyes adjust, and I see the surrounding darkness—a black mass of shifting, evil creatures. Enraged, they scream and claw at the light, but are kept back and unable to move closer to inflict harm.



“These people reflect me because I dwell within each of them through the Holy Spirit. My Church is a powerful extension of me. And that is why it cannot fail. Yes, the enemy can attack, even inflict damage at times. But the war is already won.”

“The war? Oh, at the cross.”

“Very good, Frank. But also at the Resurrection, which confirmed my victory. Here, let me show you one more thing.”

A second later, someone stands up, Bible in hand, and begins reading. He speaks of abiding under the shadow of the Almighty. It’s Sebastian! And as he speaks over those gathered, I see the boundaries of the darkness being pushed back by unseen hands.

“Since Sebastian’s healing, wherever he goes, he shares the work I performed in him, both externally and internally.”

“Woah, this is crazy.” I’m stunned to see the power of His Word coupled with a man filled with conviction and the Holy Spirit. “Seeing this, it’s clear nothing can stop this church army.”

“When the darkness is driven back by my light through the Holy Spirit and my Word, even the most hardened criminal is then free to choose and follow me.”

“So, how come the world’s such a mess if this army exists and has such power?” My eyesight returns to normal with a blink.

Jesus lowers his head, his face looking all-too sad. “Because my people in this generation...many of them have succumbed to the darkness, which has caused them to become anemic and compromised.”

“Then why don’t you just stop the madness now, here?”

“Because of people like you. As I have fought for you, I fight for every soul, because they are of immeasurable value to the Father. Eternal separation from me *is* eternal.”

His face displays another wave of sadness. I dare to grip his shoulder, squeezing gently to somehow comfort him. For a split second, I sense the pressing burden on him. “I’ll help you, Lord. I’ll do what I can to reach the masses for you here in this place.”

“Thank you, Frank.”

“But why did you come here to our little city? Why not New York or Tokyo or Manila?”

“Who says I haven’t gone there?” The hint of a smile plays at his lips. “But indeed, I am there by my Spirit and my Church working to bring the walking dead into resurrection life. Even in places where it seems impossible.”

“One final question. Why did you come to *this* street, next to *my* house?”

“Because I heard you.”

“Huh?”

“As a young boy, you lived in a home saturated with darkness. You never had a day where you didn’t look at a clock, because you dreaded when your father would return from work. On one of those days, your father in a foul mood raged against you with his belt until your raised hands stung. I heard your cries more powerfully that day than a thousand pastors praying.”  
Saying this, his voice breaks.

Tears sting my eyes from the memory and from hearing Jesus’ reaction to that time in my life. I wasn’t expecting to find myself again in that closet, but there he is: my father’s looming bulk over me with an enraged face, my frail-bodied mother sobbing behind him unable to tame his attack.

Sobs grip my body, and I can’t stop them. I hide my face in my hands as an avalanche of grief becomes unhitched from my insides. I collapse into a heap on the grassy hillock in front of me.

Seconds later, I regather myself and look up into Jesus’ face. There’s patience, strength, and understanding there. He reaches and gently strokes the top of my head with his hand. The sun sits behind his head, and it’s like I’m seeing his face radiated with brilliant, white light.

“What was it I said in the closet? I don’t remember...”

“You spoke my name and cried for rescue. You’d watched an evangelist on your big box television days before, and hope was birthed in you that day.”

“And that...caused all of what’s happened here the last ten days?”

“Yes. After one of those broadcasts, you bowed your head, and you and I became acquainted.” Jesus lowers himself until his knee touches the ground; then he extends an arm around me. “And what came as a single seed in you was the result of prayer and fasting from the original family that lived in that there farmhouse over many generations. But it was your heartfelt cry that tipped the balances so action could begin!”

“Wow,” is all I can say to that. “But it took you over five decades to come?”

“My Father’s timing is vital for extractions from the darkness.” He points to his house, now mine. “But I like the challenge. And I like coming for the one lost sheep, especially when they’ve fallen into a place they cannot escape.”

I'm in awe. "Thanks. I've felt exactly that way the past three months. And I still can't put in words the feelings I have now."

We saunter toward the cookout, Sebastian's recitation of the Psalm resounding all around.

"I was wondering."

"Go on."

"If you were to peek into the future, would there be a future with Ms. Ayustine in my life, you know, as something more than just neighbors?"

Jesus looks away, a smile showing beneath his beard. When his eyes find mine, he reaches for me squeezing my shoulder. "I see only good things for you and your life, if you keep your eyes fixed on me, Ms. Ayustine or no Ms. Ayustine."

"So, it *is* possible?"

Jesus grins. "Trust me. The rest will happen naturally if you desire it."

"I think I want it to happen supernaturally. Would be a lot easier that way!" Jesus wallops me in my arm causing me to burst out laughing. I feel so good. I've never felt so alive! I'm excited what the future holds.

We survey the yard, the people conversing, everyone content. Children run about chasing each other. Plates full and half-empty litter the tables. Two watermelons have been carved until just remnants remain.

Returning to the table, a blond-haired boy rushes forward with a plate loaded with a heaped cheeseburger on a bun offering it to Jesus. Baked beans, creamy coleslaw, and potato salad makes up the rest of the plate. Jesus takes the plate with one hand and blesses the boy with the other.

As we approach our table, Patrick brings me a loaded paper plate, too. Jesus sits opposite me.

"Patrick?" I stop him before he can step away. "How would you like to live here permanently and help me continue the work of Jesus here?"

His eyes mist up followed by an overwhelming smile. "I'd be honored. There's so much to do, and I want to be part of it all."

I nod, slapping the side of his arm. "Can't wait to work alongside you, Patrick!"

As I finally get to bite into my hamburger, I reflect on my new life. I will have a great deal to do in my new role coordinating this work for the Lord. It would be exciting, intimidating, and life-affirming. I would need to keep my ear inclined to the Spirit—which would be good for me.

Already, I can picture Toby, Mitch, Bryan, Jarrett, Theodora, Alyssia and Delante, Tahmid and Tahira, all working in concert to carry out a great work for God.

An hour later, Jesus approaches all, embracing each one that has come, his face lit with joy and gladness at each person's company. He addresses us.

"The days are evil, and genuine love has been replaced by hatred, division, and lust. But I will not leave you as powerless orphans in this world. You will suffer trouble but take heart. I have overcome, and when my Spirit abides without measure in you, you will overcome every obstacle and fiery missile flung at you." Jesus breathes in deeply, a look of sadness on his face. "I cannot stay, for you must be allowed to mature in my absence. But know this: your reward will be great for all who obey my voice and do not cling to the world. You cannot mutually love the Father *and* the world. To love both is to be deceived. Leave a legacy by focusing your eyes on the Lord, by being daily led by the Holy Spirit, and daily fed by the Scriptures."

Jesus stands up and looks us over, the sun's rays streaming through the tops of the trees behind him and lighting upon him. "My children, root yourselves in the Scriptures, and the Spirit will root in you as you obey his leading. And to those who give all for King and Kingdom, your life in the world to come will know no bounds." He stretches out his hands to all of us. "Shalom be upon each of you today until we meet again face to face, my people."

No warning is given as a wall of white mist rushes past us from all sides accompanied with a gust of wind pressing our clothes against our bodies. Hats and a toupee fly off heads to the ground as a brilliant, white light blazes from behind Jesus and intensifies. People block their eyes trying desperately to see, but are finally forced to turn away. Looking back, he's gone.

We all stand there scratching our heads, looking at each other without seeing, and wondering how we'll ever live again without him with us.

I walk forward and bend over grabbing a hat and, seeing the owner, toss it to him. Then I look over the people, trying to gather my thoughts. I've not spoken to a mass of people before, but I'm driven by another Wind as I open my mouth to speak.

"We will miss him. But he is nearer to us than our breath so long as we dwell daily in the Spirit, beginning today, beginning now." I pull out the deed and unfold it, then hold it up for all to see. "I have here a deed that represents the work that will continue from Jesus' farmhouse. It will become a base for mighty works throughout the city and region."

All the people nod. Then I see my familiar friends kneeling and heads bowing; Toby and Mitch with his girlfriend; Delante holding Alyssia, Michael next to her; Theodora; Tahmid and Tahira with their two sons; Bryan with his girlfriend, tears streaming down her cheeks; and a renewed Jarrett. I don't see Cahva, until I feel a nudge from beside me. She looks up at me, a happy expression playing at her lips.

Without anyone taking the lead, we pray. Hands grasp hands until all are connected. People from all backgrounds, rich and poor, professional and laborer, raise a singular voice to God, in praise, in gratitude, and in joy. But there's also a burden pressing on us, something I detect in myself and see on the faces of my friends. It's a good burden, because Jesus who started the work did so by giving his life so long ago. How can we not do as much, to lay down our lives for him? My mind drifts back to my head resting against his shoulder on the porch swing overnight, swaying this way and that in the stillness, the storm shaking the heavens all around us. I'll miss Jesus as my neighbor, but I know now he lives in me through the Spirit.

A brief time later, sweetened lemon iced tea is poured as stillness claims the land. A cool breeze moves around us. The treeline echoes the trills of insects and frogs.

"There we go." Patrick sets down a transparent glass plate in front of me, covered by a white cloth.

"What?" A familiar, sweet scent hits my nose.

"You know already!"

"Wow!" I'm unable to stop from smiling. I can finally eat pecan pie with brown sugar and molasses covered by a golden-brown crust knowing that God is in control! I need not ever worry again! Well, at least not tonight on this perfect summer night.

"Enjoy!" Patrick grips my shoulder. "We have significant work ahead of us, don't we?"

I lock eyes with him. "Yes, but it's a good kind of work."

"One meal at a time, we'll point people to the love of God and what He's done for us."

"Yes, and we have a solid team of people who will do it with us."

Patrick looks down at me standing akimbo. "When should we start?"

I don't need to think before answering. "We continue from today!"

"I like that."

I take a bite of the pie, its rich sweetness and textured, moist crust exploding with taste. And I can't believe it. No more rent. Not even mortgage payments to worry about. *What an incredible gift, Lord!*

But then I remember my house key on the side table inside my locked house. Oh well, I'll sleep in the farmhouse tonight to fellowship with Patrick, and whoever else hangs out with us.

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*Tahira Akhand, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*3:58 p.m.*

I catch sight of my parents walking in our direction from the park. Our children stand in front of Tahmid and me, our arms around them. Tahmid's face displays an uncanny relief and joy that I can't recall seeing...since the births of our children. But I also detect a deep concern with the approach of my parents. How will they react when they learn we've chosen a new path and abandoned the religion of our heritage?

As they walk up, my father-in-law looks me in the eye before searching the faces of my family. His face is serious. "What has happened here?"

Tahmid does not blink but remains resolute. "I and my family have made a life-changing decision today." His voice is even, unhurried.

"Go on."

"We will follow Jesus according to the truth that is contained in the *Ingil*." The Gospel within the New Testament, and the balance of the Bible, would now be our holy book.

Father searches his face and then mine with a stonelike expression. Tahmid holds me firmly, our children watching our exchange. I say nothing but await his response. I expect fury.

"Fine." He says this as if admitting an eventuality that couldn't be disregarded. He looks to mom whose lips are a line of neutrality. But its then I notice an ever-slight look of admiration on her face. Father scans across the tables in the yard. He removes his hat and wipes the sweat from his brow. "It's not so hot today."

A young lady walks up offering two plates of watermelon to my parents. With reluctance, they take the plates and nod their thanks.

To my surprise, Father looks at Tahmid with the hint of a smile. “Have you decided on a name for my grandson?”

I realize then that our family will not fracture, though there would undoubtedly be incredible discussions around our dining table in the years ahead.

Tahmid glances at me, and I nod, eager to hear his thoughts. “I was thinking Sami.”

I wait to see the reaction from my parents. A strategic name, to say the least! Not only would this honor father, but it’d always be a gentle reminder of the time he’d debated Jesus in our home, and when Jesus revealed his supernatural knowledge about their long, lost child.

Father seems to take on board Tahmid’s answer, raising a single forefinger in the air. “I think that would be a wonderful name!”

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*Tahmid Akhand, at Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*4:01 p.m.*

I could never have imagined this change in my life, so absolute and so far-reaching. I know this will change everything about my life—specifically my relationship with my extended family. I consider how I will ever convince them of this Truth revealed to us. But then I sense movement within my heart and mind that I’ve never experienced before. It would be the Spirit within me coupled with the Word, the Bible, that would convince them. I would pray to be led in how and when to share.

I also feel an incredible joy that I can’t quite understand. I feel an intensity of love that I’ve never known before for my wife and children, and my desire to please the Creator at the forefront. Now, my goals will shift. I will live to please the One who not only listens, but who speaks.

I pull Tahira closer to me. She looks up at me before planting a kiss on my cheek, her dark eyes disarming me as always. And it pleases me that her parents have not rejected us.

Tahira’s parents seated at a table, I lead our family over to the man who I hear is a pastor.

“Hello?”

When he turns to look at me, I’m caught off guard by his friendliness. “Yes sir?”

“Could you tell us more about baptism?”

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*Jarrett Blackman, at Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*4:45 p.m.*

I’m ashamed about my unwise jaunt last night, but most of all, that I took advantage of Frank, not caring at all about his own plight, but only wanting my appetite fed. Yet, it was Frank who came with Jesus offering a hand and forgiveness. And I can’t remember where the wad of cash, the other half split with the older Garrells brother, went to after my first hit. Probably stolen when I was comatose.

I’ll never forget all the kindnesses of Jesus shown me the past week, but most of all, that he rescued me from not only a drug den but myself.

I step to Frank, still feeling wobbly from the last night’s aftereffects. “May I use your phone, Frank?”

“Sure, why?” He hands me the weathered cellphone which looks to be about a decade old.

“I have to do something.” *While I still have the courage to do it.*

“What?” Frank asks, a slight impatience in his voice.

“I stole from you. The police need to know about my involvement.”

Frank nods. “I suppose they do.”

I call the local police station. I remember the number because I’ve called them so many times in the past when I was too drunk and needed a ride home rather than drive. A woman operator answers. “Hello, how can we help?”

“I stole from my neighbor. And I want to confess and turn myself in.”

The person on the other end takes down my details and hangs up, promising to send a police officer to me within the hour.

Frank eyes me. “You’ve been in trouble before with the law?”



“Yes. Nothing too weighty, but enough times to be recognized by everyone in the courthouse many times over.”

“You served time before?”

“Yes, but not with Jesus living inside me.”

“And you trust Jesus no matter what happens?”

I nod. “I figure whatever happens to me, jail or not, my path will be in others’ hands, and therefore in God’s hands. And if God leads me to jail, what better way to fight the good fight against the darkness than to go where people behind bars don’t know Jesus?”

“Could be a good plan, Jarrett.”

“God’s plan, I hope.” Jarrett’s eyes shift to the porch where Toby and Mitch sit idly on the swing. “I think the older brother won’t like me doing this. But I just felt like I needed to.”

“It’ll be the first time Mitch faces a judge. And the inevitable job loss will hurt. But he should get off lightly. And whatever happens to their house, the Lord will help them adjust.”

I extend a hand to Frank, which he shakes. “I’m sorry again for what I did to you, Frank.”

“All’s forgiven, Jarrett. And what you’re doing right now is commendable, and brave.”

“Thanks. Please get Patrick to send pancakes in a care package wherever they put me?”

Frank smiles at that. “I will.”

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*Delante Thomas, at Jesus’ Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*4:55 p.m.*

I wrap my arms around Alyssia and Michael, still shocked at the events that just took place. How close I’d come to being an accomplice to Jesus being victimized a second time in history! I can’t imagine my end result if things had turned out differently, and Jesus *had* been harmed. But despite my hatred and weaponized plan to harm and discredit him, he didn’t despise me or throw me aside. In fact, he kept reaching for me without giving up, despite knowing how far from him I’d gone.

I scan the faces of the guys, each of them having partnered with me to commit crime and hurt people. Even as they sit at the tables eating the fine BBQ, their eyes occasionally land on me.

I'm not sure why it is, but it's as if they're expecting me to stand them up and usher them into their new lives. And I'm glad I might be able to do that. Actually, I'm glad I can do anything for the Lord after the life I've lived the past years.

I draw Alyssia closer to me and whisper in her ear. "How about four months from today we make our life together...permanent?"

She looks up at me, but her face isn't the face I'd been expecting. She's glaring at me. "Are you serious? Is that what you call a proposal?" She looks me over. I'm relieved when I see the hint of a smile.

I plant a kiss on her forehead. "You haven't seen anything yet, my lady." Warmth nestles within me. And I find myself praying. *Lead me, God, so I can have a life that pleases you. Amen!*

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*Toby Garrett, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*5:07 p.m.*

Jarrett ambles to us, hands in pockets. "Hey guys."

"Hey." I remain approachable, though I'm disappointed with Jarrett's actions last night. Mitch stays silent, throwing him a nod. Shelly just went home after everything she's learned about Mitch. He doesn't know if she'll give him a second chance.

Jarrett clears his throat and speaks, his voice apologetic. He fixes his eyes on Mitch. "I had to turn myself in, and when they asked me about anyone else involved, I had to give your name."

And with those words, I realize our lives are about to change in a huge way.

"Sorry." Head lowered, Jarrett walks off.

We sit there silent for a few seconds till Mitch speaks. "I'm sorry about everything. I made stupid choices. Toby, I'm not proud that I've put you in this situation."

I push away the anger rumbling inside me. "I trusted Jesus before I learned about you, and I trust him now, whatever happens." I can't keep the edge out of my voice, and I'm unable to look Mitch in the eye.

He rests a hand on my shoulder. "T-Toby?" He speaks my name almost in a whisper.

I can't not look at him. His chiseled jaw trembles, and tears stream down his cheeks, his face reddening. He looks away, embarrassed. And its then that I see the handiwork of God having steered an independent Mitch to this moment when he'd be broken and need God.

"I-I miss mom and dad." His voice breaks. And its then I recall he'd never cried for our family lost, not at the funeral, nor since that day we learned about the tragedy.

Tears well up seeing him like this, melting my heart. I don't say anything, just embrace him. We cry together.

He takes a deep breath, relief displayed on his face. "Whatever happens, I know my life's taken a huge detour."

"We'll handle it together. And if we can't keep the house, then we'll trust him where he takes us."

"I'm scared about the future."

"Don't worry. His strength will help you get through what's in front of you."

"I like that." His voice, though, lacks conviction.

"Or I could come bail you out with the money Frank gave us."

"Toby, keep that envelope safe. We'll pray about how to use it."

I nod, understanding. "And if you call me on the third day begging me to come bail you out?"

"Remind me of now when I was brave. That money's for the house, not for me."

"Let's pray together." We bow our heads. "Jesus, you coming here changed everything. And may our coming into others' lives in the days ahead also change everything for them. Fill us. Lead us. And use us for your Kingdom."

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*Frank Bruno, at Jesus' Home, 30 Summit Avenue*

*5:14 p.m.*

I watch Toby praying for his brother on the porch. I know the police are coming but feel a peace about the situation. God is in control!

I take a bite of the delicious pie just as something furry nudges against my leg accompanied with a series of meows. Looking down, Attack Cat locks eyes with me with his stark, blue eyes, his white-gray tail raised high.

“Buddy!” I reach down and stroke the top of his head. He presses his head into my hands before walking forward as if on tip-toes, pressing his furry side against me. An unfamiliar tingling comes from Attack Cat’s collar—and then the gleam of something dangling catches my eye.

“My house key? Lord, you told me not to worry.”

I pat the empty chair beside me, and Attack Cat springs up onto it before forming a circle and plopping down, his attentive eyes and soft meows beseeching me to stroke him. “Love you, Attack Cat.” I run my fingers across his head and back.

I look out across the yard and catch a glimpse of Cahva talking to Tahira.

“Cahva?” I yell out with a polite smile.

She catches my eye. I notice a subtle, pleased grin.

“You’ve got to come try this incredible pie!”

## Epilogue: The Visitors

*Frank Bruno, 30 Summit Avenue*

*Years Later – 3:48 p.m.*

Alex sits attentive at the table. Delante and Alyssia had asked me to look after his seven-year-old son so they could go out with a team to do street evangelism—their third time this week. Many are coming to Jesus.

“So, what happened next?” Alex tilts his head inquisitively.

“Well, Moses led the people to the Jordan River. Then he climbed a mountain and looked across the Promised Land given to the People forty years before.” I’d been retelling the story of Moses to Alex for the past few days. I did my best to tell the story as if I’d been there myself, which made it a bit more exciting to a young mind.

“And then?”

“Then, Moses waited till it was his time to die.”

“But he went with the People into the Promised Land, right?”

“Unfortunately not, because he’d disobeyed the Lord.”

As I spoke, a flicker of concern crept across Alex’s face. “He wasn’t allowed to go into the Land?”

I hear the distress in the boy’s voice. “Instead of speaking to the rock as God had commanded, he’d struck the rock.”

The corners of Alex’s mouth twitches, and tears build in his eyes. “Why?” This display of emotion surprises me; I’d not expected it.

I reach over, resting my hand on his shoulder. “Because we must always obey the Lord, even in the small things.”

Alex folds his arms in front of him on the table and buries his face in his arms, and begins to quietly cry. Attack Cat springs from his cat bed on the floor from the edge of the room, brushing against the boy’s leg, which draws the boy’s eyes. Then the cat jumps up into his lap as if to comfort him.

Just then, the oven beeper sounds. I raise my hands to the boy to reassure him. “Wait just a minute, Alex. Be right back.” Alex pets Attack Cat.

I remove one of three hot pies from the oven. Our homeless friends would fill up the seats around the table for dinner, and would be thrilled to have hot apple pie and vanilla ice cream for dessert. I’m about to set the first on a wire rack when several raps thud against the front door of the farmhouse—not knocks from knuckles but from an object tapping against the door.

I crane my neck around the corner and look past Alex. “Patrick? Are you free? Can you check who it is? My hands are kinda full right now.”

A series of raps come again. With a sigh, I put the pie down and go to see who it is. Opening the door, two older gentlemen stand, their mother-of-pearl attire at once reminding me of the attire Jesus wore when he visited us years before. Each wears a smile behind long beards which reach down to black cords fastened around their waists. Their faces, though, are not aged, but show vitality. Golden shawls cover their heads with long, twisting white and blue tassels at the corners at chest level. Both hold a long wooden staff with distinct, intricate carvings. I surmise the man in front of me used his staff to tap the door.

The man in front speaks up with a friendly smile. “Hello, Mr. Frank Bruno! And how is your wife, Cahva?”

“We are good, thank you.” I’m still wondering who these men are, and how they know my name. ZZ Top springs to mind. Patrick comes downstairs and stands behind me. Alex stands in front of me while looking up at these strange visitors.

The man nods, pleased. “We have heard good things about you and Patrick from the King. I am Moses.” As he says this, he lowers his gaze to Alex. The boy’s face takes on a sheepish look, but full of focus and awe. A smile plays at Moses’ lips, which draws out a smile from Alex.

Moses gestures behind him. “And this here is my friend and brother, Elijah. We have come to stay with you for a time.”

I’m taken aback by this event. Can these two men really be the Witnesses of Revelation?

Moses lowers himself to the boy, surprisingly agile for his age. “And I will now enter the Promised Land by God’s sanction when I go up to Jerusalem.”

“What is sanction?” Alex asks, curious. He looks up to me searching my face for an answer.

Before I can answer, a bright smile pushes out Moses' beard. He speaks, his voice strong and vibrant. "The Eternal King has given us a mighty task. He has sent us to turn many from the errors of their ways, and to fulfil the Scriptures."

I'm awestruck at the significance of this moment. "Welcome, friends."

The two men step inside and into the living room. Elijah grins, pleased. "Thank you for having us."

Moses locks eyes with my ministry partner. "Patrick, the King spoke highly of you."

"Is that so?" He erupts with smiles at that. "Are you really *the* Moses and *the* Elijah?"

They nod, their eyes bursting with joy. Their steady gaze seems to hold the weight of wisdom, a spark reflecting knowledge, experience, and self-awareness.

Patrick reflects that sentiment. "Dear sirs, might you be hungry?"

Moses' smile reaches his eyes. "We have been told your hamburgers are incredible!"

Patrick fiddles with his curly beard, stark orange-red against his white t-shirt. "Would you like to have a taste?"

Elijah brightens at the prospect. "Thank you, Patrick! Sounds wonderful." Then the man faces me. "Frank?"

"Yes?"

His eyes blaze, full of conviction and authority. He speaks, his voice gentle but firm. "Jesus sends his love to all of you. He is pleased with you and your wife's work here that has pushed back against the darkness in powerful ways in this region. He beckons you both, and Patrick, to hold firm in him until the end. Those who trust and hope in the Lord will never be disappointed. They will do exploits for him!"

I can't stop grinning at the message from Jesus. "Amen! I plan to do exactly that until I see Jesus again, Elijah!"

At that, we all sit down at the table, the same table Jesus had at one time leaned against and ate from. My life had changed with but a knock. And now, what adventures might the future hold?

Thank you for reading my novel!

I hope it has blessed you!

If you've enjoyed this book,  
could you take a moment to rate  
or review (one line is fine) the book?

Scan the QR Code with your phone  
which will take you to the Amazon page  
for this novel,  
“The Day Jesus Moved Next Door.”



Reviews are like gold to independent authors.



## From the Author

Dear reader,

I was influenced in a major way by the classic novel, *Joshua*, by Joseph F. Girzone. That beloved book captured the humanity and wonder of Christ visiting a small town in our modern age. And in no way do I believe this book equates its magnificence. However, I always felt there might be another facet to that story worth exploring. In my novel, I wanted to delve into the supernatural by displaying the spiritual war that I believe takes place around us, and to present Jesus as one who is unapologetically the Son of God working in concert with the Holy Spirit within that war. In this story, Jesus moves into an old farmhouse on 30 Summit Avenue.

I don't believe, theologically, that Jesus moves into houses in our cities and towns. (Though He does often reveal Himself through dreams, visions, & other supernatural encounters.) I do believe, however, that the Holy Spirit lives within each of us who follow Christ. And with His empowerment and leading, we can, like Jesus in this novel, make a difference in our neighborhoods and cultures to present Christ's love and salvation to those in darkness.

What would happen to our neighborhoods if one thousand followers of Christ surrendered to the Holy Spirit and lived out life as led by Him? What if one million did this? What if ten million did this? What acts of kindness and "paying it forward" moments would happen, and how many people, as a result, would awaken to the light and love of Christ and His Salvation?

I have presented this story also in light of my belief that Jesus desires to immerse us in the Holy Spirit in order to be greater witnesses for Him, and so we would have a greater love for His Word, His Great Commission mandate, and those within our church fellowships. God doesn't automatically empower us; we must ask and seek Him. Indeed, we must be immersed in His Holy Spirit daily. He will always match our hunger.

I pray that as you've read this book, you've been moved emotionally, practically, and spiritually. The Lord Jesus was a friend to sinners. And He remains a friend to sinners today. If you feel like you are alone and fighting darkness, call out to Jesus who still visits Homes, or jails, or hospital rooms, or the one reading this book on a plane. Ask forgiveness for your sin, and then put your trust in Jesus and His Finished Work at the Cross. He will take you, dead in your trespasses, and raise you to New Life. You'll be adopted as God's child. Life after that becomes an adventure as you live in concert with the Holy Spirit and His Word, the Bible.

Feel free to write me at [Shilohsrising@gmail.com](mailto:Shilohsrising@gmail.com) if you need spiritual help or have spiritual questions. Or visit my website, [www.seanelliotrussell.com](http://www.seanelliotrussell.com).

I am, in the LORD, yours,

Sean Elliot Russell