

THE JESUS BOY

by

Sean Elliot Russell

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Any reference in this novel to "The Book" is a reference to *The Holy Bible*.

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**“The Jesus Boys: Ruins & Hives”
(Book Two of the Lightbearer Series)**

Coming soon!

Praise for “The Jesus Boy”:

“This is a novel that you don’t forget in a hurry and 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). This novel does not just entertain greatly, but it challenges you in your faith, your relationship with God, and stimulates a desire to know Him better and in a deeper way.” **Peter Younghusband, Perspective by Peter**

“Satisfied me deeply... Rarely do we find a book this well done with such spiritual strength.” **David Bergsland, RadiqX Press**

“...a moving and delightful story.” **Steve Pillinger, Author of the Mindruler Series.**

“Loved this book. It challenged me and excited me.” **G. Mather**

“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, Amazon**

“...a gripping tale...” **C. S. Wachter, Author of the Words of Oschen Series**

“...an exceptional book, filled with interesting characters that you end up caring about, a storyline that took me from fear to tears to laughter...” **Glen Robinson, Author of The Champion Series.**

“...brought tears to my eyes...” **Kathryn F. Comunale**

“This book was delicious! It reminded me of ‘This Present Darkness’ by Frank Peretti only more expansive in knowing God personally.” **Marie Taylor**

“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 and kept my interest.” **TrulyJen**

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Author's Post Script:

Books Published by Sean Elliot Russell

Coming Soon

Dedication

With all my heart, I dedicate this novel to my friend and brother in Christ, Von “Superr Von” Borilla, a man whose life and actions are like those of the Joshua Phillips character in “The Jesus Boy.”

Owner and coach of UFK Martial Arts in Vancouver, Canada, Von often goes out onto the streets ministering the love of Jesus—giving food and blankets, praying for the sick (and seeing results!), and ministering the Good News to people who sometimes have little or no hope. He’s a friend to all he meets!

It’s this kind of service and heart-position to the King that will draw down the Kingdom of God upon the earth into people’s lives.

Acknowledgments

I’d want to thank two friends whose feedback helped improve the novel:

Chris S. Wachter and Steve Pillinger.

Your edit suggestions and overall input have made a huge difference in making this novel the best it can be! From the depths of my heart, I thank you both!

Chris has authored many novels including **The Seven Words Series**: “Sorcerer’s Bane”, “The Light Arises”, “The Deceit of Darkness”, and “The Light Unbound”.

Steve has authored the amazing **Mindrulers Series**:
“The Mindruler”, “The Restorers”, and “The Strongholder”.

Chris and Steve are both talented writers with incredible imaginations!
If you’re looking for adventure, fantasy, memorable characters, told with a redemptive arc and Christian-world view, check out these writers’ works. You will not be disappointed!

Part One | Seedlings

**“a young plant, one raised from seed
and not from a cutting”**

Prologue One | The Four

Three Years Before

The darkness clawed and slithered and seeped into the landscape, the very cellular levels of Sterling City's brick and wood and steel and parks being saturated with a residue that weighed people down, that stripped them of delight, hope, and purpose. People stopped seeing each other—instead walking by with barely a nod given. Neighbors neglected to introduce themselves or look out for each other. Churches, plenty of them, seemed as cold and indifferent as the world around them. Love was talked about. But few knew how to wield its powers to change lives or communities or nations.

Then the darkness saw in the distance a flash of light like a great hill set ablaze. Four persons, their piercing light as mesmerizing as it was torturing to the dark ones, merged their Faith. They reflected the One's light and took His burden as their own.

The light expanded like a wildfire in a dry wheat field.

The dark ones, compelled to unify due to the threat from the Four, circled like vultures positioned to extinguish the fiery light at first opportunity. They craved a feast. As they drew near to smother the Four, they were stopped and repulsed by a wall of light.

So, they withdrew, focused their plans elsewhere, though they never ceased to test the light's outer limits for weakness to reduce its effect. They knew these Four, no matter how determined or pious, would be prone to falter—and when they did, the dark one's onslaught would snuff out the light and drench the land in darkness again.

Prologue Two | The Weight of a Mountain

Present Day

It began in a small house on the edge of a small neighborhood in Sterling City, Iowa. One walking by that house on that night would never have imagined what was about to take place within its walls.

It was a night like so many.

It happened not in the father's bedroom or den. It wasn't a mother reclining in her favorite chair. It was a typical teenage boy who extended his tongue to the offering of sweet honey. And as the gift tingled upon his tongue, it sat there, the sweetness enticing, marvelous, and dangerous.

Joshua Phillips slammed the Book shut in both hands, the words he'd just read reverberating within him, probing inside his heart and mind, revealing for him his insecurities, his failures, his joys, and his most ardent desires.

A struggle ensued. A war of decisions and fears and ultimate joy mired together, all started with two words spoken by the Master: "Follow Me." Those words though spoken so many centuries before, whispered to him with a loudness that made his body tremble in anticipation of what they would mean for him, for his life, for those around him. Finally, he conceded, a triumph found only in surrender.

Then came wave after wave of liberty coursing through him, of life streaming through every atomic particle of his being. The weight of a mountain came and rested upon the young man's shoulders and chest, pressing down upon him with an unspoken burden while lifting him to heights he'd never known before. The gentleness of the Unseen touched the vessel and flooded his inner being.

But even as the boy rejoiced, there came also a sense of foreboding. The days ahead would be treacherous—the path uneven and strewn with hazards. Joshua nodded to himself even as the joy washed over him once more like a wave of warm, foamy ocean water. He would do all that was necessary to fulfill the Will not his own—even if it meant his very life.

With that, he approached and closed his door. Others in the house might've heard the door close not sensing its importance, not hearing the significance of the many boundaries about to be crossed beginning with a single step and a single moment of absolute surrender.

The lad fell to his knees and prayed.

Almost beyond human perception, just outside that room, as if a darkened crow fluttering against the window, a creature lingered—its red eyes fixed on the goings-on in the room. It rose and fell, shifting backward and forward like a dragonfly. More of its kind appeared, all drawn to the life within.

They hungered for a feast.

The One standing over the boy turned toward them, His face like a huge beaming searchlight. As His gaze met theirs, they shrieked and scampered away to a safe distance—hovering back and forth as if awaiting a more opportune time.

A cold draft passed through the seams of the window. Joshua glanced toward the darkened glass—as if seeing something. He expected to see a ghoulish face looking in—or quick hands reaching to grab him. Fear threatened to flood over him; but he did not allow it. He turned his face away from the window, his

inner gaze returning to the insulation and warmth of the One Who surrounded him. Whatever would happen to him in the days and weeks and months ahead, he knew his source of security would always be hiding in Him.

Content, he rested his chin on his chest as a new wave of joy flooded his heart and mind.

One | Back to Earth

On the morning of August 22nd, Joshua Phillips stepped out of his bedroom and made his way downstairs to the living room before quietly stepping into the kitchen. His parents talked at the dining table and had not noticed him enter the room. Scents of toast, scrambled eggs, and percolating coffee tugged at Joshua; he was hungry.

He couldn't describe very well what had happened to him during the past twenty-one days. A passion had driven him—to touch the Untouchable, fueled by more than just emotion but by words spoken by the Master millennia ago.

"Follow Me," He'd said to a tax collector, words that had latched onto Joshua. A churchgoer for as long as he could remember, he understood the Scriptures and knew the Christian lingo. But when he'd read those words by the Master, he'd stopped reading. An echo stirred up within him. The ramifications of those two words loomed, not allowing rest for the next days. And in that wrestling of divine and disciple, Joshua had experienced the Lord take hold of him with a tender hand and lovingly refuse to let go.

At the end of those days had come a change within him on his outlook and his interactions with the world at large. It'd been like wandering an unfamiliar and barren land covered with a thick haze before bursting through a misty wall into the brightness of wonders that had always been within reach, always there for the offering, always freely available—yet which Joshua sensed required incredible cost.

In the place of this concern had been birthed a sweetness, peace, and joy that Joshua had never thought possible. His family noticed the effect on him but remained puzzled and concerned.

From the beginning of his quest, Joshua had understood that people, including his parents, might be shocked and perhaps worried about his actions. He'd decided at the beginning not to let worries about what people thought concern him; there was only the One to please.

The family Border Collie, Bailey, stepped over to him, reared upward extending his white paws which Joshua held in his hands. He bent over, hugging and rubbing his childhood dog. Rust-brown colored except for white on his chest, snout and one ear, the dog arched his back in a morning stretch. Satisfied, Bailey returned to his bedding and plopped down—his eyes fastened on the activities at the table.

When Joshua's mom noticed him, her eyes enlarged as if seeing a ghost.

Mom, Joan Phillips, had thought the whole saga regarding Joshua strange, and something to be observed. As long as she could remember, her family attended church each week. But to lock oneself away from everything—*everything*—seemed extreme, especially during the summer months. Perhaps the most troubling to Joan had been the skipped meals and the complete isolation. It just wasn't normal.

When, during that three-week period she and her husband entered his room to check on him, Joshua would push away his blond hair overlapping his eyes before looking up at them with a carefree, undisturbed face. He always grinned, his eyes gleaming and conviction lighting his countenance. To his parent's relief, there were no signs of disconnection from reality, nor a spirituality that seemed otherworldly. He just sat there, reading that Book, speaking to the Unseen.

That morning, she'd set the table for five not expecting to see her next to youngest son walk through the doorway. At the sight of his lanky frame standing there, her mouth dropped an inch. His blue-green eyes twinkled, half-hidden beneath dangling blond strands, his look calm and assured.

She'd been listening to her husband, Dennis, tell her about an employee who'd been let go the previous day for being under the influence of drugs while at work. He'd stopped mid-sentence when he saw his wife's eyes fix on something behind his right shoulder.

"What?" Dennis lowered his paper and glanced behind him. "Hey, Joshua." Dennis, too, was surprised to see him, subtle relief heard in his voice.

Relief fluttered through Joan seeing her son rejoin the family routine after so long. Despite the longevity of his actions, no harm had come. Unspoken within her, she hoped Joshua would get through this phase and return to normality.

His dad, Dennis Phillips, rumbled a chair away from the table beside him. "Son, sit down."

"Thanks." Joshua sat down, placing his hands in front of him on the table.

His mom retrieved a plate from the cupboard. "Well, I didn't expect you to join us for breakfast this morning." She rested her hand on his shoulder. "How would you like your eggs, Joshua?"

"Scrambled. Thanks, Mom."

In her upper-thirties, his mom kept a youthful beauty and always-pleasant disposition. Oval-faced with high, wide cheekbones and blue-gray eyes, she wore minimal make-up on her milky-white skin. Her light brown hair, tied to the rear, indicated she was ready to usher her family into the new day. She kept an industrious and inexhaustible reserve to keep her household moving in the right direction. Without apology, she shepherded the kids with assigned chores and enforced the routines of home life. She remained fair, a smile never far from her lips.

"You're welcome." She stopped as if catching her breath and fixed her gaze on Joshua. "Everything okay?"

"Yep!" Joshua pulled his hands to his lap. When his mom didn't stop looking at him, he couldn't help but to grin and lift his hands. "What, Mom?"

"We know you've been on a journey of sorts, lately. What do you feel you've learned? What has it accomplished for your life?" Turning from him, she emptied yellow egg mixture into a heated frying pan. It hissed and spat, filling the room with the aroma of fresh eggs cooking.

"Obedience, and that He's my sole comfort and reward."

"Oh." She replied in a plain voice as if that had been the obvious answer. She worked the eggs sizzling in front of her. "Obedience?" There was curiosity in her voice.

"I'm not sure how to put it. I guess I've learned how to listen to Him."

His dad interrupted, concern in his voice. "'Listen'? So, you...I mean, He *speaks* to you?"

"Yes."

He watched his dad comb his gold-blond beard with his thick, work-worn fingers. A tall man with broad shoulders, he wore his cleanly pressed, blue work uniform with scripted stark black letters on a white backdrop, *Sterling City Auto Repair*. His father could appear ominous if he didn't allow his quick smile to reach his blue eyes. Recently, Joshua had heard his father groaning about the Big 40 nearing.

His dad continued his queries. "And He's now your sole comfort and reward?"

"When I fasted meals and pushed away distractions, I guess I was forced to run to Him for comfort and strength. He became my sole reward—not food, entertainment, or anything else."

His dad let the paper flap down onto the table. "I see. Remind me to remind you about that the next time you need extra allowance, okay?"

Joshua caught the half-smile playing at his father's mouth, but decided, with a grin, against committing himself to his idea.

A moment later, his mom set the plate in front of him loaded with scrambled eggs, home-made hash browns, and two slices of buttered toast. She stood over her son for a moment before turning without another word to continue her tasks. Joshua picked up his fork to eat, the enticing aroma rising from his plate.

His dad continued the interrogation. "But what do you mean, He *speaks* to you?"

Joshua chewed and swallowed his food. "I've prayed to be tuned to His voice. That's the only way to properly follow Him."

"Hmmm." A puzzled, thoughtful expression crossed his father's face. "Him leading you to half-starve yourself—are you sure that was His voice?"

"Don't worry, Dad. He's safe."

His dad scratched his full head of straw-colored hair. "So, it took you twenty-one days for Jesus to come into your heart?"

"No, Dad. It took that long for me to enter *His* heart."

An eyebrow shot up on his dad's face before he returned his gaze to the newspaper in his hands.

Just then, Joshua's older brothers, Kris and Bruce, descended the spiral metal staircase at the opposite end of the kitchen. Both tall and good looking, they fastened their eyes on Joshua. Their faces displayed curiosity and surprise at seeing him. They, too, had given him strange looks regarding his peculiar behavior over the past weeks.

"You guys wanna play basketball later?" Joshua asked.

They sat at the table as they poured juice into glasses and awaited the new batch of toast and scrambled eggs being cooked. The two, aged sixteen and seventeen, both prone to smiling or laughing with little effort, gave each other sustained looks. The younger, Bruce, grinned. "So, you've finally returned to planet earth?"

Joshua tried to keep from smiling, but it was too difficult. "Yeah, I'm back."

Both amused, Bruce and Kris shared a laugh. Bruce continued. "Okay, but don't expect the Lord to bail you out when we pulverize you."

Joshua looked at his mom. "What about Sammy? I could use his help. He isn't up yet?"

His mom wiped the counter. "He's not feeling well this morning. You boys work up an appetite. Later this afternoon, we'll do a BBQ after your father comes back from a half-day at work."

An hour later, Joshua played hoops showing his skills against aggressive and skilled brothers who tested his mettle in every way. But even as he laughed and played hard, there was a fresh look to the world around him. It was as if a new dimension had attached itself to everything he looked upon—more to it than what his senses could glean—of this he was certain.

At that moment, a week before the start of school, Joshua acknowledged there was only the immediacy of the present moment before him. There were no thoughts of school approaching, or girls, or even what they'd do the next day.

Still, Joshua recognized his worldview shift that had come over the previous weeks. The echo sounded from the One whose touch and majesty flowed everywhere in time and space. He now heard the One calling for those who had been separated from Him. It was a heart that would not relent and would not rest until every one of the lost heard His Call. Joshua had discovered this during the last twenty-one days. At that moment more than any other, Joshua realized his purpose and mission for the days in front of him would be to give his will wholeheartedly to the One, whatever the cost to himself.

Two | The Mystery of Lydia

Lydia Claremont rushed through the crowded hallway trying to squeeze between her co-students, her mind scrambling to remember the room number of her next class period. Only a few more minutes to go before she'd be late. Having forgotten her schedule at home, she'd been forced to recall where she was supposed to go. With a sigh of relief, she recognized classmates entering a room which would be where she'd spend the next eighty minutes.

It was just before lunch, a time that made her glad that the day was halfway over, but also gloomy because she still had to wait a whole period before she'd get something to eat and chat with friends. Not that she allowed class to stop her from socializing. At times, she caused her teachers to border on disciplinary action against her because she liked to talk at her own convenience. It wasn't because she lacked self-control. Her mom had once described her as strong-willed to a neighbor—a description she had always thought true about herself. She did the things she wanted because she wanted to, even if it meant displeasing people around her—teachers included. And while her adult instructors usually had their way with her eventually when it came to her behavior, she reveled in displaying an ever-present resistance to those in authority.

Her friends were many, though she could take them or leave them. She knew how to influence people toward her way of thinking, often with but the flash of a smile. She also knew how to set people at ease, which went a long way in influencing others.

She moved past the students gathered in front of the entrance before making her way to her desk, which was positioned in row three, seat four—in the middle of the class. As she sat, she glanced toward the seat two rows over on her right. Therein sat a sandy blond-haired boy who had interested Lydia on day one and day two. Her first impression of him had been that he wasn't that good looking, but little by little during those three days, and seeing him in another of her classes, she'd noticed his blue-green eyes and the friendly smile that touched his lips whenever he talked with classmates. Though quiet for her tastes, other traits about him had grabbed her attention, including a strange purity and a dreamy quality that characterized his actions and the way he conducted himself. It was as if he listened to music with earphones; yet, there were no earphones or music. A strange disposition surrounded him, but not in a bad way.

"Hey Joshua," she said loud enough for him to hear. She'd not introduced herself to him, though he'd observed her in another class they shared.

For a fleeting second, two red patches radiated on his cheeks. "Hi Lydia. How's everything?" His voice was unrushed and calm.

Lydia heard the bell ring followed by the hurried march of the ultra-thin but tall science teacher, Mr. Opal, into the room.

"Good morning, class," he boomed in a louder-than-needed voice. The class gave a superficial reply, which the teacher challenged. "*I said, 'Good morning.'*" The class echoed a forced, louder reply, "Good morning."

Lydia leaned over toward Joshua, the student in between leaning back. "What do you like to do for fun?"

An unsure expression appeared on Joshua's face. It was obvious he was warring between speaking to her at that moment or waiting for a time when he wouldn't get in trouble with Mr. Opal. To her satisfaction, he leaned toward her and dared to voice a reply. Just then, the teacher's voice resonated over their heads.

“Mr. Phillips!”

Joshua looked up startled and equally embarrassed. “Yes?”

“Save it for another time. We’ve a science class to conduct.”

Looking awkward at being caught, Joshua nodded while glancing at Lydia.

Though brief, Lydia had enjoyed the scene. For a moment, it seemed as if the boy had snapped out of a light trance, as if the confusion and the prospect of breaking Mr. Opal’s rules had pierced his cozy bubble. It was strangely attractive to see Joshua in that state. She already sensed she liked him, though she couldn’t decide why—or to what end such a relationship might lead. He had thrown her furtive glances the past three days, glances that Lydia recognized as his interest in her. Every so often during class, she’d see him look her way as if studying or admiring her. Sometimes she’d act like she didn’t notice, but other times, she’d turn to him on purpose, just to see his reaction. His cheeks would blush coupled with the hint of a smile. She grinned at his reactions.

Despite the attraction, there seemed a vast gulf of difference between them—something Lydia had not identified until that very day. She’d asked a friend about Joshua if she’d heard any tidbits of information about him. The words that came from her friend’s lips had given her the information she needed: Joshua Phillips was a Christian. That, she thought, was all the reason to get to know him. Perhaps with some leading, some convincing, and a little open-mindedness from him, she would show him just what he was, and what he could be if only he’d leave behind his naïve faith. Then, perhaps, the gulf of differences would disappear. And if not, she’d have her way with him, regardless.

Three | Uncharted Territory

The fourth day of school, Joshua ran to get to his next-to-the-last class when he whizzed by a student whose form was twisted and unnaturally contorted within a wheelchair. He didn't know the student, but as he overtook him, the heaviness of a burden pressed down upon Joshua.

Reach out and touch him.

Joshua stopped. The wrestling within him was fleeting as he turned and walked back toward his classmate who wheeled along.

"Hello," Joshua said, his lips curving upward, a slight tremor in his voice. "May I speak to you for a second?"

The student's downturned hand released the forward shifter which brought the chair to a sudden halt. His eyes glared through thick glasses as he jerked his head agreeably, followed by several indistinguishable moans.

Joshua's heart raced and his hands trembled, but he continued. Like a haze surrounding him, his clearness of mind vanished, and his faith seemed distant from him. With his next words, he pushed out into uncharted territory. He sensed a spiritual wind blowing at his back, propelling him to doubt his doubts, to trust and obey. "I know you don't know me since we've just met now..."

The student managed a smile though he was certainly just being polite. *Have I been given permission or not?* With awkwardness, Joshua leaned forward and laid his hands on each of the boy's emaciated shoulders. The pressure mounted upon him to quit and get to his class—but it was too late to retreat, too late to not pray for this boy. He leaned closer to speak into his fellow student's ear.

Without warning, the late bell hammered for several seconds along the hallway, and, almost immediately, was followed by a man's booming voice. "Hey, you two! You're late for sixth period."

"I only know that God told me to pray for you," Joshua said to the boy. He shot a glance to the teacher, recognized Mr. Bell, an ex-Marine built like a heavyweight boxer. Joshua worried he might get in trouble, but the impression pressing upon him remained too great to ignore or discard. Turning back to the student, Joshua couldn't decipher if the boy understood what he'd told him or not. "So—"

"I will not repeat myself," bellowed the teacher's stern voice. Joshua glanced toward Mr. Bell. He now had an excuse to not pray, if he wished, but something compelled him forward.

"—in the Name of Jesus..." He kept his hands on the boy's shoulders praying, not knowing what he should say or do next.

The heavy clicks of Mr. Bell's shoes echoed louder as the teacher drew near, his voice charged. "What are you *doing*, young man?"

Joshua kept his heart on his task despite the pressure of the encroaching teacher. The longest three seconds passed.

The teacher stood over him, his heated breath fluttering across the back of Joshua's neck. "If you don't answer me, I will escort you to the principal's office."

Three more seconds.

"Are you *listening* to me? I won't tolerate this behavior."

Joshua sensed students had gathered in the hallway. Looking up, he noticed teachers sticking their heads out of their classrooms.

All at once, Joshua released the student's shoulders and straightened up. He relaxed and faced Mr. Bell, hoping to appease him with a smile which, as he made eye contact, faltered. "Sorry, I just felt an urge to...pray for him."

The wheelchair-bound student moaned several emphatic nods, his eyes lit with approval.

Seeing the wheelchair boy's gladness, Mr. Bell's face grudgingly softened.

Knowing he was pushing things to the limit, Joshua bent to the boy's ear. "No matter what, just know God loves you!"

Joshua walked off and turned to give a lighthearted wave to the boy. There was a reassurance within Joshua that he had done no wrong. But at the same time, there was also a test of faith warring within him. All eyes remained fixed on him as he walked down the hall. It seemed the most difficult walk he'd ever endured.

Joshua took in a deep breath as he tried to ignore the emotions inside him. Questions to God wrestled for answers. *Why did I just pray for him? What had it accomplished?*

Just as he was about to turn the corner, a large snapping filled the hallway—like a tree limb breaking. Joshua stopped, almost afraid to look. Turning, his eyes doubled in size as he saw the boy had risen from his chair, the teacher's face aghast at this scene taking place. The boy hollered even as his arms straightened, even as his twisting head gained perfect movement and strength. Within seconds, the boy's frame took on a new form. The boy yelled out, his exhilarated voice changing from grunts and distorted syllables to understood words.

"L-Look at me," he shouted as he walked and showed his hands and body to those gathered. Teachers stepped out of their classrooms wondering what was going on, and students followed until they crowded the hallway. With each second, the boy's limbs strengthened as he moved about. Everyone gasped, the only sound, aside from the boy's shouts, being fierce whispers among students.

Mr. Bell looked from the boy to Joshua with muted amazement, his face twisted in shock.

Many students mirrored the boy and smiled while others watched and pondered. A few faces knotted into a mixture of fright and confusion.

Tears brimmed Joshua's eyes. He fell to his knees, humbled, awed, afraid, and energized all in the same moment.

Mr. Bell moved through the crowd to Joshua, staggering as if he'd had one drink too many. "H-How did you do that, son?"

Joshua wiped away his tears before smiling and giving a nervous laugh even as he stared at the boy who now spun about, his screams of delight filling the hallway. "I didn't do it!" He stared up at Mr. Bell whose hands were shaking. "It wasn't me," Joshua said, tears slipping down his cheeks. "It was all God. It was His power."

Four | The Spreading Strange and Wonderful News

The rest of that day at school for Joshua was anything but normal. The way his fellow students looked at him, and even some teachers—some with surprise, some with suspicion, others with fear. Joshua shook it off, though. He needed to care only how the One looked at him. In fact, since his classmate's healing, his heart had overflowed with a sense of closeness to Him. It was one thing to believe without confirmation; it was another to believe with unequivocal assurance that the Spirit of the Most High rested upon him—a simple teen who had followed Jesus and allowed His influence to shape every area of his life.

When the relief of the last bell shattered the silence, Joshua hurried through the bustle of students to get to his bus. He looked forward to getting home so he could eat; he was starving.

As he pushed the door open and exited to the steamy heat of the outside, an unfamiliar voice called to him. Joshua turned and saw the boy he'd prayed for earlier standing next to an enormous tree beside the pathway to the buses. Two adults stood next to him—their resemblance showing they might be his parents. The boy stood short for his age, but the changes that had taken place were mind-blowing.

A light flared in the boy's eyes. "My name's Brad," he said, extending his hand toward Joshua who shook his hand. "I couldn't do this at lunchtime!"

"Do what?" Joshua asked, trying not to sound impatient. He looked toward the long line of buses—his just three buses ahead.

"Shake your hand."

"Ah, yeah!" Joshua felt his cheeks lift as he smiled. "It amazes me, too! I didn't recognize you without your glasses."

Brad chuckled. "Yeah, now they give me a headache when I use them. I still think I need glasses—but not the coke-bottle glasses I've been using."

Joshua looked Brad up and down. "He's totally changed you!"

"Joshua?" The tall man standing behind Brad stepped forward with a hand thrust between them, a small smile lifting the corners of his mouth. "I'm Karl Young, Brad's father. This is my wife, Stephanie. How can we ever thank you?"

Joshua shook his hand. "Hello, sir." The man's compliment washed over Joshua and threatened to lodge within him; however, he let it fall away from him. "There's no need to thank me."

The mother gave a wavering grin. "But how? How is this possible? *Look* at my son! He's a brand-new boy!" An unhappy expression appeared on Brad's father's face at his wife's queries.

Joshua recognized the mother's lack of faith even in the face of overwhelming evidence, but he understood. These sorts of things weren't meant to happen. "It *isn't* possible...not without God. But give glory where it belongs: to God." Joshua pointed to the long line of buses about to move off. "I should get going before I miss my bus. Take care, Mr. and Mrs. Young! Brad, let's talk more tomorrow." He waved as he walked ahead.

"Wait," Brad said, walking alongside Joshua to his bus. "I was thinking. I'd like to serve this Jesus as you serve Him."

Joshua heard his words just as he stood at the entrance to his bus. Several classmates seated on the bus watched closely and whispered feverishly to each other. His tiredness amplified all in one second. He wanted to go home, eat and rest—and most of all, contemplate what had happened today. But he couldn't ignore this other hunger that had been birthed in Brad. Finally, and glad after he'd done it, Joshua stepped away from his bus. "Are you sure that you want to follow Him?"

The boy's face seemed to be calculating the cost. "Look at me!" He threw out his arms and hands as if auditioning for a part. "I'd be stupid not to follow the One Who healed me! I want to know this Jesus...whatever it costs."

Joshua watched as the first of the line of yellow buses pulled off. The unseen within Brad was crying out for answers from the Unseen above. Joshua would continue to pay the price and live in obedience to the Will not his own, despite his own will and its desires.

Five | Inner Warning

Joshua got home just as his mobile rang within his bag. He rubbed Bailey's head for a few seconds even as he scrambled to get his phone out. The number that appeared on his display wasn't someone in his directory. He plopped down on the sofa wondering who was calling.

"Hello?"

"Hi Joshua," a girl's voice said in a friendlier-than-usual tone. "Lydia here. Busy?"

Joshua acknowledged his mom with a wave as she walked into the living room from the kitchen.

"Lydia? Hey. I just got home. How'd you get my number?" he asked with a light chuckle.

"I have my connections," she said with pride in her voice. "What happened with you today? I've heard some crazy stuff. Is it true?"

"Crazy?"

"That a guy bound in a wheelchair all his life suddenly walks—after you prayed for him or something."

"His name's Brad, and yeah, I prayed for him."

"How did you do it, though?"

"I didn't do it; I just obeyed God when He nudged me to pray for him."

There came a few seconds of silence. "Wow. I've never heard of that happening before."

"It's no big deal when you think about it. God is alive and mended Brad."

"I see. Then how come He doesn't fix all the broken people everywhere?"

"I'm not sure. That's why He's God and I'm His follower. I just do what He tells me."

"So...He *speaks* to you?"

Joshua laughed. "You been talking to my dad?"

"No," she said, curiosity in her voice.

"I'll explain some time. But to answer your question, it's more of a knowing that I'm to do something. He'll impress me to pray for someone or whatever. But I never dreamed that He'd heal a paraplegic...and do it through me."

"That's...interesting, to say the least! Are you busy this Friday night?" She snickered as she added, "If you're not praying at the monastery, we can do something."

A withdrawal came within—ever so slight, as if something within him had been pinched and pulled inward. "I'll let you know," Joshua said, hesitation in his voice. He liked this girl. But why the warning?

"Ooookaaaay," she replied, her voice flat.

"No, I just need to confirm it before I make a decision. I'll let you know tomorrow in class."

"Well, pray about it," she said, the tone of her voice serious. Her voice became a flirtation. "This little vessel needs to be *mended* too!"

"We all need to be mended one way or another." Joshua quipped a laugh to mask his awkwardness. He didn't like what she'd said—or *how* she'd said it. A moment later, he wished her good night and ended the call.

He held his head in his hands as he mouthed a quick prayer for guidance. Just then, there was the sense of something amiss in the room. A darkened corner in the living room drew his attention. Something was there, still, silent, menacing. A shudder passed through and shook Joshua. He stood up from the sofa as if to challenge the threat he sensed.

"The Lord is my High Tower," he declared as he turned and climbed the carpeted stairway to his bedroom. At the top of the stairs, he turned right and stepped into his room before closing the door and

leaning his forehead against it while mouthing a prayer to the One. He slipped off his shoes and sat down at the end of his bed even as he struggled to understand the receding he'd sensed earlier while talking to Lydia. As he assessed it, that same feeling still lingered.

"Lord," he whispered as he slipped to his knees onto thick carpet. "I don't want my closeness with You to falter." He rubbed his eyes as he spoke, his voice breaking. "I want only to please You. What happened today—wow, Lord! It was all You. And I want to be used like that again and again," he said with conviction. "Thank You for healing Brad!"

Moments later, he entered a time of worship with the entirety of his heart just as he had during his twenty-one days in August. A sense of comfort—the receding within Him no longer so apparent—coated his heart, calming him. As he finished his time in worship, he again prayed for wisdom regarding this girl named Lydia.

Six | Unfolding Plan

The TV playing softly in the background, Lydia hung up and laid back in the recliner, the old chair creaking and moaning under her weight. The smell of garlic bread and tomato sauce wafted in from the kitchen, her mom and Stacy, her younger sister, preparing dinner.

Her body was tired, yet her mind raced having spoken to Joshua. She contemplated Joshua's indecision—a rare event when it came to boys she showed interest in. While she liked the challenge, an odd tinge of resentment clung to her insides—for whatever reason. Just as she arose to go upstairs to prepare her things for the next day, her cellphone chirped.

She hoped it was Joshua returning her call to say he'd go with her on Friday. Seeing it wasn't him but someone she wasn't in a mood to talk with, she let out a heavy groan.

"Hey," she said, impatience leaking into her voice.

"Hey sweetheart, how's everything going?" the man's familiar voice asked, too friendly for Lydia's liking.

"Please." She sighed. "*Don't* call me that."

He laughed, mockery and a hint of resentment present. "Don't be such a prune, Lydia!"

"Everything's on track, Frank." She paced the living room, forced to listen to his concerns. "Yes, I got it under control... Don't worry!" She stopped midstride as a burning heat reached her cheeks and behind her eyes. She held in her breath to keep from exploding. "You know, you should trust me more! I know what I'm doing!"

She listened a few more minutes.

"Okay, I'll do as you ask. Bye!" She ended the call.

All at once, her temples ached as an inner pressure mounted. She was where she was because she was proficient at what she did. So what if people weren't satisfied with her performance. She'd put in more hours than all her predecessors combined—and with more to show for her work than any of them.

As she thought about her mounting stresses, her thoughts turned to Joshua. Within a moment, her reflections went from dark to light and from misery to gladness as she recognized the brightness and simple comfort inherent in him.

What is it about you, Joshua Phillips, that you draw my interest, that you carry about you a weird, dreamy peace—yet not look like a dullard?

She would unearth what it was about him—this mystery of Joshua. Besides, she loved this new challenge. And whatever challenges she tackled, she overcame and had her way.

Seven | The Whispering of That Name

An ear-splitting wail filled the room. Joshua leaped up out of bed and smacked the alarm clock. Still dark outside, he sensed the Unseen surround him even as his mind awakened.

“Good morning, Lord!” He slipped to his knees and began to dialogue with Him. As he did, the Presence thickened and coated him, bringing with it an assurance and vitality.

Moments later, however, as he made mention of his school, it was as if a roadblock of dread blocked him.

“What’s going on, Lord?” And as he thought about it, he realized there had come a warning. “Okay, Lord,” he said confidently. “Then I thank You for Your added grace to face whatever comes my way. You *are* my strength!”

Stepping into the bathroom, he brushed his teeth. He recalled the phone call from Lydia the night before. He’d had girl interests in his past, for sure. But Lydia was different, more mature but also more rough-edged, as if she was used to a different crowd of people than her freshmen status let on.

There was something else. More than any previous girl he’d courted, there was an attraction to her—almost to the point that she intimidated him. Then again, was there anyone she couldn’t intimidate?

Her entrance into his life had been unexpected. In some ways, it worried him what a relationship with a girl would mean for him, and his relationship with the One. A part of him wanted to avoid the whole situation while another side yearned to explore what this all meant. Joshua decided he’d be cautious and take things slow.

Dressed, groomed, and cologned-up, he departed his bedroom and walked to the end of the hallway before descending the spiral staircase to the kitchen. The smell of pancakes, bacon, and baked beans met him. He saw both his mom and dad sitting at the table talking in lower-than-normal voices.

“Hey,” Joshua said, scanning his parents’ faces, trying to figure out what was being talked about. He sensed something was wrong.

“Morning, Joshua,” his dad said in a normal voice, his newspaper still folded and undisturbed on the table.

Joshua watched his mom, her back to him, lower her head and wipe a cheek before finally looking around to him. “Hey, Joshua,” she said, trying too hard to be cheerful even as he noted a red puffiness beneath her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Joshua asked, determined to know what was going on.

His mom gave a brief, unsteady smile. “Just talking grown-up stuff.”

“*What* stuff?” Joshua asked unsatisfied, pushing his straight blond hair away from his eyes. He heard the commotion of his older brothers behind him as they descended the spiral staircase.

“Hey,” mom crooned to Kris and Bruce. “Samuel’s still asleep!”

They quieted with whispered apologies. The boys’ tall frames stepped past Joshua before taking their places at the table which activated mom.

“Your father’s already eaten his fill of pancakes! More coming up, boys,” she offered, moving to the counter and oven. “And I think I can talk your father into dropping you guys off at school.”

“Sure, no problem,” dad said as he lifted the newspaper and opened it.

Both older brothers gave each other high fives. “Nice!” Bruce exclaimed.

Joshua, however, remained unsure what he should do. He stood there unable to ignore the concern and sadness on his mother’s face. It was clear his parents were hiding something from him. For all he

knew, it had nothing to do with him. Yet, he couldn't be sure of this, either. The previous night, he'd overheard his brothers tell his parents about the healing of Brad.

In a moment, a twisting sadness enveloped his heart. The approval of his parents meant so much. Could he bear the weight of knowing his parents didn't approve of him, his actions, or his faith-actions on behalf of the One? He loved his parents. But could he love God if he were tested in such a manner?

"Thanks, I'm not that hungry," Josh said as he approached the door that led to the living room.

"Where're you going, Joshua?" his dad asked over his shoulder. "I'll take all of you."

Bailey scampered from his crate and stood beside Joshua.

"That's all right, Dad," Joshua said as he looked down at his dog. Bailey's ears perked up as he scanned Joshua's face with pleading eyes. "Sorry, boy. Not this time." Then he turned toward his family. "I'm gonna be late for the bus. See you guys later."

Joshua stepped into the living room and made his way to the front door even as his stomach rumbled in protest. He regretted not staying and enjoying his family's company.

As he walked to a rendezvous with his school bus, he whispered the Name which brought an immediate comfort. Other feelings, however, stirred within him that equaled fear. He realized just how daring this new adventure of his was. If he wasn't careful, if he didn't prize his newfound relationship with the Most High above all, he might fall from grace only to find no one around supporting him, or worse, wanting to be associated with him. The raw realization terrified him.

"Please forgive me for my doubt," he whispered into the empty air as he glanced down at the paved road as he walked. The Unseen seemed to wrap around him even closer than previously which granted him renewed hope that he would not perish regardless of circumstances—that he'd never be left abandoned or alone.

He would pay the price regardless what happened to him or his relationships.

The Presence was thick around Joshua like a winter coat—yet even that Great Presence could not block out the dark ones' concentrated shrieks and screams directed at him.

This began the moment he'd stepped into the kitchen—the confusion sown, the disconnection of the boy with his family, and the fear arising within him about losing all his relationships—including his closeness with the One. These all were quite satisfying. Yet the dark ones also hungered to get nearer to him—to latch onto him and his life's sustenance. Soon, they knew. They'd use his weaknesses to dethrone the One from his heart—and, in addition, use the shame and guilt to drive him far away from Him so that getting back would be unlikely if not impossible.

Part Two | Tender Shoots

**“a very young plant,
or a new part growing on a plant”**

Eight | Bless Your Enemies

As Joshua stepped off the bus, Brad stood waiting for him, a beaming smile planted on his face. He wasn't alone. Three other students, two boys, one girl, stood beside him in a line as if soldiers awaiting instructions.

"Hi Joshua," Brad said.

Joshua smiled at his new friend and those standing next to him. He suspected he'd always have a friend on this earth as long as Brad was upon it.

"Hey," Joshua said. "What's up?"

"I want you to meet Jennifer, Sergio, and Allistair."

Pleased though unnerved, Joshua gave a quick wave to the group. "Nice to meet you guys. You all look like you've been waiting for me to arrive—what's the occasion?"

Jennifer spoke up. She was African American with friendly, round eyes, and the smoothest olive skin Joshua had ever seen. She had a reed-slim frame topped by intricately braided hair that skirted her shoulders. "My friend Alicia told me what happened to Brad. And I think I speak for all of us when I say we want to know more about Jesus...and what his healing means."

"I see," Joshua said, his face heated. A pang of embarrassment passed through him as he didn't exactly know what to do or say next. Just the night before, Joshua had sensed the demonstration of power the previous day would be enough to begin a harvest with few words spoken. Yet there was also a realization that an irreversible darkness had settled into the landscape of the school long before—the effects of the weeds and tares observed everywhere in the community. God's power, he knew, would produce change no matter how difficult. *But how would the darkness respond to such?*

A tall, tanned boy with short, curly black hair and brown eyes spoke up. "Yeah, we just want to know what's real. I'm Sergio, and he's Allistair," he said gesturing to his tall friend of Vietnamese-American lineage next to him. "We both saw what happened to Brad. Truth be told, it freaked us both out."

Allistair nodded passing his hand through his spiked jet-black hair. "Yeah, tell us more."

Joshua opened his mouth to speak, unsure what he'd say when the words flowed from his lips. "God's power is here because God's here. He wants to set everyone free of whatever chains them. Do you want to follow Him as I follow Him?"

All four nodded their heads.

"Then let's meet after—"

"Well look what we got here!" an amused voice interrupted from several feet away. Three older boys walked toward them, the leader showed a wide grin on his rotund face. His black eyes seemed closer to each other than they should've been, framed by wavy, black hair. His round cheeks and face were plump and rested upon a massive body—no neck visible. He stood over six-foot-tall. His hands were ominous, like those of a gorilla—ready to clutch and dismember. Like the smaller guys beside him, he wore a blue jean jacket, oversized jeans, and immaculate-white sneakers. All three wore their red, straight-edged street caps turned to the right. Glancing at the leader who'd just spoken to him, it was clear to Joshua that the guy was in a mood to play. Unless intervention took place, he'd be a cornered mouse. The cold dread from his morning prayer settled upon him. Yet, because the Lord had revealed this to him, there remained a confidence that he'd be all right.

Joshua prayed for the Lord's help.

The oversized young man drew to within five feet but continued his tirade. “We got the preacher dude right in front of our very eyes!” he said jabbing the shoulder of one of his cohorts with the back of his hand. He kept his cold, black eyes fastened on Joshua.

Joshua stepped between Brad and his new friends and the approaching three boys. “What do you want?” he asked evenly, his heart pounding within his chest.

The large boy’s grin changed to amazement, his eyebrows knit with subtle anger. “Hmm, maybe I want to smash you into the pavement just so your friends don’t get the silly idea to talk to me like you just did.”

Joshua hated confrontation. Even worse, he hated pain. “Look, I didn’t mean any disrespect,” he said with a softened steadiness. Just then came a word within him, like a rock lifting to the surface waters of his mind and heart: *Bless your enemies*.

Even as Joshua contemplated what he should do, the gorilla of a boy redirected the dialogue, though Joshua didn’t like any of this situation.

“So, how’d you do it? Magic? Mirrors?” he mocked with a laugh.

“How did I do what?”

“How’d you make that boy,” he pointed at Brad, “get up out of his chair?” Brad dropped his gaze to the ground.

“I didn’t. It was God’s power.”

“Is that so?”

Lightning fast, Joshua felt himself heaved upward by the boy’s grasping hands and then downward. His cheekbone and temple slapped against the cool, jagged pavement. Pain exploded across the right side of Joshua’s face. The shocked students surrounding took in a collective breath, shuffling back several feet.

“Are you sure about that, Jesus boy? ‘Coz I’m not!”

Bless your enemies blazed across Joshua’s mind. He moaned, his heart thumping, the throbbing pain pulsing in tendrils up through his skull as his cheekbone was pressed and minced against the rough, grimy concrete beneath the weight of a 300-pound bully.

Bless my enemies? Only a seething rage filled his heart. His enemy deserved no blessing or kind words—words that would be useless. He wanted, instead, to call down fire from the sky like an ancient prophet.

Joshua could hear Brad and the others protesting though no relief came to him.

“Hey!” a teacher’s voice bellowed from some distance away.

The brute spoke in a gloomy voice into Joshua’s ear. “Tomorrow morning, I’m gonna come here and ask you the same question—and the answer better be to my satisfaction, J-Boy.”

“What... do you want...the answer...to be?” Joshua managed through labored breaths.

“Here’s a clue: I *don’t believe* in God.”

The downward pressure pinning his body and face to the pavement lifted away. Groaning, Joshua sat up before tenderly touching his cheek and looking at his fingers; blood coated them. Pins and needles fluttered through his limbs.

The teacher reached the gathered crowd, the attackers having scampered off the school grounds. “Make space!” the teacher shouted, the crowd opening to allow him through. Reaching Joshua, he bent down to him. “Are you okay, young man?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” he said even as the phrase repeated once more in his mind, *Bless your enemies*.

The shrieks of the darkened ones had sown confusion and embarrassment in the boy during his one-sided melee. And when the deafening reverberations of the Voice had filled the boy's insides, simple words with simple instructions, the boy had, to their delight and pleasure, resorted to his own wisdom above the One's. They continued to concentrate their attacks on the boy—to bring him to the place of doubting the One's trustworthiness, especially when the chips fell.

A heavy dread rested upon Joshua even though he tried to act unshaken and normal before Brad and the others. In honesty, a weight now pressed upon him and a sadness clung to his heart. There was something else: a sense of betrayal permeated his thoughts. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so humiliated.

Brad, Jennifer, Sergio, and Allistair followed Joshua into the school foyer. They each stared at the ground as if unsure what to say. Brad rested his hand on Joshua's shoulder.

"You were brave," Jennifer offered, following behind.

"Brave?" Joshua gave a doubtful glance toward her as he touched his bloodied cheekbone. "How was I brave? I was disgraced back there."

After a momentary silence, she replied. "You stood between them and us. I'd call that brave no matter what!"

The others nodded in agreement.

Joshua gave a light shrug as the words acted as a gauze for his internal hurts. In some ways, they'd given him back part of his dignity. Right there and then, he realized he'd just met true friends. He stopped and looked at them intently. "Meet me 2:30 p.m. at the flagpole. If you're serious about serving Him, we'll talk about it then."

Four agreed, but only three rushed off. Brad lingered behind. He cast Joshua a sheepish look. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to help you earlier."

"It's okay, Brad." Joshua gave a light jab to his friend's shoulder. "It was out of your hands *and* mine."

"We should tell a teacher they're coming back for you tomorrow morning, don't you think?"

Almost without thinking, Joshua shook his head. "No. I'd rather let God handle this."

"Catch you later!" Brad waved as he headed the opposite direction. It was as Joshua walked alone that he realized the look that had been cast his way from Brad: admiration.

Joshua thought of himself as a humble person, neither meek nor a wimp. Knowing his own limitations, he'd used common sense when reacting to people and situations around him. He'd always thought he could talk his way out of a tough spot.

Minutes before, however, he'd found his circumstances run amok in the face of a bully intent on inflicting pain and humiliation upon him. A mixture of hatred, anger, and confusion coursed through him as he walked toward his homeroom. Was Brad correct? Perhaps he needed to speak to a teacher?

As he entered the classroom moments later, he lightly touched his bruised cheekbone, the stinging tendrils shooting up along the side of his skull. He took his seat without hearing or seeing anyone around him, replaying the unbelievable scene that had just been unleashed on him. There he'd been, talking about God's power, when suddenly, His power had *not* been. He'd been left to fend for himself. The jagged cement had become the reality—not God's power.

Yet, even as the teacher took roll, and as students talked in hushed tones around him, Joshua sensed the insulation of the enfolding Presence wanting to wrap around him as if to comfort him. A barrier had arisen from the moment of his humiliation until he'd just sat down.

The problem remained in one place: his own heart. Deep down, he could never blame God for what had happened. Unable to resist the Holy Spirit's comfort, he closed his eyes and whispered the Name. Within himself, he expressed he was sorry and sought forgiveness.

Then and there in the classroom, wave after wave of intimacy from the Uncreated One cascaded upon and around him as the barrier was demolished. His eyes closed, he raised his brows in surprise as a voice penetrated time and space.

"Joshua."

"*Joshua!*" It came again, the tone impatient.

His eyes shot open. "Present," he replied to the teacher, the titters of nearby students sounding around him. His cheeks heated, Joshua twitched a half-smile to those around him so he didn't look too weird.

"What happened to your face?" Lydia asked. She'd sauntered into the science class and instead of walking down her own row, she'd walked down Joshua's before standing over him—a concerned look on her face.

"Just an accident," Joshua grinned.

"Playing rough with your brothers?" she asked, her voice probing to know but for more reasons than just his welfare, Joshua thought. The bruise and scab on his face were of interest to everyone, it seemed, and now Lydia.

Instead of lying, Joshua offered a friendly smile. "Naah," he said allowing his voice to downplay what had happened. He didn't feel like sharing a moment that still jarred him. "Just an accident this morning."

She leaned her weight against the edge of another student's desk as if to get cozy. She showed no concern for the girl seated there who remained incredibly patient.

"So," Lydia said following a sigh. She looked down at him from her perched position.

"So," Joshua repeated with a friendly grin trying not to display his momentary discomfort.

Without warning, she leaned over toward Joshua, her striking features impressing him. She had rounded brows that complimented her deep brown eyes, framed by long, dark brown hair. Her smile, quick to appear, had the power to light up a room. "Would you care to go with me to a youth group this Friday night?"

"What kind of youth group is it?" Joshua asked as he slunk down into his seat.

"A witch coven," she said with a quip of a laugh. "Church, of course," she said simply and then turned and whisked off down the row before entering her own row and taking her seat. She cast Joshua a furtive smile as Mr. Opal entered the room with his characteristic too-loud greeting.

Perhaps Lydia was open to God working within her? To find out, Joshua would have to spend time with her, a realization that frightened and thrilled him. She glanced at him which gave him the chance to nod a smile to her. He would go with her on Friday night.

Nine | Deserts

The rest of the students had departed the school grounds except for occasional students going about their after school activities. Joshua and the other students sat on white marble benches beneath the towering oaks, the deep, cooling shadows granting relief from the sun's oppressive heat. Every so often, Joshua glanced about him not wanting a repeat of this morning.

He could see on the faces of Brad, Jennifer, Sergio, and Allistair an eagerness to understand what he had stepped into not long before. They awaited what Joshua knew would be a major change; it would inject a vibrancy and adventure into their lives—if they dared to step out, if they each paid the price.

Sergio asked the first question. "How did you come to know Him?"

Joshua couldn't help but to smile at the memories of his encounter with the Lord. "After a week of renewal services at my church, I'd settled back into my normal routines. I really wasn't that impacted. But then I read a verse where Jesus told Matthew the tax collector to follow Him. The words wouldn't let me go."

"What did you do after that?" Allistair asked, a puzzled look flashing across his face. He leaned toward him, a gleam of enthusiasm emitting from his inquisitive black eyes.

"I went into my bedroom and didn't leave except for necessities. I talked to Him and tried to listen. I read His Word. I worshiped. I passed through," he paused as he searched for the right description, "my own *desert* experience."

"*Desert* experience?" Jennifer asked.

Joshua closed his eyes for a moment and prayed for the Holy Spirit's wisdom. "It's difficult to explain but I read in Luke 4 how even God's Son had to learn obedience through time in a desert for forty days." Joshua's heart lifted in exhilaration as he explained. "Before Jesus faced temptation, the Spirit had rested *with* Him. When He came out of the wilderness having overcome His trials, the Spirit rested *upon* Him." Joshua waited to see if his words registered with any of them.

Brad's eyebrows raised in excitement. "So, something happened to Him only after He'd passed His 'spiritual' exams?"

"Exactly!" Joshua said matching his enthusiasm. "It was Jesus graduating with honors. And it wasn't a diploma He walked out of the desert with, it was the Spirit of God without limit." Joshua paused to let it sink in. "When I went into my bedroom, I stopped everything...to be with Him."

A look of disbelief appeared on Sergio's face. "No television? No chatting? No PlayStation? No tunes?"

Joshua smiled, understanding how radical it sounded. "Well, I listened to encouraging music, but everything else I eliminated. I also gave up two of my daily meals, except for drinking juice and taking Communion each day before the Lord."

"How hard was it for you?" Jennifer asked.

Joshua didn't want to lie. "There were a lot of times I wanted to quit, and to go do what I wanted. I fidgeted, and I fought all my desires to sleep, eat, and entertain myself."

Allistair and Sergio exchanged looks before turning back toward Joshua. Sergio asked, "So we have to do the same thing?"

Joshua stared down at the pavement, the memory of being shoved down into it that very morning an unkind reminder that the tests and growth and learning would never end.

Allistair shifted his weight as he pondered aloud Sergio's question. "But it'd be *worth* it!" He looked around at those gathered before fixing his eyes on Sergio. "To be touched by One so great, and then to somehow be able to touch His heart... What price *wouldn't* be enough?"

Joshua nodded. "That's it! You each must listen to His directives and go through your own desert experience. The price, for some, is too great. But when you graduate with honors like Jesus, the life changes in you will ripple out and begin to change those around you."

"What *is* the price?" Jennifer asked, wincing, as if she might get hurt by the answer.

Joshua fixed his eyes on her. "It costs...*everything*."

"Everything?"

"*Everything!*" Joshua said, excitement infusing all of him.

"But why so many days?" Sergio asked. "Why can't we just get jolted with His electricity and have His power if we decide to follow Him?"

Joshua wiped away a strand of hair skirting his eyes as he pondered the question. "I don't know. Perhaps He could jolt you, and perhaps He does that to some." He glanced up at the trees that shaded them from the sun's heat. "Look at these oak trees." They each looked upward at the far-reaching limbs covered in thick greenery, faint traces of yellows and oranges seen on the leaves. "These giants started as tiny seeds. I guess it's Him proving you...like a metal made pure and resilient through intense heat and icy water—plus a hammer. More than anything else, it isn't so much Him moving into your heart...but you moving into *His*."

All four nodded, each of their faces displaying various levels of understanding.

"But it is a time of testing—of character growth," Joshua said. "You must be strong...or, rather, weak, so that He might be strong within you. It's the building of character that He treasures most so you begin to look like His Son."

Joshua watched as Brad stood up and faced each of them. Then, he shared. "I know that just yesterday morning, I couldn't stand here or talk in a manner that people could easily understand me. I lived, my body endlessly cramped in twisted knots, day to day in misery." He paused as tears filled his eyes. "Every function of my body, every effort to live was a struggle—and a burden to people, especially my family. Each day, I searched to know why I should continue living...and what my purpose could ever be. I'd come to school and nod and smile...but inwardly, I was never convinced it was all worth it to keep going. I barely had a friend because of my condition. People were too embarrassed to get to know me or be seen talking with me. Sometimes I'd go an entire day without talking to anyone—not even teachers. So, when Joshua stopped me in the hallway to talk to me, I really listened. And God touched me through Joshua's obedience. My life, and the lives of my parents have dramatically changed forever." Brad paused, his face seemed to be calculating the cost in a moment. "I had *nothing* before He touched me. I have everything now...and I want to give back to Him all that I am."

Joshua's eyes met those of Brad. In an instant, he knew what to do. With a determined look, Joshua rose to his feet and placed his hands on Brad's shoulders. He prayed for his friend, and within minutes, for each of the others. Then, he sent them home and told them to do as their hearts—and the Spirit—led them in the hours and days ahead. If the world was going to be changed, it would first begin within each of them and continue with equal fervor every day, something Joshua had warned them about with absolute conviction.

Almost an hour later, as Joshua stepped out of Brad's parents' car at his house, however, he heard the echo of his own words that he had spoken to the others. Although tired, and though he fought with

the idea of eating a meal and going to sleep, he entered his room, closed the door, and went to his knees to pray—not only for himself but for his new friends.

Yet even as he went deep aiming to accomplish great things in the Holy Spirit, he was brought back to the image of himself being shoved into the hard, irregular pavement. And he was confronted with his feelings against the bouncer-of-a-bully who had threatened him—and would, within twelve hours or less, return to haunt him.

He glanced toward the darkened window opposite his bed as if sensing something there peering inside, as if a face brushed against the glass.

Joshua turned back to the Lord, ignoring it as his imagination.

“How can I love someone like my attacker? Please, Lord. Show me how to forgive him—how to see him as You see him?” A relief washed over him having admitted these questions to the Lord—and somehow, he knew He had heard him.

The ink-black creatures hissed and turned on each other like rabid dogs as they struck the barrier in their zeal to fill Joshua’s room with their life-draining, dark plans—the glory of the One within the room too great to enter. They’d thought the boy was moving in their direction because of his bitterness, his hatred, and his unwillingness to do the most basic of things required of His followers—to allow and give genuine love, even to an enemy. And, they’d been overjoyed at his mounting pride—an effective barrier to anything good from the One. But then the boy had gone to his knees and even fasted a meal—and now this: the turning back of the boy to the wisdom of his Master. They continued to watch—their hungry eyes fixed on the kneeling Lightbearer.

It would be soon, they knew. They would have access to him and feast like vultures ripping at a carcass.

Ten | The Dream

Joshua dreamed. He found himself roving rapidly through a golden wheat field that trembled in the wind. There in front of him scampered the frame of the behemoth bully as if trying to get away from Joshua. Every now and then, he'd look back, a terrified look of desperation on his face.

Just then, the large boy stopped in his tracks as a golden cloud surrounded him. As the light engulfed him, he grew hostile and beat back the hazy brightness. The gesticulating boy, seeing how helpless he was to cast off this strangeness, dashed in another direction, and again Joshua saw himself following close behind.

The scene repeated several times, each time the golden light hugging the boy like a swarm of bees. Soon enough he grew exhausted until his fighting and running tapered to nothing. And there he stood, bathing in the glowing cloud.

A voice filled the air. *This one will do great exploits. My love will capture him.*

Joshua awakened and sat up, startled. The scene replayed in his mind so strongly that he thought himself still asleep. He blinked as his eyes adjusted to his bedroom around him. A pressure building within him, he slipped out of bed, his knees landing on the thick carpet, even as sobs came from deep within for this one who had never known love, not even for a single second.

"But how can You reach him?" Joshua wept deeply in a way he didn't—couldn't—understand. "How?" he whispered through a veneer of tears. "How can You do this?"

And then the words coursed through him as strongly as that first day when God had spoken to him to follow Him. *Bless your enemies.*

Eleven | Wrestling with God

Joshua awakened from a catnap just as the school bus screeched to a halt, the first image flooding his mind the burly face of the bully. He expected him to be waiting to humiliate him just as he exited the bus—before even his first class.

Half-praying, he stepped off the bus and looked around. No one was there. Maybe the bully had forgotten him. The morning air was cool but refreshing—the rising sun with its warmth fighting to escape the distant horizon’s clinging hold. He inhaled deeply.

“Hey,” shouted a voice from the side.

Momentarily jolted, Joshua turned to find Sergio and Allistair coming toward him, their faces seeming to be different from the previous day. It was as if a soft glow rested upon them.

“Hey Josh!” Sergio said.

Joshua nodded and smiled while looking them over. They seemed content, focused, and more self-aware of everything.

“We began to ‘pay the price’ last night,” Allistair beamed, his black eyes glimmering with a joy that Joshua hadn’t seen previously.

Joshua forgot all about his own concerns and rejoiced with his two friends. “Keep it up. Welcome to the School of the Holy Spirit,” he beamed. “Have you seen Brad and Jennifer?”

“Not yet,” Sergio answered.

Joshua scanned around him. To his chagrin, there wasn’t a teacher present. But part of him was glad because now he’d have to depend solely on God.

“Oh, oh,” came Sergio’s ominous voice. Joshua heard the warning in his friend’s voice and whirled around to find the three thugs stepping between the parked buses—their eyes fixed intently on Joshua.

“Allistair? Sergio?” Josh said.

“Yeah?” they murmured at the same time.

“Could you guys pray with me for the next few minutes?”

Sergio spoke under his breath. “We’ll do that, but we’ll also be praying *for* you.”

“Gee, thanks for that!” Joshua replied, unable to keep from grinning.

Joshua breathed his own quick prayer for wisdom and direction. As the larger boys stepped closer, Joshua gathered his courage and stood to await what would come.

“Jesus boy!” the big boy seethed through lips that barely revealed teeth. “Been waiting for me?”

Joshua did nothing, said nothing. He continued to pray when the impression lodged in his mind as before: *Bless your enemies*.

This time, Joshua was convinced, he would do as he’d been told. He had nothing to lose.

“So, you got an answer for me? How did the wheelchair-boy,” he growled, “get up out of his chair the other day?”

Joshua steadied himself for what was about to unfold. “The power of God,” he said, his face undisturbed by the threat before him.

“Not a good answer, J-Boy,” the boy said in a near croon. Moving with a speed that shocked Joshua, the bully’s gigantic hands seized Joshua’s collar and twisted him face down to the pavement until his right side slammed against the cement.

Several students who had gathered to watch the confrontation were now rewarded with this one-sided melee.

Bless your enemies.

Like before, Joshua's cheek was minced against the cement by the larger boy's pressing weight. Slithers of pain ignited his upper cheek, temple, and his jaw. With his left hand that remained free, however, Joshua ignored the pain and reached behind him to lay his hand upon his oppressor.

"What do you think you're doing?" He swatted Joshua's hand down.

But Joshua wouldn't relent. He reached around quicker the second time, his hand landing on the bullies' kneecap. "The Lord...*bless* you," Joshua shouted through his pain, and with a burst of breath.

Instantly, Joshua was mesmerized as he saw images flash before him. *A boy, maybe seven, running through an untidy house, hardly dressed. Shrilled shouts. A confrontation. A lady being shoved to the floor by a sizeable man dressed in a black leather jacket. The boy cries at what he sees. He runs over to her as if to help her—to do something. But the lady pays little attention to his presence in her nigh-drun stupor. She sees him and screams at him to get to bed.*

Joshua had not known anything like this would happen...and even as this giant pressed him even harder against the pavement, Joshua forced his words through his pain. "He knows...what...you've gone through. He remembers...how lonely you felt when...your mother wouldn't come home at night. It was Him who wanted to give you comfort when all you experienced was fear, for her, for yourself, on so many long nights." Tears, not from the pain, began to fall from Joshua's eyes at the scene unleashed upon him. He could sense how empty and love-starved this boy had been all his life. He *loves* you, Cary."

The bully released Joshua and stepped back as if he'd just touched a live wire. His face grew fearful and amazed at the same time as he scanned Joshua. "How'd you know my name and all that stuff you just said?"

Joshua untwisted himself into a more comfortable position before giving the hint of a shrug. "I didn't. God did. And though you want to deny it, He is calling you to follow Him and know a love you've never experienced before."

Cary lifted his hands to his head as if his head would explode. He looked startled, confused, and on the verge of overload. He pounded his head with his fists as if to keep the realization away from his mind.

His two pals' faces displayed disbelief and confusion, as did the students' faces who had gathered.

Joshua stood up and dusted off his knees. Looking sternly at Cary, he directed the palm of his hand toward the boy and spoke with authority. "I say again, the Lord *bless* you."

Cary collapsed to the ground as if all strength had left his body—the two teens to his side looking down at him even more dumbfounded. He tried to rise without success. It was almost as if he was fastened to the ground though nothing held him.

Joshua walked over to Cary and kneeled beside him. "Your unrest will continue...until you surrender to Him. But when you do, you will rise new...*and*...you will *know* His love."

Joshua straightened up before walking away. Delicately, he touched his cheekbone, suddenly not minding that the wound from the previous morning had reopened.

Sergio and Allistair followed close by, their faces aghast. "What did we just see?" Allistair asked looking back at the downed, twisting teenager.

Joshua glanced at Allistair. "The Lord told me to bless him yesterday. But I didn't obey. So, I thought it better to do what He tells me. When I reached around and laid my hand on him, I saw glimpses of his growing up years in seconds."

"Are you serious?" Sergio asked.

It was just then, nearing the school entrance, that Joshua sat on a nearby bench as a surge of emotions surfaced. Sergio and Allistair sat beside him. Looking away to hide the tears that brimmed his

eyes, Joshua spoke. "He...Cary...he's lived a hard life. Yesterday, I hated him. I wanted to call down fire upon him. But just now, I've been changed. I only feel a love—God's love—for him."

"But he's on the ground," Sergio said looking at the crowd that had gathered around the guy. "It's as if he's wrestling someone."

Joshua nodded emphatically. "Cary tried to pin me to the ground to get me to give up my love and trust in God. Now he's pinned to the ground to receive His love. When he surrenders and admits the truth, he'll be able to get up."

"God would do that?" Sergio asked.

Josh shrugged his shoulders. "I'd say it's Cary versus God's love. That would pin a lot of people to the ground until they surrendered."

"But when will he be able to get up?" Allistair asked astonished.

Joshua shrugged again. "*That* is between Cary and God."

Less than an hour later, Joshua found himself sitting in the Principal's office. Mr. Brown probed into the earlier incident involving the bully. Joshua wasn't surprised he'd been called here; Mr. Brown's tone, however, was a bit unexpected.

"*What* did you do to that boy?" the balding man asked perplexed.

Joshua raised his brows and leaned partially forward surprised at the question. "I did nothing to him. What *could* I have done to him?"

"Some students at the scene say they saw you strike him," the teacher answered with a sigh.

"I did not fight him," Joshua said plainly. "And the entire scene was one in which I was the least in control. Didn't you see how big he was?"

"Well," Mr. Brown said through thinly pressed lips, "the boy was unable to get up for over an hour, Mr. Phillips. And when he did finally get up, the boy was crying uncontrollably."

"Crying?" he asked.

"In a strange mixture of sorrow and something altogether peculiar."

"Peculiar?"

"I don't know how to explain it. He had tears...of joy, and something like relief."

Joshua flashed a grin at the workings of God within Cary.

"What is so funny, Mr. Phillips?" Mr. Brown asked.

"I suspect that perhaps *Someone* had His way with him."

"Someone?"

"God."

"God?" he asked, traces of half-mockery in his voice.

Joshua pressed his back against his chair knowing his next words would be interesting to Mr. Brown. "I blessed him."

"You *what*?"

"I blessed the bully, Cary." Joshua awaited Mr. Brown's reaction. His face, however, remained as stoic as a statue's. Joshua spoke. "I don't know if he'd ever experienced a caring hand toward him in his life. But this morning, God's hand came upon him."

Mr. Brown leaned back in his high-back chair growing more annoyed. He swiveled on his chair and stared out the massive office window—the day bright with golden light. “You mean to say he ‘got’ religion lying on the pavement? It looked more like a reaction to drugs!”

“No, not religion or drugs,” Joshua said with a slight tinge of anger. “He experienced...His love.”

“Mr. Phillips, I find this whole scenario highly unusual. In fact, I heard the news two days ago about Brad Young. Tell me, please...*what* is going on?”

Joshua studied Mr. Brown’s face realizing that these items would be strange and difficult for a critic to accept. “Few people consider God in their existence—except as a last resort. Perhaps that is why it seems unusual when God touches people in unique and life-changing ways.”

Before dismissing him, Mr. Brown mentioned that he would be investigating the matter further. Joshua nodded, stood, and offered a hand toward Mr. Brown. They shook hands, and then Joshua left his office.

Would Mr. Brown or other teachers punish him for actions done by him that were beneficial? Perhaps they would try to give God detention, he thought with a grin. But his goal, regardless of what anyone thought, would remain pleasing God in every area—regardless of obstacles.

In deep thought, Cary answered his phone as he meandered through the park. He prepared for what would come after he shared his decision.

“Hey!”

“What happened earlier? Did you do what Mr. Tony asked?” Pistol sounded annoyed.

Cary stared into the distance. “I did it. But I don’t know what just happened. I can’t explain it. Something wild!”

“Have you taken product?”

He paced back and forth before speaking again. “Listen, I know it sounds whack, but I experienced reality back there, something I can’t put into words.”

“What are you talking about?” His impatience and irritation mired into one.

“I’ve always survived on my own. I didn’t need anybody. But when he touched me...”

“Who?”

“That Jesus boy.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m sorry,” Cary said, as emotions welled up within him. “But I can’t deny what happened to me. Whatever’s in that kid is real—and powerful! I can’t explain it.” He paused for a second before resuming. “And one more thing: as of today, I’m out of the gang.”

An angry outburst exploded through the phone’s speaker. To his surprise, Cary remained at peace. The call ended abruptly.

Twelve | Voices

Joshua detested the fact that he didn't yet drive a car. As it was, he remained at the inconvenient mercy of his older brothers or parents. Without protesting, his mom had agreed to give him and Lydia a ride to the church for the Friday youth meeting. Although not his church, he'd heard people's comments at his own church about the excellent work being done there. The fact that Lydia had invited him to accompany her made him hopeful there was some spiritual desire within her, too.

"So, school going okay?" his mother asked, giving him a sidelong glance. "I've heard a few things from your brothers that seem hard to believe," she said as she looked rearward before backing out of the driveway. The sun's red-orange light was draining behind the distant horizon, the cooling darkness claiming the neighborhood.

"Like what?" he asked with a faint sigh. He leaned his head back feeling more tired than usual.

"Things a little strange, things I wouldn't believe except I know your brothers can't keep a joke going more than a few minutes. Is any of it true?"

Joshua looked at his mother. "Well, it's not difficult to understand when we realize God's real. And He desires to give His love away. He doesn't like seeing humanity imprisoned...by anything." He glanced over to his mom seeing her eyebrows knit in concern. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing...it's just unusual. You have to admit that."

He moaned. "Mom, it's called the supernatural, stress on the word *super*."

"That's supposed to help your father and me understand how you can make a wheelchair-bound boy walk?"

"I didn't make anyone walk. It was just God moving through me. He'll use anyone who's yielded to Him and obeys Him."

There came silence. His mom released a lengthy breath. "Well, at least you're not a hermit anymore. It's good you're getting out. And I'm glad you're on this date," she said with excitement in her voice. "What's her name?"

"Lydia, and it's just a youth group meeting, Mom," he said with amusement. "Before you know it, I'll be calling you to come pick us up."

"Hmm, too bad. Might do you some good to have some normal fun, stress on the word *normal*," she said good-naturedly with a quick laugh.

Joshua smiled knowing his mom was just looking out for him and trying to protect him from becoming weird.

They arrived at Lydia's house at the appointed time. Out stepped a slim, tall girl who approached the car. She wore tight jeans and a white top. Almost anything, Joshua surmised, looked amazing on her.

"Niiice going, Joshua," Joan said. "She's a beaut."

"Mom!" he said with a grin, giving only a slight nod of his head, trying not to exacerbate the situation. Leaping out of the car, he held the front door for Lydia even as a mingling of fright and nervousness settled within him. On his exterior, though, he fought to maintain a look of calm.

Stepping to the car, Lydia beamed. "Thank you!" she said before taking a seat beside his mom.

Joshua bent down. "Mom, this is my friend, Lydia. Lydia, my mom, Joan."

Joan took Lydia's hand with a pleased smile. "Nice to meet you, Lydia."

Taking a seat in the back, Joshua listened to his mom and Lydia talk as they made their way to the church. Every now and then, Lydia would glance back at Joshua with a smile or include him in their casual conversation.

As it was, though, a war raged within Joshua. For the first time since he'd come out of his room after twenty-one days, Joshua realized that his attention was being drawn in different directions and that his diligence wasn't as strong as he'd thought it was. Suddenly, this cute, intelligent, quick-to-laugh girl—with her eye on him—had entered his life; he wasn't so sure what that might mean for him and the Unseen within.

Joshua looked down at his phone and typed a quick message. He sent the text to Brad, Jennifer, Sergio, and Allistair asking them to please pray for him—for the strength to escape any temptation, and to keep his heart and mind fixed on the One, no matter what.

The car's tires crunched the thick gravel of the driveway that eventually led to a black-paved church parking lot. Tonight filled him with a strange mixture of gladness and uncertainty. He held the keys to his own future—a future that would be shaped by his present decisions. It was this reality that scared Joshua, even more than the onslaught and humiliation of a bully or a hundred bullies.

Lydia had been pleased when Joshua agreed to go to the church youth group. It was a place full of energy and people genuine about what they believed. She'd appreciated the reception when she'd come here several months before—both the leaders and teens had welcomed her. And although there were moments when the peer pressure was incredible for her to *give her life to the Lord*, she'd not allowed it to stop her from visiting occasionally. And, there were the other reasons she went—reasons few would ever learn about.

When she saw Joshua's mom's car drive up alongside her house, Lydia's heart had lifted, giving her a momentary relief from the subtle, unseen nervousness rumbling around inside her. It surprised her because few if any previous boys had stirred her to such levels. Perhaps, with but a little bit of prying, she could shatter the barriers that kept her from knowing him more. She wanted to understand Joshua. Perhaps church would be a means for her to draw close to him, and to find out what made him tick.

Joshua had held the car door open for her as she approached, which impressed her. She liked his easygoing style of dress, and the friendliness he radiated. Most of her previous boyfriends had never held a door for her or treated her like someone special. Perhaps old-fashioned, but he showed characteristics of a gentleman.

She saw the way he'd glanced at her upon her approach to the car. He'd tried his best to hide his attraction to her by looking off in the distance, which resulted in splashes of red coating his face. This pleased her. Perhaps this invitation was the best idea she'd had in quite some time.

After the pleasant drive to the church, Lydia and Joshua waved goodbye to his mother who disappeared down the gravel road, followed by a yellow cloud of dust. Lydia spoke up. "You have a great mom."

"Thanks," he said.

"Ready?" Lydia asked as they both glanced behind them at the church. It had a contemporary look to it—which was a must for Lydia. She didn't want to feel like she was in a museum or a morgue.

They walked up several steps and pulled on the glass double doors that opened into a lobby with a shiny, marble-like floor and contemporary decor. Swinging open the heavy wooden doors that led into the inner sanctuary, Lydia was glad to hear music booming from massive speakers in anticipation of the teen crowd that was about to show up. Across the front of the sanctuary read a sign in bold, black letters: "No Compromise!"

"I like the entire set-up," Joshua said with a subtle nod, flicking his dollop of blond strands away from his eyes. "How often do you come here?"

"I come on Fridays, but only when I'm bored out of my mind."

"Hmm, so you came to the last place on your list to be with me?" Joshua asked hinting a smile.

"No, silly," she said, entwining her arm in Joshua's, glad for his contact. "I'm not bored out of my mind tonight."

"And why would that be?"

Lydia laughed at the question. "Because, I have you to myself," she said, throwing him a genial smile. She walked toward a refreshments table before casting a rearward glance at him.

So far, everything was going as she'd planned. Tonight, the walls would begin to fall. If it took several of these "dates," she would continue until she understood Joshua.

Joshua watched as two adults approached. Lydia introduced Joshua to Paul and Tamara, the husband and wife who headed the youth group. The man, overly tall and sporting a dark goatee, smiled. His demeanor impressed Joshua. He could see teenagers would seek his affirmation. Tamara, petite and beaming, radiated brightness and quiet authority.

"Hi Joshua," the couple both said, offering their open hands to him. Joshua couldn't help but sense a witness that there was something special about this couple.

"Hello," Joshua replied, shaking their hands. He couldn't help but smile at their enthusiasm and warmth.

As a small group of teens entered the church, the couple told Joshua and Lydia to make themselves feel at home as they went to welcome the group.

"They're cool," Joshua said, casting a glance over his shoulder.

"Yeah," Lydia replied, though her tone indicated that she was more interested in moving on to other matters. "After the worship service, care to go for a walk on the grounds?"

His heart dropped several inches as he heard the question. The awkward silence lingered between them. "We'll see," he said, remaining neutral. In his heart, he tried to reassure himself that tonight he'd maintain caution and not do something stupid. Lydia, he already sensed, had a powerful pull on him. He didn't fancy being in a situation where he might forget his convictions—and lose his special connection with the One.

Multiple strobe lights of streaking colors flashed on every side, the sanctuary darkened, the speakers' booming volume rumbling up through Joshua's feet and reverberating into his chest. The keyboard, bass, guitars, and the rhythmic beats of drums filled the room as the worship service roared to life.

Joshua scanned the faces of the young people who had come. All sorts of youth were here: some wearing black, heavy metal t-shirts while others had on casual, preppy clothes. The majority wore jeans with t-shirts. On the opposite side of the sanctuary sat three black-clad goths with multiple piercings, stiffened black hair raised or spiked, with splashes of make-up on their face, and silver jewelry dangling from their clothes. If Church was supposed to be a place for the sick to come and get well, this church

fulfilled that as far as Joshua could tell. Looking over the worshippers, he saw most clapping and dancing while others remained seated and quiet.

As Joshua joined in singing and lifting his hands to the One over the next thirty minutes, Lydia beside him seated and still, he became conscious he was withholding his enthusiasm to worship. It wasn't that he was ashamed, but that he didn't feel free to enjoy the time when Lydia sat next to him looking bored, even dumbfounded, at what was happening around her. He'd noticed the way Lydia looked at him—as if she were studying him or not quite comprehending what it was he was doing. Joshua mused this place was like a spiritual all-you-can-eat buffet—not a place for someone on a diet or not hungry. He blushed several times in awkwardness. He sensed something else—a warning within him that didn't diminish and made him feel off-kilter, despite the setting and amazing atmosphere.

As the youth pastor, Paul, stood with the Book held in both hands, Lydia fixed her eyes on Joshua and gestured for him and her to head out to the foyer. He didn't like being rude and leaned toward Lydia. "Let's wait till after his sharing," he whispered. Her face darkened and grew solemn.

Joshua listened to Paul's fervent exhortation to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and not to give in to the rampant peer pressure as they interacted within their schools and other social arenas.

Without warning, Lydia shot up from her place and walked back toward the rear exits. Was she upset at him? Trying not to look at anyone staring at him, Joshua arose and followed her. Stepping out into the lobby, Joshua saw Lydia staring out the tall rectangular window into the parking lot, her arms folded and held close to her body.

"I thought you'd go for a walk with me," she said when she saw him approach via his reflection in the glass..

"Yeah, but I didn't want to be rude to your pastor—"

"He's *not* my pastor," she said, turning to face him, her face flustered. "I only come here occasionally. You may not have noticed, but I'm not into this religion hitch like they are...or you."

A receding intensified within him. "Religious hitch? But it's not like that—"

"—I like being a part of this place," she interrupted before stepping in front of him. "The people are pleasant and the atmosphere positive. But I don't care for the preaching."

"I see." He stared enraptured by her raven eyes, her long, midnight hair framing an open face with the flirty grin playing at her lips. He ignored the discomfort of standing in front of her.

"But *do* you see?" she asked.

Joshua studied Lydia, unsure what to say. He stood amidst a minefield with every step precarious.

"Listen," she pleaded, her voice growing more pleasant. "Can't we go for a walk? Can't we learn as much from the world as we can from a dusty old book?"

Joshua thought to correct her perception but decided now wasn't the time. "Okay, let's go out—but just for a few minutes."

"Cool!" She beamed, excited.

"But next time, do you promise to stay for the entire message?" he asked.

"Next time?" Her face showed a puzzled expression. "Who said there will be a next time?" She laughed as she grabbed his hand and led him across to the foyer's exit.

"I like Paul and Tam, but I don't care for their pushiness," Lydia said as they walked behind the church, the lush grass slanting for several hundred feet till it stopped at the yellow-sand volleyball court,

around which were arranged several picnic tables. Along the edge of the grounds, tall trees and thick shrubbery made up the boundary. "I'm happy and content the way I am. I don't need what they have."

"Are you sure about that? What they have isn't just an irrational faith, Lydia. It's real and life-changing because they've encountered the Risen One."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm happy if it's real to them, or to you," she said, brushing a wisp of her black hair from her eyes. "But truth changes from one person to the next. I think it's all just a matter of perception."

Joshua replied. "Truth seems to lose its relativism when a person drives up to a red traffic light."

Lydia laughed, as she weighed Joshua's words. "Well, I believe what I can see."

Joshua nodded. "Okay. Then tell me what happens at a sunrise?"

She stopped and looked at him, one hand on her hip. "That's not a fair example."

"If your eyes lie to you about the sun not actually rising, how much more could our hearts also not see correctly?"

She turned and walked onward, her face neutral.

He continued as he matched her slow stride. "If God is there, then that is reality, not just a matter of perception through our five senses."

"Isn't that a big *if*?" Lydia asked. "And even if He is there, why doesn't He do anything to stop the suffering? Why didn't He help the Franklins?"

Joshua replayed in his mind the newscasts several weeks before regarding a midnight fire that had engulfed a home killing an elderly couple the community loved. He'd thought about the question of suffering and evil often. He replied softly after praying for wisdom.

"I had a lot of time during those twenty-one days alone with God. In short, my faith says that God entered human history and became one of us. He lived and died within this world. Not once did He ever deny the reality of evil or suffering. Instead, He acknowledged it, confronted it, and when possible, overturned it! But He also reminded His people of their responsibilities and to be active to share His love and redemptive act."

Lydia shook her head emphatically. "That's deep, Joshua. But if God is love, how can He do nothing when children starve to death or when terrorists have their way and kill innocent people? If He really loved, why wouldn't He intervene?"

Joshua waited several seconds trying to think through his own thoughts. "I don't know the answers though I could spout off theories all day. What's needed in all of us is a change. We live in a broken world...but that doesn't remove from us our need to choose Him in our own lives."

"Joshua," she said, stopping and turning toward him. She stood a bit taller than him. She took his hands in hers and smiled. "I hope we can become something more than friends. It feels rare to meet someone like you; and I want you to know I respect what you believe...even if I can't be into your faith as much as you are."

Joshua hardly blinked as she stood there holding his hands facing him. His heartbeat quickened, and he realized he must appear as red as a tomato. Her beauty mesmerized him even as he tried to concentrate on what she was saying to him. Joshua spoke, finally. He granted himself the freedom to speak his heart's feelings. "I think you are stunning, Lydia."

She released his hands and stepped even closer to him, the fronts of their bodies almost touching, their faces nearly meeting. Her hands now held each of his biceps and gave subtle squeezes as her eyes scanned his face and a smile played at her lips.

If you love Me, you will obey My commandments.

The words rose within him even as he tried to bring action to the words—without success.

Her hands moved up to his shoulders. They just stood there, no words, just her warmth merging with his. He smelled her alluring perfume and stared into those gorgeous eyes that now shimmered into him with a brilliance that he'd never known from any other until that day and hour and minute and second.

"Hey, you guys!" Tamara's voice floated down to them from the edge of the parking lot. "You need to come back into the church until the meeting's over."

Joshua saw Tamara facing them, her arms folded. He gave her a wave and nod. "Let's head back," he said to Lydia.

Fleeting disappointment crossed Lydia's face. "Okay," she said.

As they walked up the hill toward the church, regret and a tinge of sadness clawed at Joshua's insides. For one long moment, he'd allowed the voice of another to distract him from the Voice of the One. He shuddered at the precipice where he now stood. If he wasn't cautious, even tonight, all could be lost.

He prayed as he trudged up the grassy knoll. It seemed as if his prayers were weighted and went nowhere. He watched Lydia several steps in front of him. He tried to discern who this girl was in his life and what her entrance meant to his future—and to his relationship with the One.

Joshua's eyes fixed on the thick, darkened treeline—the branches swaying this way and that. An empty chill passed through him and coiled down his spine.

Lydia was hooked by cords to two large demonic brutes who almost always loomed near her, the dark ones able to stir her emotions and sway her decision-making whichever direction they desired.

Despite the worship and despite the preaching, the dark ones had used the girl's interaction with Joshua to discover access points of vulnerability. They knew how to lure humanity across dangerous tripwires. Because of his subtle disregard for the One's voice, the Presence had, for a time, dimmed within him like an old, fading lightbulb. This had allowed dark agents to temporarily sever his link to the One—at least on the boy's end. A disturbance resulted leading to a gaping emptiness within the boy; this allowed them to harass him for quite some time to their satisfaction.

In a nigh celebration, the darkness rejoiced that the boy was drawn to this alluring girl's physical looks—without concern for her inner looks. He was drawn to her with enticing passions and subtle but powerful lusts fueling him. The enemy had convinced much of the world it was harmless flirtation. Yet, the ungodly ones knew it went beyond ancient boundaries established by the One both to protect the boy and to protect the girl—both of whom were of immeasurable value to the One.

For this reason, it would satisfy them even more to wreck havoc and destroy them.

Thirteen | The Four Boulders

Joshua had returned just before midnight the previous evening, wondering if anything good had come of his time with Lydia. Tamara made Joshua and Lydia wait inside the church lobby until Joshua's mother arrived to retrieve them.

The youth worship service had been grand, and although he'd enjoyed Lydia's company, a heaviness clung to his insides, because he'd not been more sensitive to the Holy Spirit when the testing had come. Over the last days, Joshua had thought a lot about Samson's story. The Judge of Israel had retrieved honey out of a carcass—a dangerous act in case he mistakenly touched the carcass and broke his vow to the Lord. And as the story went, the man's reckless behavior eventually led to great personal tragedy. Joshua didn't want to be a Samson in his own journey.

Awakening early, Joshua threw off his blankets and dropped to his knees. He leaned his head against his interlocking fingers held up by his elbows as he focused on the One. But as he sought to enter His courts, it was as if a great door blocked his path. Since his interchange with Lydia, something had changed within him.

"What's happening to me, Lord?" Yet despite his best efforts, his mind kept returning to when she'd stepped up to him. He shouldn't have been so engulfed in her wake. Yet that's what had happened. Paralysis had made him powerless as he stood there looking into those sparkling eyes, her wide lips forming a smile that expanded her fair cheeks.

In fact, if it hadn't been for the watchful interference of Tamara, Joshua worried what the outcome might've been. If another ten, even five, minutes had been allowed for him to be with her, what might have been the outcome?

He envisioned her arresting smile as if she were standing in front of him again, her face inches from his, their bodies touching. A flutter of pleasure passed through him even as he tried to divert his emotions and stampeding thoughts. He wanted to be with her. He missed her. But, deep down, he was glad he wasn't with her knowing his current weakness.

Having no success in realigning himself to the Lord in his bedroom, Joshua hoped a change of scenery would help him reconnect. He'd go to a treasured place in his heart. Dressed in shorts, he flew downstairs just as he heard a tiny voice rise from the high back sofa.

"Hey Josh." A body wrapped tightly in blankets laid there, Bailey asleep along the front of the sofa on the gray carpet.

"Sammy?" Joshua asked, surprised he was there.

"Hi," his little brother answered from his nigh-buried face. Bailey sat up and eyed Joshua, his tail flapping against the bottom of the sofa.

"What are you doing sleeping down here?"

"Mom said I could sleep here if I wanted. I'm not feeling good."

Joshua nodded. He stepped over to the back of the sofa and leaned down until his elbows rested against the top of the sofa's sturdy back. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," he replied with a weak voice. "Yucky is all I can say."

"Want me to pray for you?"

"Okay."

Joshua stepped around and sat down on the edge of the seat cushion where his little brother's feet rested. He placed his hands on his little brother's forehead, almost too hot to the touch, and spoke a prayer against whatever was attacking his brother's body. He prayed for a full minute before finishing.

Would the power move within Sam like it had with Brad? As he walked out of the room, he expected something to happen. But nothing changed.

He stepped into the kitchen and saw his mom seated at the kitchen table, working a crossword puzzle. "I'll be back in a few hours, Mom."

"Going to your usual place?"

Joshua nodded.

"Everything okay, Joshua?" The look she gave him made him feel even more unsure of himself.

"Yep," Joshua said. He knew the balance in his life was, at that moment, out of whack. "I'm going out to clear my head. I'm leaving my phone, so I don't get distracted."

She nodded. "Take Bailey with you?"

"Sounds great," Joshua's upper lip curled in mirth at the suggestion. Bailey, his ears perked high, tail wagging side to side hitting everything in its path, scrambled to the kitchen door. He reared upward awaiting that special moment when the door would open. "Come on, boy!" Joshua said as he yanked the door open which allowed a wall of morning heat to engulf him. Bailey scampered onto the manicured bright green grass, following his nose from bush to bush, sniffing in dog intrigue. Although Josh didn't like the heat, he welcomed the sun's brightness which lifted his spirits and offered a sense of relief. *I'm alive, and no matter what, You love me!*

Joshua slipped between two shoulder-high bushes onto a shaded path, the relief of shade from the canopy of tall trees cooling him. Some sun's rays broke through the ceiling of trees, the white-gold rays slanting into the shadowed forest.

He sauntered along the wide path that was used occasionally by small tractors or four-wheelers, numerous winged insects crisscrossing in front of him in a hurry to get somewhere. He ducked and wove past webbed architecture suspended between tree limbs, so not to disturb their hard work. The wise builders were hidden and tucked away from the heat.

The wide dirt path moved north behind his and his neighbors' houses a mile before rising steeply and opening into a vast field. Toughened, knee-high, yellow-green grass scratched his legs as he climbed. Then, the path narrowed significantly until it was wide enough only for one person to walk—medium-sized rocks, shrubbery, and mounds of earth on each side. A zigzag dirt path cut through the land led him upward to four large boulders seated at the hill's summit—what his family called the Four Boulders. Joshua scanned the dry dirt path and noticed the intermittent footprints of animals that crisscrossed the trail—deer, dogs, and small critters. Deep impressions of dirt bikes and four-wheelers were also evident on the path—all of them appearing weeks or months old.

When he arrived at Four Boulders, these boulders that had been placed in their resting places as silent guardians over the land, he walked another 500 feet to the edge of a cliff from which he could see the lower lands. Singular tiny houses and small, distant farms dotted the landscape. A wind crisscrossed giving added relief from the sun's direct rays.

He sat down on the flat rock that he'd adopted as his own since he began coming up here years before. It rested upon the slight incline along the hillside, held up by a bed of grass, dirt, and roots from a lone, sturdy tree that hunkered over the rock. Its leaves were orange-red, its branches perched above cast a cooling shadow over the flat rock. Joshua expelled all the air from his lungs as if to push out all the anxiety inside him. He wiped away from his forehead the sweat and pushed back his hair. He took in the entire view, glad he'd come here. He was in the perfect position to realign himself—which, no matter what, offered him an advantage to his internal unease.

This was his resting place with the One, the place he came to dialogue with Him. He yanked a jug of ice water from his backpack and took a long, deep drink. He bent over and poured water into a cup-shaped depression in the rock. Bailey approached and gulped the water down before looking up, his long pink tongue hanging half out of his mouth as he panted. Then he took a seat next to Joshua, both of them scanning across the distance. Relaxed and at rest, Joshua rubbed the top of Bailey's head.

He sat for some time, just happy to have made the effort to come here. Then Joshua determined to fulfill the purpose for his visit. Joshua asked into the open air, "Have I lost Your favor?"

Not feeling like he wanted to study the details of what he had and had not done, he gave what he hoped would be a blanket apology to satisfy the Unseen One. "Okay, I'm sorry for anything I did or did not do..." As he said this, though, an urgency rose within him. He needed to be specific or else all his effort of reaching out to the Lord, and this lengthy walk, would be in vain.

"Yes, Lord... I'm sorry for not listening to You last night...for feeding my own desires instead...and for allowing Lydia to replace You as my primary focus... But most of all, I realize that I didn't acknowledge Your Will above my own..." His words trailed off as he stared into the distance. This entire episode proved that even the tiniest trespass could cause consequences. "Lord, what am I without You? I can't do anything without You. I can't even breathe properly without You being near me."

It hadn't taken as much effort as he imagined before he sensed the Spirit's renewing Presence surround and embrace him. Nagging questions churned within him without the relief of answers: Was it okay to date Lydia? Could he date her if she didn't walk with the Lord as he did? Or was there something he didn't know, something he hadn't realized about her, about himself, or about the Lord's Will? He prayed for most of the morning, the Book open beside him. When the sun approached mid-sky, Joshua's inner splintering seemed to be dealt with as a new confidence and joy bubbled up from within him. Even his breathing flowed in and out easier.

Back to some sort of normal, the renewed joy washing over him, he noted Bailey's pinpointed gaze to the forest edge. Then he saw movement at the edge of the woods—someone coming up the hill toward him. Bailey let out several barks. Joshua leaned forward, his eyes fastened on the approaching figure. He couldn't see who it was, but it appeared to be a young lady. Then, he heard a familiar voice float upward toward him. She waved at him with excitement.

Lydia? Here? Now? Joshua rose and dashed to meet her as she drew nearer, Bailey scrambling alongside him. A pang of uncertainty cluttered his mind, along with a strange glimmer of gladness, even excitement, that she'd come—that he'd be next to her in just a few seconds again.

"Lord, please help me," he prayed. "I will need Your help to stay true to You!"

"Hey there," Joshua beamed as she came within arm's reach of him. He extended an arm toward her which she took as they hugged. Joshua thought she looked amazing—her straight black hair tied behind her head, her yellow tank top attire and black khaki shorts complete with white ankle socks and black running trainers. Bailey drew near which pleased Lydia. She kneeled and ran both hands through the rust-brown and white of Bailey's head and ears.

"What a beautiful dog! What's his name?" she asked as she rubbed him.

"Bailey," Joshua replied.

Lydia spoke, her face tinged red from her trek up the hillside. "It's Saturday afternoon...so I thought I'd come by and see what you're up to." She glanced up at Josh giving him an infectious smile.

"Come and sit in the shade," Joshua offered. "How did you find me?"

"Your mom told me where you'd be," she replied. "Are you hungry? She made grilled-cheese sandwiches for us."

"Grilled-cheese sandwiches sound great," he said excited for the unexpected lunch—and to be with her again, too.

As they reached the tree's shade and flat rock, Joshua gestured to her. "Have a seat."

Gingerly, she sat, Bailey coming and taking up a position in front of her while looking out across the lands. Lydia gave hearty rubs along the dog's back and around to his whitened chest.

Joshua sat down beside her and scanned into the distance. Deep down, he also prayed.

"Am I intruding on your privacy by coming here?" she asked with a sheepish expression.

"No," he said. "But you surprised me. It's a lengthy walk to get here."

"My friend dropped me off at your place. When I found out you were up here and not in your house, my ride was already long gone. Your mom told me it'd be easy to find you if I followed the trail up to the clearing and headed toward the four large boulders."

"Yeah, she's been here with me a few times along with my family. We've come here for cookouts. Amazing view, isn't it?"

She nodded and glanced toward the horizon. "It's timeless here."

"It sure is!" Joshua nodded.

"So, why'd you come here alone?"

"Not alone; Bailey's been with me." He gave her a sidelong glance and chuckled.

She reflected his humor with a smile, her alluring lips making Joshua wonder what it'd be like to kiss her—a thought he dismissed.

"I like to come here to pray," he said, his voice a serious tone.

"Should I leave?" Lydia offered with a half-smile.

"No," Joshua said, more quickly than he wanted. "I finished just before you came. I'm glad you've come." He was glad, which is what concerned him.

"Really?" Lydia asked as she edged closer to Joshua complete with a flirtatious smile.

"Yeah," he said, unable to keep from smiling, too. He shot her a quick glance before looking to the safety of the distance. It would be better to not feed the desire that was already burning within him. At that moment, he determined he'd not be too warm to her while alone with her, but also not be rude.

Lydia fixed her eyes on him. "To pray? *For real?*" She held a curious look on her face.

Joshua ignored the irritation that she didn't yet regard what was important to him. Nodding, he decided to be firm...but indirectly. "This is one place I come to find strength."

"Okay, *Arnold*," she said bringing her voice to a low pitch mimicking Arnold Schwarzenegger's accent. When she noted his lack of amusement, her voice grew sober. "To find spiritual strength?"

"Yeah." Joshua gave her a fleeting glance. "But it's more than just spiritual. It encompasses all of me. My emotions, my intellect, my will...even my body."

"You find strength by praying?" she asked.

"As strange as that might sound, yes. But for me, it's more like two people sitting down and having a talk—like we're doing right now."

Lydia shrugged. "Hey, if it works for you. Where was God sitting...?" she asked with a grin.

"It's not like that," Joshua replied, hiding his irritation. He sensed the sooner they returned to the house, the better the outcome of this circumstance would be for him. "Lydia, let's head back," he said.

"But I just got here," Lydia said. Then, she reached out even as he was attempting to stand up—keeping him in place. "Wait a minute," Lydia said, flashing a striking smile.

Joshua turned to face her just as her lips touched, and kissed, his. He resisted little, for it had come and gone before he could do much about it. Then, she leaped up and walked forward a few paces, staring outward across the panoramic view.

"Maybe I want some spiritual strength out here too," she said over her shoulder as if nothing had just happened.

Joshua's heart sunk within him. He gave no reply but let out a slow breath even as he prayed again not to be pulled deeper into unwanted territory.

"Where does the trail go?" she asked and walked until she was fifty meters above them.

"It leads to a rock quarry on the other side."

She halted. "Oh. Not very exciting."

Joshua sensed the discomfort lingering between them. He didn't know how to remove the awkwardness without appearing too warm. If he remained aloof from her, he might seem too cold, and forever lose her. A part of him wanted to take her hand in his and seal the deal. Another part wished for any other situation but this one.

"So, Lydia," he said in a friendly but neutral tone.

"So, Joshua," she aped, again sitting beside him.

Joshua grinned. "So, you have brothers, sisters?" he asked attempting to make small talk.

"I have a younger sister. My father...passed away when I was young, just after Stacy was born."

He rested a hand on her shoulder for a second before glancing at her. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Cancer took him before I could learn what having a daddy feels like." She looked off into the distance for a second before resuming. "You have three brothers?"

"Yes."

"I met Samuel. Sad to see him feeling so icky earlier."

"Yeah, we're praying for him to get better."

"Hey, I have a question for you," she said, lifting her backpack onto her lap. She pulled out one of the grilled-cheese sandwiches and handed it to Joshua.

"What's your question?" he asked as he unwrapped the foil around his sandwich.

"You have two older brothers and yet you didn't ask for their help a couple days ago?"

"Help? What for?" He took a bite of the sandwich before he slowed his chewing and tilted his ear toward her.

"How 'bout protecting you from those bullies at school?" she asked as she, too, unwrapped her toasted, gooey-cheese sandwich.

"You heard about that?" he asked.

"Yeah, I heard you knocked the boy down and he couldn't get up for nearly an hour."

"That was because of God, not me. I did nothing to him. I *couldn't* do anything to him."

"I heard his gang weren't thrilled with his sudden, strange change."

Joshua was surprised to be talking about the bully revealed to be Cary. "What kind of change were they unhappy about?"

"When he got religion. He'd changed so much they initiated him out of the gang."

"How'd you learn about all this?" Joshua asked.

She seemed not to hear his question but asked her own. "If you didn't hit that boy, then what happened?"

"I merely did what God told me to do," he said, taking another bite of his sandwich.

"Which was?"

"He impressed me to tell him, 'The Lord bless you.'"

"That doesn't seem like a blessing to me. He was pinned to the ground."

"The principal also thought the entire event strange." He half-smiled as he took a bite from his sandwich. He was still in awe of that moment. Bailey stood nearby, his relaxed eyes focused outward, his rust-brown and white fur blowing from the light breeze.

A burning had formed within Joshua as they'd begun talking about Cary. "It was a blessing," Joshua said, "because he found God's love, and freedom. God did that, not me. It was all His idea, not mine." Joshua couldn't help it, but he laughed. "It's amazing that God can do in an hour what would take a man years or even a lifetime to fix."

"You make it sound like God did an operation on him."

"Maybe. I don't know. But I think all that guy ever wanted was to be loved...and in that time on the ground, though he fought it, I believe he wrestled with an all-encompassing love as if a moth caught by its wings. The more he struggled, the more helpless he became." Joshua became silent, his face serious.

"How do you know that's what happened?"

"Because what happened to him is what happened to me."

"Huh?"

"When I spent twenty-one days locked away from the world, He touched me. I can't explain it, but I knew His love for me in a way that I'd only heard or read about. I experienced His love as if He was wrapping His arms around me."

"That seems a bit out there, don't you think?"

Joshua tried to be careful not to allow his irritation to seep into his voice. "Lydia, it's said we were created in His image and that God is love. If that's true, then we would need love to survive—and even just to operate properly. Without that love, we'd morph into something we weren't meant to be."

Lydia reached to her side and grabbed at a small tree's leaf, yanking it free. "But if that's what we all need and if God is love, why don't we have it? Why did it take weeks for you to discover it?"

"I could've found it that first hour...but first I had to have the clutter removed from my life. Most people are too distracted to notice their real inner needs that only He can satisfy. And the enemy does a great job at hiding Him from us."

Lydia nodded as she took in his words. He scanned the smooth rocks around him, their surfaces appearing wet in the sunlight's glimmer. "During that three-week period, I became an onion that God peeled away until what remained of me was reality."

"So, what is real? Give me the fast-forward version."

Joshua hesitated to say. He didn't want to overload Lydia, but her questions were thoughtful and could lead to a work of God in her life. And there was also a quality of holiness about these things. It wasn't something he wanted to speak lightly about.

"God's love. God's Son dying on a cross. Both of those for me, to me, because of me... But during all that discovery, I also learned about...my own brokenness."

Lydia gave no reply though her mind seemed to be racing to understand. "That's deep, Joshua!"

"It is deep, but it's also a gift to understand," he said, awe in his voice.

"So, God healed that guy the other day—but He did it in an hour," Lydia noted.

Joshua nodded. "There is no formula. God can do whatever He wants as He sees fit and according to each person. All I know for certain is that until Cary surrendered, he was his own worst enemy—and everyone else's, too."

"So...what would happen if you blessed me...with another kiss?" she said with a smirk giving him a sidelong look.

With a shy grin, he allowed the question to linger. Since their discussion had turned to God, there had been a noticeable change in his heart. A confidence of safety from temptation had arisen within him. Was this the strength he'd needed and prayed for? "Lydia, I like you, too. But I want to move slow."

"Joshua," she said half-flustered, but with a grin. "I was asking for a simple kiss, not what *you* were thinking."

Joshua leaned back and studied her as she gave him a semi-icy look and turned her face away from him. "I," he finally conceded, "would be honored to kiss you."

With no hesitation, he reached over and kissed her on her lips. At first, he thought he'd kissed her too briefly...until a satisfied smile appeared on her face.

They sat there for the next hour talking about petty things...but not caring about what they talked about. When they got up to return to the house, Joshua reached and took hold of her hand. He squeezed her hand as they walked, Bailey following. Suddenly, they looked at each other a bit differently than they had just two hours before.

Joshua felt relief that Lydia had given him space and respect regarding his faith. Nothing of a compromising nature had taken place.

A strange fulfillment settled within his heart. No change in his heart-connection to the One had taken place. And although he still wrestled with questions, he thought the best way would be to go slow, as he'd said to her, and avoid any action that would lead to compromise. The connection with her established, Joshua reveled in his heart that he and Lydia were now more than friends. Still, there would be limits and boundaries to their relationship according to how she responded to the Lord on a personal level. That would change the trajectory of their relationship. He'd have to wait to see.

Arriving back at the house, Joshua, Lydia and Bailey in tow, entered through the kitchen door to hear his mom's concerned voice in the next room. Joshua saw his mom sitting beside Samuel, wiping his forehead with a wet cloth—the boy's head propped up on her lap.

"Mom?" Joshua asked, concern in his voice.

"He's gotten worse."

Bailey ran past until he sat in front of Samuel and licked his hand. The child's face appeared flushed and his eyes heavy.

Just then, Joshua's father came in the front door. His eyes glanced over the room. Immediately, he greeted Lydia before noticing young Samuel on the sofa with his wife. "What's wrong, Joan?"

"His temperature's 104. He's getting worse."

"We'll take him to the hospital now," Dennis said as he reached down and held Sammy's hand.

Joan aided Samuel to his feet, the blanket wrapped around him.

"Is there anything I can do?" Joshua asked.

Joan shot him a reassuring smile that faded as she tried to help Samuel walk toward the front door. "Tell your brothers when they get back that we took Samuel to the hospital."

As they stepped out the door, Joshua's chest tightened. He clenched his fists as anguish filled him. Surely the power would've made Samuel well if he hadn't been sidetracked the night before because of his incident with Lydia. He'd fooled himself into believing he could be close to the Lord *and* be a regular teen. The reality washed over him: this path he was on required a special dedication and focus to the One.

"Lydia, I have to go pray," he said as the whirl of the moment crashed into his heart.

"Okaaay," Lydia said looking down at the floor, dejection in her voice. "Do you want me to go?"

Joshua knew he must seem either insane or rude—if not both. "Look," he said with as much reassurance as he could muster. "This is serious. I need to spend time in prayer for Samuel."

"Fine," Lydia said, her face losing all of its light. "I'll call my mom to come pick me up."

"I'll call you later, okay?" Joshua offered in an appeasing tone. "I'm going upstairs to my room. Stay here till your mom gets here. I'm sorry."

Lydia nodded, not happy.

It was clear to Joshua he'd hurt her feelings. Yet he also couldn't ignore the urgency he felt that hadn't been there moments before.

Lydia marched toward the front door. As she reached the door, she glanced back at Joshua. "I can't compete with your god," she said, her eyes daggers directed at him. "I'll wait on the porch for my mom." And with that, she stomped out of the house slamming the door behind her. It left Joshua feeling even more confused.

He decided he'd mend any grievances with Lydia as soon as possible. For now, however, he could not allow himself to be distracted. His little brother needed him. And Joshua knew the power of God mixed with prayer could resolve any difficulty.

Climbing his stairs and entering his room, he flung himself to his knees as he sought to connect with the One and break the grip of the sickness on Sammy. He struggled to push away the regret he was feeling as he cast his eyes heavenward, of in one moment feeling so close to Lydia and in the next being torn from her. *Is a close relationship with anyone possible beside You, Lord?*

At the Four Boulders, the dark forces had attempted to scream into the boy's ears to keep him confused and on an unsure footing with the One. Their attempts had only succeeded, however, until the boy became honest and went into the specifics of his disobedience. When the boy entered that place, the dark forces arrayed against him were themselves disoriented and turning on each other.

Even when the girl was brought, something altogether unplanned had taken place. The attached tethers to her had been temporarily cut.

And, to their chagrin, she had responded, ever so faintly, to the One—which enraged them.

The Presence had been so strong, the boy's repentance, though having not dealt with all the issues, that the barriers between the boy and the One were demolished, and reconnections made.

So, they returned their attention on the youngest brother—to exacerbate his situation.

Somehow, they knew the youngest brother remained a key to devastating the Lightbearer's faith and trust in the One.

Fourteen | The Mystery of Joshua

Lydia sat in the car, her mother quizzing her with concerned glances as to why she remained so quiet.

"Everything's fine," she replied, even as her pierced heart ached. She'd not expected to be rushed out of his house...not like that. Not because the monk had to go pray. She'd never had *that* happen to her before—which might be comical if not for the anger that simmered inside her.

Strangely, she conceded an appreciation for Joshua's concern for Samuel. It was present, but a small appreciation. He really believed God would do something for Samuel. Truth be told, she'd been amazed at the two stories that were already being whispered at school about Joshua's amazing abilities—the unexplained healing of the wheelchair boy and the transformation of the gang member-slash-bully in a single hour.

Could such be explained away? Lydia queried inwardly. Perhaps Joshua had tapped into the unlimited potential and powers of the mind. Most people only used a tenth of their mental capabilities, she'd heard online. Perhaps God had nothing to do with it, only Joshua didn't know it. His belief system wouldn't allow such thinking.

Still, she kept remembering the statement Joshua had spoken to her about God's love, about how he'd always spoken of it or heard it but never experienced it until he'd spent that three-week period shut away. Though she'd not admitted it, she agreed that all human beings sought one thing primarily: to be loved. She'd never considered God before and she wasn't about to now. But she felt the attraction of wishing such a powerful love were true and available to her.

She remained more practical. She wouldn't go off searching the cosmos for something or someone invisible when she could find it here on earth. And though anger coursed through her, she decided there and then that she'd let Joshua do his thing with God for the time being. Pleased at the way he'd responded to her so far, she would give him time to adjust to her being in his life. For the first time today, he'd opened his heart to her and revealed what it was that so stirred him with passion.

The chirp of her cellphone rang. Lydia's heart sank a notch as she swore under her breath.

"I heard that," her mom muttered, not looking at her.

She'd forgotten to turn off her phone to prevent what was now happening. She was religious not to talk business in front of her mom.

"Hello?" she asked, her voice lacking interest. She wanted to end the call as soon as possible.

"Can you talk?" Frank asked.

"I'll call you back in 30." She ended the call.

Her mom shot her a wary glance. "Who was on the phone that you couldn't talk in front of me?" Her curly black hair waved as she turned away to check for oncoming traffic at an intersection. "Hmmm?"

"Just a classmate requesting my notes for a test on Monday," she said. "Anyway, thanks for picking me up at Joshua's on short notice. I owe you one."

"You owe me a half dozen at last count," she grinned.

Lydia smiled. "Yeah, I do." She hoped in the next few days to do something for her mom—perhaps an inexpensive gift.

Her mind returned to the image of Joshua sitting there on the cliff edge, his blond hair being blown in the air. She could still feel the light touch of his kiss on her lips—the way he'd bravely leaned toward her. The look on his face, bravery mixed with cute awkwardness, made her smile.

For the second time, he'd been forced out of his protective bubble because of her. She liked these wayward characteristics in Joshua and wondered if she could make such permanent in him without

shattering his world. But another part of her wondered if she would even like him if such changes took place.

She'd enjoyed her time with him at the Four Boulders. She liked that there weren't any phony pretenses about him. He was who he was, and even more important, he accepted her. She might not embrace his God, but he'd not pushed her toward his religion.

She had to wonder, though, if Joshua could handle that which was unique about her, too. At this moment, she knew it unlikely. Perhaps with time, she'd be able to knock off his halo enough to sway him to her way of thinking and normal living. Then, anything might be possible. But such thoughts couldn't be considered so early in their relationship.

She dismissed her heavy thoughts. For now, she just wanted to go home and wait for his call. Who knows? He might call her at any moment to say he was sorry. Or better, he might call to ask her to return later that day. He was, after all, into her. She smiled at that thought.

She rested on the end of her bed staring at her accursed phone screen, tired of playing Candy Crush, the sun's light draining from the room. Four hours had gone by—and still, no call had come.

Did he think of her at all? He couldn't still be praying, could he? Had he forgotten their time together that morning and afternoon, and the previous evening? So many questions churned in her mind. All in one second, she shrugged, flipped onto her back, and decided she'd stop being angry and be less demanding. She allowed her eyes to close as tiredness swept over her from her climb to the Four Boulders and back. He would, eventually, call. She was convinced of that. She just needed to be patient. It was Saturday, early evening. Surely, he wouldn't want to spend the entire day and that evening alone in his monastery, she concluded.

Joshua had entered the wilderness of prayer by his own choosing with a dedication to remain as long as needed. He made his way through the haze, unsure where he was going and when he would arrive.

He sought forgiveness for focusing elsewhere when it was clear his purposes now were so much more vital—especially when Sammy was in need.

Joshua smiled at the joy and peace radiating about him. He marveled at the love that so enfolded around him and in him and through him making him content and yet ever-hungry for more. There was no other place he'd rather be.

He was at home here.

Fifteen | Keeping Watch

Several raps came at the bedroom door. Joshua looked up at his wall clock and saw it was 10 p.m. He leaped up hoping good news had come about Samuel. Opening the door, he found his father standing in the darkened hallway.

"Is Samuel okay?" Joshua asked.

His father's face displayed subtle anger.

Joshua realized the darkened, unhappy look was fixed on him.

"You didn't tell your brothers where we went?"

Joshua suddenly remembered he'd been told to tell his brothers his parents had taken Samuel to the hospital. "Sorry, Dad. I came straight up here after you guys left. I've been praying for Samuel."

"Joshua, for the past six hours, they haven't known where we were. My phone battery didn't last an hour after we reached the hospital—and your mother hadn't brought hers."

"Sorry," Josh repeated.

"Your brothers didn't even know you were up here, son!"

This was the first time in a long time he'd seen his father angry—and he was the cause.

Finally, his father spoke. "Remember that old adage about being 'so heavenly minded that you become no earthly good'?"

The words struck Joshua like a hammer. A recoiling within him took place even as he tried to pull back from the caustic words. But there was no escape. The attack reverberated within him even as he looked away. He fought off his desire to allow his wound to surface on his face. It was clear that his own intentions, his desire for more of God and more of His power pouring through him was misunderstood. How could they ever know what he'd discovered? How could they ever understand the brilliance that remained so close, but which continually cost so much to attain and maintain?

"Is Samuel okay?" Joshua asked in a low voice, casting his father a glance.

"Yeah," his father replied, his voice softer. "He's still got a fever, but the doctor's brought it down some. He's asleep now in his room."

"What's happening with him?"

"Don't worry. Just keep praying," he replied in a reassuring voice even as he pulled the door shut.

His father's words lingered. Was it possible that he was spending so much time keeping watch of himself that his family was in danger of being neglected to the point of disrespect? And his actions with Lydia earlier: had he treated her fairly to ask her to leave?

Opening the door, he stepped into the hallway and then into Samuel's room next to his. There he rested, his chest rising and falling a bit too much, it seemed. He approached his little brother's frame and knelt beside the bed.

Closing his eyes, Joshua whispered the Name of Jesus. Comfort enclosed Joshua even as he gave grateful thanks for his brother. He remained kneeling there listening to the rhythmic, troubled breathing of his sleeping brother. He laid his hands on his heated arm.

"Joshua?" came the tiny, vulnerable voice.

"How're you feeling?"

"I'm scared."

Joshua squeezed his arm gently. "You're not in this alone. We're here with you. And the Lord is not abandoning us." At that, Joshua laid on the bed beside his brother and placed an arm around him and held him. "Love is all we need," he said to Sammy in a near whisper.

As he sat there, Joshua decided he would do his part and trust God, no matter how difficult. He would keep his mind fixed on things above—for the sake of those whom he was meant to minister to around him. Silently, Joshua prayed and rebuked the sickness even as his tiredness took hold of his mind and tugged him into sleep.

Sixteen | Lydia's Resolve

Anger coursed through Lydia. She pressed Joshua's name with stiffened fingers to dial him to give him a piece of her mind. But before it could ring once, she canceled the call. Why should I call him? He should call me! *You surely can't be praying...still!*

Then she realized this strange feeling churning within her. Strange indeed because she recognized it as a jealousy against this god of Joshua's. And it was then she contemplated how she'd bring Joshua back to reality.

"Joshua, your phone!" his Dad shouted from downstairs.

With a jolt, Joshua remembered poor Lydia. He looked at the clock: 10:48 p.m. He hoped it was Brad, or Sergio, or anyone else so he could fulfill his promise and call Lydia.

Rushing downstairs, he grabbed his phone on a side table. *Oh no! Lydia!* "Hello?"

"Hmm, you mean you have time to answer my call?"

Joshua winced. "Lydia, I'm sor—"

"It's okay," she interrupted. "You do your praying, and long walks, and whatever else you want."

"I'm sorry. I've been watching over Samuel all evening. I lost track of time. My Mom took over a few minutes ago."

"Is he feeling better?" she asked, genuine interest in her voice.

"Yes, he seems to be doing better. Thanks for asking."

There came a pause. "Well, I hope you sleep well tonight."

"Please, wait. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings earlier today."

"No need to explain, Joshua." Her voice was frosty. "I wouldn't want you to have to put priority on me when I'm clearly not."

The call ended. He rang her back hoping she'd pick up. It went straight to voicemail. He left a message asking Lydia to call him back.

Joshua sighed. No matter what he did, he made a mess! He stepped over to the window and looked out at the darkened landscape. The moon gleamed in the sky, its light coating the landscape with a soft, bluish hue. The intermittent clouds drifted lazily along, and for a split second, he envied the inanimate objects without a care in the world.

Returning to his bedroom, he plopped down on his bed and forced from his lungs all the trapped air. His many questions echoed within him regarding his relationship with Lydia.

"Please," he prayed. "Give me guidance before I lose everything dear to me. Don't let me fall away from You, Lord. Give me eyes to see, and strength to do whatever You lead me to do—regarding Lydia, regarding every situation in my life now!"

With that, he undressed, pulled back his bed covers, and crawled beneath. He turned on his side and pulled the covers up around his shoulders even as he tried to forget the day's worries and weights.

"Amen," he whispered.

Seventeen | Cary's Change

Climbing off the bus, Joshua made his way toward the school entrance when he collided with someone's broad chest. He looked up to see the bully he'd clashed with days before. His left cheekbone and eye shone purple-black bruising, and red tributaries stretched across the white of his eye. Joshua recognized changes that had taken place since their last encounter. Despite his roughed-up appearance, he looked jovial; and his face displayed a strange peace.

"Hi," the big guy mumbled in a deep but soft voice.

"I'm Joshua," he said, extending his hand. Cary shook his hand and pulled him into a half-embrace.

Joshua felt surprised, and shy, at his former bully's enthusiastic greeting. Cary, too, appeared to be adjusting to this unfamiliar thing called interaction with people.

Cary laughed. "You know who I am 'coz God already told you my name!"

"That's true," Joshua replied.

Cary's glad expression took on a sober, timid look. "Do you mind if we talk for a minute?"

"Sure. What's up?" Joshua's astonishment continued to build.

"I want to know more," he said rubbing his polar bear hands together as if he was eyeing a great treasure spread out before him.

"About?"

"Last week, I...surrendered my life to God. I don't know how to say it, but until that day, I'd never known what genuine love is. Now, I need to know more... but I don't know what the next steps are." He rubbed the back of his neck.

Joshua replied, feeling a burning within his heart. "I understand what you're talking about. When you taste His goodness, nothing else can compare."

"Yeah, man! So true!" Cary said, pounding his fist in excitement. "But how can I know more about Him?"

"Hey, leave him alone!" The voice came from behind.

Brad charged, his eyes set on Cary. Behind him trailed Sergio, Allistair, and Jennifer. Joshua stepped in front of them and raised his hands. "No, Brad...he's not here to hurt me. He's here because he wants to know more about the Lord."

They all shot each other surprised looks.

"Really?" Sergio asked.

"What's your name, anyway?" Jennifer asked.

"Cary."

Within the next few moments, the group of freshmen surrounded the behemoth and prayed for him that God would reveal Himself to Cary and guide him in this new path. Cary's face showed great encouragement.

"Thank you," he said.

"After school," Brad added, "we meet in room 312 to read the Bible and discuss what it means to each of us. You're welcome to come."

Cary nodded with an enormous grin. "I'll be there." Without warning, he rose and stepped toward Brad before wrapping his enormous arms around him causing temporary panic. Then, he turned and hugged each of the others. As he came to Joshua, he held him for an extra-long moment before whispering downward into his ear, "Thanks for blessing me the other day."

Joshua watched as the boy walked toward the school's entrance. A week ago, he'd have gone to wherever gang members go in the space of a day. Now he was attending school and seeking to understand and know more about God.

A wave of joy welled up from within Joshua. He breathed thanks to the One Who had brought Cary out of his troubled, unloved life into something robust and altogether better. He turned to the others finding it impossible to erase the smile upon his lips. They each reflected his smile, in awe of the monumental change in the now-gentle giant.

"How's the time alone with God going?" Joshua asked.

Jennifer replied almost giddy. "I'm doing well. It's been difficult to adjust my schedule having three younger brothers who love to put their noses into anything and everything."

Joshua grinned. "I know about brothers, believe me! But you can do it. Our priority should always be to reach His heart and then not move from there. After we reach that place, we aim to stay and maintain our connection to Him."

They each nodded. Sergio spoke up as the group ambled to the school entrance. "I believe God wants us to do something special as a group on October 15th."

"In a month? What's that?" Joshua asked.

"Not sure, but I believe it's a day for all of us to do a work together for Him."

Brad tightened his book bag straps as he walked. "I told Sergio we should seek the Lord about it and ask Him to confirm it somehow."

"Good idea," Joshua replied. "If He's directing all of us, He will confirm to each of us."

Sergio nodded. "Good idea."

Allistair raised his hand to interject. "We're both confused about how to know if it's God or if it's ourselves. How do you separate His will from our own?"

The short clang of the warning bell sounded.

"That's not something that can be taught. It's about knowing His heart and being responsive to whatever, whenever He impresses it on you. Get in the Bible and don't come out till you know His heart."

"But," Allistair asked, pondering, "suppose I'm wrong. Suppose I do something, and it wasn't God at all—but all me?"

Joshua understood the tension. "In that case, you lean on your faith in God. And if it's a good deed and it wasn't God, at least nothing bad can come out of a good deed, right? That's how I see it."

They nodded.

Jennifer interjected. "Just be obedient. And brave."

Waving goodbye to the guys, Joshua headed to his homeroom class elated at seeing Cary on a fresh path, and at hearing the news that the others were on their own journeys. It would not be easy; and there would never be a time when they could say they'd "arrived," but at least they would know Him intimately, and, in time, give away His life to the lost and spiritually dead around them. That made Joshua content. Approaching his homeroom, Joshua heard her voice from behind.

"Joshua?"

He turned as the bell rang; he was now late. "Hey Lydia."

She kept silent but stepped toward him and seemed to be studying him.

"How are you?" Joshua asked. A scan of his homeroom revealed the teacher not there yet.

"I'm fine. How's Samuel?"

"He's okay. I checked on him this morning and he was sleeping soundly."

"That's good to hear," she said. "Look, I'm sorry about my call on Saturday night. I know you were worried about your brother. Lord knows I wish I had someone who'd watch over me like you do for him."

"I want to do that for you, Lydia," Joshua said, locking his eyes on her eyes which drew him in. Instantly, his truancy was forgotten. She stepped closer to him just as a boy's voice yelled from inside the classroom.

"Joshy! Don't forget to get her saved. She needs Jesus!" Over half the class burst out in laughter.

Joshua peered into the class. Freddie, a tall, thin Puerto Rican boy known for getting a laugh or two at the expense of others, was giggling.

"Don't be a naughty saint!" Freddie followed up. More laughter filled the classroom.

Heat gathered in Joshua's cheeks—of slight embarrassment, and anger. Turning back to Lydia, he saw her eyes boring holes into Freddie.

"Hey." Joshua reached out and touched her arm. Finally, she tore her gaze from the boy back to Joshua. "He's the class clown. Just ignore him."

They stepped away from the entrance to have more privacy. Lydia looked down. Without another word, one of her hands reached and clasped Joshua's hand. "I think I feel something for you." She cast him an infectious smile.

He didn't want to appear insensitive. "I feel something for you, too." Joshua locked onto her eyes which gleamed with desire. For a second time, he forgot where he was.

"That'll be enough, Mr. Phillips," a craggy voice came from down the hallway. "*Romance 101* is for *after* school, not during."

Joshua and Lydia jolted apart at Mr. Bryan's approach as he stepped between them into the room.

"I'll see you later," Lydia said as she reached out and brushed his arm with her hand. Even as she stepped off, her eyes probed the room in Freddie's direction.

Joshua gave a quick wave which she mirrored as he entered the class.

"And you're late, Mr. Phillips," came Mr. Bryan's voice as he approached and sat at his desk.

But Joshua did not mind being tardy. He was caught up at the moment that was now his to treasure. It seemed official to Joshua, but despite the last few days, he and Lydia were now in a relationship. He tried his best to cast aside any conflicts or confusion that would enter his life because of this transition. And though he tried to hide it, he grinned with satisfaction as he sat there, causing several good-natured snickers from students sitting around him.

His face turned an extra shade of red when he realized everyone had been watching him since the moment he'd entered class.

Eighteen | A Clean Slate

Lydia thought the first half of the weekend something of a success in being able to connect with Joshua. She'd found him to be a gentleman, with an affable smile, fun to be with, and rather easy-going despite what she viewed as a restrictive faith. The second half of the weekend, however, had been less than what she'd expected.

It was clear that Joshua would not be the typical boyfriend. She thought several times about giving up on him, yet there remained a keen interest and attraction. Perhaps that's why her hands had tightened into fists so much lately in frustration—because she found her heart newly captive to this boy even though he looked heavenward more than the average guy. But if she was honest, she didn't like the fact that she wasn't in command of her own emotions. Or perhaps this was what love was?

On this morning, she decided to start fresh. She'd wiped the slate clean. Instead of nagging and remaining upset, she'd solidify her feelings and figure out where their relationship was headed—if anywhere worthwhile.

When she saw Joshua, then held onto his hands just several moments before, she'd been filled with a bizarre warmth. The affirmation of their relationship gave her a sense of rootedness as if she were now immovable. Her insides were steeled with a renewed confidence and excitement. Mystery, too. And so many other emotions. She'd been with guys before, but few if any had stirred her like Joshua.

Only one part of her time with Joshua had been marred: That boy's mocking from Joshua's homeroom class. If he'd known who she was, he wouldn't have thought his bantering so amusing. If it was attention the boy was seeking, she knew what to do. He wouldn't be laughing for too much longer after she was done with him.

Nineteen | Burdens

The after-school prayer meeting was typical of other meetings, apart from Cary's presence. His battered appearance, the black eye and bruised face, caused awkwardness in the group. But accompanying the bruises had also come a joy in his face and disposition. It almost seemed too good to be true. Yet, the *Hound of Heaven*, the Holy Spirit, had gone on the hunt and brought home a lost, love-starved child. Joshua still recalled the heartrending dream which made him all the more overjoyed knowing Cary had found love and God's acceptance.

As if Cary's visit wasn't enough of a controversy, he'd brought with him two teenage thugs who flaunted steel-like stares and arrogance. Yet, Joshua noticed something beneath the surface of their protective bravado: a curiosity.

"This is T.J. and B.L.," Cary said, extending his arms around his two friends on his left and right.

Joshua nodded and gave a welcoming smile. "How are you guys?" To his surprise, both thrust open hands to him, which Joshua shook. They gave half-nods and grunts, but their handshakes had been firm. Joshua figured they must be wrestling to understand what had happened to Cary to bring about such an earthquake of a change in him.

"These two," Cary said, "are close friends. They made sure they were absent when the gang initiated me out!" As if punctuating his words, he pointed to his bruises and blackened left eye, which stood out against the backdrop of Cary's blanched-white skin. "They endured an entire day of classes so they could be here now. They've come to find out if God is real. Plain and simple."

Joshua's eyebrows shot up. "The biggest evidence is standing there!" He pointed at Cary.

Both guys stared, looking unconvinced.

Cary bolted past them, nearly shouting as he went, to the others gathered midway across the room. "If you want evidence, all you have to do is look at this guy!" He grasped Brad's shoulders and shot a look to his friends.

"What's so special about him?" T.J. asked, his voice monotone.

Shaking off any timidity, Brad raised himself out of his chair which was conjoined with the desktop. He spoke with a boldness Joshua hadn't seen in him. "Because, over a week ago, I couldn't even stand up or talk to you like I am now. God did that for me in under five minutes!"

At that, the two boys took a seat without saying another word.

After the meeting, Joshua walked alongside Cary as they headed to the parking lot. Cary's eyes blazed with curiosity as he spoke. "What was it that caused you to spend twenty-one days with Him?"

Joshua appreciated his question. "Everyone follows someone or something. The life, teaching, and power of Jesus drew me to want to follow Him. But I knew it would take every bit of my dedication or else, I might as well not try."

Cary nodded as they walked.

Joshua continued. "The Lord seemed to say to me in my heart during those twenty-one days that through Him in me, monumental change would come to the world."

Cary smiled at that. "Big change *is* needed in the world."

Joshua stopped and looked up at Cary. "Your friends seemed to want to believe. But what stopped them from deciding to follow Christ? I thought they were ready, but then they backed off."

A look of concern crossed Cary's face. Reluctantly, he spoke. "They're afraid of leaving the Jaded Hearts. If they leave, the gang might make examples of them."

"What, you mean they'd kill them?"

"There are some things worse than being killed, Joshua. You saw what they did to me, and they liked me. I can tell you that the gang's leaders won't like the changes that are happening right now—especially if B.L. and T.J. also left. Three Hearts gone in a week would not go down well. It might even cause you problems."

"What are the leaders' names so I can pray for them?"

Cary hesitated before answering. "Pistol is the leader. Then there's Mr. Tony. And the big boss, Frank Gelb."

"Pistol, Mr. Tony, and Gelb, eh?" he repeated to memorize their names. "Pistol *sounds* like a person who needs prayer."

"That's what I've always known him as in the years I was in the gang."

"Mister Tony, eh?"

"I don't know much about him. I just know he occasionally controls the Hearts to do things for him. But none of the gang has ever been allowed to meet Mr. Tony. Or Frank."

"What did you have to do for Mr. Tony or Frank guy?"

Cary shook his head. "Not a good idea. I don't think I should tell you anything about that."

"Is it something that affects our school?"

"All I can say is, it affects *everything* in this city."

"And you can't tell me more?"

"If I told you, it'd put us both in danger."

"Okay," Joshua replied with irritation in his voice. At the edge of the parking lot, he stopped at the point they'd separate. "Pray about it. God's working in our lives not just for our own sakes, but for each one of the people at our school and beyond—even those in the Jaded Hearts including Pistol, Mr. Tony, and Frank."

"I'll do what you guys do, pray," Cary replied. "If God leads me to share with you, I'll share. But," he said solemnly, "you may end up wishing you didn't know what I know."

It was then that Joshua remembered the warning about the darkness, and how it would not take kindly to the work of God. Despite that, Joshua had decided to trust God. There was nothing inside him that would allow him to turn back now. Whatever was to come, good or bad, he'd face it with the determination and strength of Samson. In fulfilling the will of God, however, he prayed he wouldn't have a similar fate to Samson.

"So, how are you and Lydia?" Joan asked as they neared home.

"We're fine, Mom," Joshua said.

"Is it official yet?" she asked, giving a sidelong glance, a smile playing at her lips.

"I guess so."

His mom displayed her pearly whites, impressed. "She is such an attractive young lady. I hear your brothers are just a tad jealous."

"They are?" Joshua glanced at her.

"You should try to find time to be with them more. It won't be long before they're going off to college or, in Kris's case, into the Air Force."

"Yeah, I'd like to do that." He glanced down at his phone, feigning non-interest. "They're proud of me?"

"Yes." She grinned, her hands directing the steering wheel as needed.

A sense of goodness settled within him knowing the thoughts of his big brothers toward him. He shot his mom a look. "How was Sammy this morning?"

"He was feeling better today so we let him go to school."

"That's good to hear." He paused a second. "Mom, did you ever have a faith like mine when you were younger?"

She considered the question. Finally, the words tumbled forth. "I went to a Christian camp when I was fourteen which impacted me, which is why our family goes to church every week. I've tried to give each of you kids the chance to have the Lord in your lives if you so choose."

"What about Dad? How did he come to know the Lord?"

"Why don't you ask him?" she asked, giving him a sidelong glance. "Good for bonding."

Joshua caught her grin directed at him. His mom always worked to bring the family closer together. But he resisted the advice to ask his father. He still remembered his father's sharp words days before. "He was angry with me for not telling Kris and Bruce you guys were at the hospital with Sammy on Saturday night."

"Your father worries about Samuel. And he was tired when he spoke to you."

"Why hasn't Dad gone with us to church the last few Sundays? That's not normal for him."

Their car pulled into the driveway.

"Mom?"

Joshua's mom seemed to hesitate to give an answer. Turning off the engine, she prepared to get out of the car. She halted for a second. "Just pray for him, Joshua. He may not seem as deep as you are when it comes to faith, but he does believe." She jingled the keys in her hand. "And, his faith's been tested, lately."

Joshua's mind replayed her words. *What's testing Dad?*

His mom came around the car toward the front door. "When you get the chance, talk to him. He's fair and he'll tell you exactly what he thinks and answer questions the same way."

"Mom?" His mom walked behind him up onto the porch. "What's the test? I mean, for Dad?"

Without answering him, she stepped past Joshua and put the keys in the lock and turned. The door swung inward. Before stepping inside, she gave him a sidelong glance. "Talk to your father when you can."

"Okay, Mom." He entered inside, then turned left and climbed the carpeted stairs to his bedroom.

He entered his room and closed the door behind him. He set his overstuffed bookbag on his bed. Opening his closet door on his left, he hung his jacket on a coat hanger. Then, unzipping his bag and removing his heavy textbooks, he stepped around to his desk and arranged the books according to the homework he'd need to do. As was routine, he approached both of his windows and closed the curtains—one directly above his desk, the other opposite his bed's footboard about two paces.

Before delving into the algebra problems that Mrs. Blackwell had assigned, he lied down on his bed to rest a few moments. He stared up at his phone screen checking the statuses of his friends. As he did, he reflected on what his mom had said about his father being tested.

A series of loud scratches drew his attention at the window straight ahead. He jolted upright and stared at the window wondering what was happening. It was as if something was trying to get inside. Then, from the corner of his left eye, came the slow opening and massive squeak of his closet door. As he turned to his left, a gunshot exploded around him shaking him and the house. Inches from him, a massive black head with eyes of red and thin, razor teeth stared at him. Its mouth formed a wide sneer. The putrid smell of its rotten breath invaded his nasal passage down into his throat.

Josh screamed as he sat up—the darkened room around him threatening and dangerous. His heart pounded against his sternum. He looked around afraid, feeling cornered by the darkened form—its hideous face still ingrained in his mind’s eye. Some relief came when he realized it’d only been a dream. Yet it seemed so real.

Whatever it was, it seemed intent to inject fear into him. It lingered filling his insides with a sickly feeling. Instinctively, he pulled his knees to himself as a protective measure. He whispered the Name even as shame filled him that he didn’t have more courage. He forced himself up from the bed and shouted out, “*Jesus is Lord!*”

A comfort and sweetness swept into the room allowing for no empty or unused spaces. Then came to his mind a reminder of the Master’s words he’d read days before: “I will never leave nor forsake you.” The Word collided with the darkness, yet both showed to him that his life remained at the pivotal point of a great conflict. Joshua slipped to the carpet onto his knees and prayed as he sought the Lord’s refuge.

“My Lord!” He squeezed his eyes shut. The Presence strengthened and thickened about Him. The dread siphoned from the room. A heaviness pressed down upon him. “What is it, Lord?” Joshua prayed a bit longer before getting up and grabbing his guitar from the corner. He sat on the edge of his bed and strummed a song of worship. As his heart went deep, the air cleared even more. However, a burden ached and twisted down his spine settling within him. He pressed into the Lord’s heart, speaking to the Lord in utterances known and unknown—his eyes fixed on the One. “I trust You, I trust You.”

Without a sound, his bedroom door swiveled toward him revealing a darkened head. An urge to scream nearly overwhelmed him. His eyes doubled in size until he realized it was just Kris.

“Hey brat!” He made a silly face before laughing. “Dinner’s ready!”

Twenty | Broken Fred

Arriving at his homeroom at the start of the day, Joshua saw the class whispering ferociously—even with the teacher standing at the front of the room. Even at Mr. Bryan’s stern protest, there remained the cyclone of fevered rumination.

“What’s going on?” Joshua whispered to Cheryl, a girl seated next to him.

“Did you hear about Freddie?”

“What about him?” he asked, remembering the boy’s jeering playfulness directed toward Lydia and him the previous morning.

“He was attacked while walking to school.”

“Attacked? Is he okay?”

“He’s in the hospital. I heard his arm was broken.”

“Did they find out who attacked him?”

“They’re still not sure, but they think the Jaded Hearts did it.”

“Hmm,” Joshua murmured, turning away, troubled. His mind returned to Lydia’s expression the day before when Freddie had had his little bit of fun at their expense. Her face had surprised him—disfigured with something that resembled a repressed rage. Was there a connection between this morning’s violence and her response to Freddie?

“Joshua Phillips.”

“Present,” he answered Mr. Bryan’s roll call. Despite such coincidences, Joshua shook off his suspicion. Lydia was not like that and certainly wasn’t able to cause such an attack on poor Freddie.

Later, one class away from lunch, a hungry Joshua made his way through the thick crowds of students toward his science class. He was about to enter the room when he heard his name called from behind. Turning, he saw Lydia’s beaming smile. Joshua smiled back at her giving her a brief look over before slowing down to wait for her. As usual, she looked graceful in a light blue top and dark blue jeans she wore.

“How’s your day going?” he asked as he reached over and gave her a kiss on her cheek.

A pleased grin crossed her face as she brushed back a black strand of hair from her eyes. She cradled two books and a notebook. “Good here,” she replied with a buoyant grin. “And you?”

His lips formed a subtle smile. “Fine here.”

“Why’s that?” she asked over her shoulder as they moved through the crowds of huddling students.

“‘Coz I’m with you again,” he chuckled.

The corners of her lips rose. “Same way I feel.”

“Hey, you remember that boy that was heckling us yesterday in my homeroom?” Joshua queried.

“Yeah, what about him?”

“He was attacked while walking to school this morning. They think someone in the Jaded Hearts did it.” They neared their class and stopped just outside the door.

“Really?” There was concern in her voice. But then, almost instantly, it changed. “I suppose you think I should be sorry for him?” she asked, her lips pressed together forming a straight line.

“But his arm was broken,” he answered, studying her reaction.

“I repeat: ‘You think I should be sorry for him?’” she said in an even tone.

“What does that mean?”

“It means, ugliness goes around, and it certainly comes around.”

“He was just joking with us. He didn’t deserve to end up in the hospital.” Joshua noted Mr. Opal’s approach and shifted to let him get by.

“Good morning, class,” he bellowed as he entered.

Joshua and Lydia took their cues to follow the teacher inside even as he considered her reply. Was he being too sensitive about Lydia’s insensitivity? He found her viewpoint, no matter how much he tried to reason it, unacceptable.

The next eighty minutes seemed to stretch indefinitely. Joshua tried to act normal and give his attention to class and to Lydia. Yet there was something inside that made him feel as if the wind had been kicked out of him.

Following class, Lydia stepped to Joshua’s desk as he readied to leave for lunch. “I’m sorry. I hope Freddie’s okay,” she offered, her voice steady and sure. “It’s just that I barely know him. My only perception of him is from yesterday—and no, I didn’t appreciate being teased by him.”

Joshua finished placing his books and folders into his backpack before looking up into her open face. “I don’t think anyone deserves to be put in the hospital.”

Lydia nodded, though her black eyes seemed steel-like and lacking warmth. “Fine. I’ll have some flowers delivered to him if it makes you feel better!”

Joshua looked up at her and noted the hint of a smirk on her face. “No flowers are necessary,” he said, unamused. “Maybe some genuine sympathy?”

“Josh, okay!” At that, she walked down the row of desks and out of the class.

Joshua wanted to call out to her, to stop her from leaving him, but something else within him wouldn’t let him do it.

Twenty-One | God's Gunslinger

After school and the daily devotional meeting, Joshua awaited his Mom's arrival to take him home. He'd forgotten to recharge his cellphone the night before which had left his phone with a dead battery halfway through the day. He waited an hour before he realized she wasn't coming. The school grounds empty, he started the forty-minute walk home. Doing anything would be better than standing there waiting.

As he walked, he prayed. He whispered the Name and thanked Him for His love and daily provision. He even thanked the Lord for the ability and strength of walking. With a smirk, however, he lifted a supplication to the Lord in jest, "It'd be nice, though, if someone I know stopped to give me a ride."

About halfway home, he saw a small convenience store he'd traveled past perhaps thousands of times in a car without ever stopping once. Waiting to pay for his drink, Joshua noticed an older man standing in front of him talking with a slurred voice to a disinterested clerk.

A bottle rested in the man's left hand. He sipped at the bottle, his worn, whiskered face beet red from the past summer's scorch. His hair had receded halfway—the remains of which were a bleached yellow. In his mid- to upper-fifties, he looked to be a farmer in his worn blue-jean suspenders. The only thing he lacked for the impression was a brimmed straw hat.

As the man stepped outside, the clerk, in his low twenties, raised his eyes to the ceiling and shook his head. "Every day, he comes in drunk!"

"Does he cause you problems?"

"Not really. But he always tells the same stories." The man wore a nametag on his uniform that read *John*.

The Voice whispered within Joshua. *Tell John what I am about to do in this man's life today.*

Huh? But rather than question or linger, Joshua spoke to the clerk. "You'll think this strange, but the Lord will do an amazing work in that man today. And you will be a witness to His work."

The clerk stared at Joshua as if paralyzed. "Oooookaaay," he managed in a half-mocking tone. "It took the Good Lord six days to create everything; it'll take a lot more than six days for the Lord to change *that* man."

Joshua grabbed his ice cold glass bottle of Pepsi. He understood the clerk's skepticism. He waved and smiled at him as he exited the shop.

The old man sat beneath the shade at one of two table-bench combos on the side of the parking lot. Walking over to him, Joshua gave the man an uncertain smile locking eyes with him.

"W-What do you want?" the man asked, a slur in his voice.

Joshua saw into those hardened, hazel eyes. Forgetting himself or how the man might react, Joshua shared. "The Lord hears all your stories, but He hears much more than that. He hears most of all the story of your heart being shattered into tiny pieces over the years. He loves to fix things."

"W-Who are you?" the man asked. When Joshua didn't reply quick enough, the man pounded the table with his fist. "*What* do you want?" His face grew deeper shades of red and his teeth clenched.

Joshua, instead of retreating, stepped closer to him. "It doesn't matter who *I* am. It is *He* Who will take your pain. And replace it with a new heart—one that's whole and can receive love again. He wants to help you."

Without warning, the man's fury morphed into laughter before changing again to sobbing. Tears slipped down his red cheeks. Half a minute later, having caught his breath, he eyed Joshua. "Help me?"

Did He help me six years ago when my wife died? What good's His help now when I'm a shell of what I once was?"

Words alone would do no good. At the prompting of the Unseen One, and with a boldness that was becoming more familiar of late, Joshua reached forward placing his hand on the man's shoulder. "The healing you require will come when you know that you're absolutely loved and have never been alone."

Something like a current of electricity shot through the man as he jolted backward off the bench onto the grassy knoll behind him. Joshua pulled back, shocked by what had happened. He scrambled to help the old man back onto the bench. However, the man appeared conked out in a still, calm sleep. Tapping his cheeks, Joshua drew the man out of his unconscious state. His eyes slipped open, and his face appeared rested and at peace. "What an amazin' dream," he said, his voice crisp and clear. His eyes were lit with something—Joshua was seeing hope there.

"You had a dream?" Joshua asked.

The man sat up. "Yes. I dreamed I was in my unlit house by myself when a streaming light came through the window into the room. Then, arms enfolded around me from behind and I heard a Voice. It was soothing and kind, but strong. It said my heart needed to open to receive a gift."

"What gift was that?"

"Can't you tell?"

"You do look like a different man than what I saw minutes ago."

"Who are you?" the man asked, looking Joshua over as if he'd just now seen him for the first time.

"Joshua Phillips," he answered with a smile. "My father's Dennis Phillips who owns the Old Sterling Repair Shop in the city center."

"I see." At that, the man stood up with Joshua's help before taking his hand in his and shaking it. He walked toward the store, appearing groggy until he'd taken a few steps. "I'm thirsty," he shouted over his shoulder toward Joshua.

Joshua took a seat on the bench, his back pressed against the table's wooden edge.

Minutes later, the old man exited the store, four one-gallon cartons of spring water in his hands. With a wave, he headed down the road.

"Where are you going, sir?" Joshua yelled after the old man.

The man stopped and turned back toward him. He paused as he looked down at the ground and then up at him again. The corners of his eyes crinkled as his face shone. "Home. I have a refrigerator and kitchen cabinet full of junk to get rid of—stuff I won't be needin' anymore."

Joshua nodded, in awe of God's power. "Don't forget to read the Bible!" he shouted.

The old man turned and waved as he walked down the road, as if he didn't have a care in the world. Joshua sat watching him saunter off. There came a voice from the shop entrance.

"What'd you do to him? He was completely sober." John, the clerk, stood there watching the old man head down the street.

"I told you what the Lord said to me about him. The Lord healed his broken heart. Remember what you've seen today." At that, Joshua stood and resumed his walk home. For a moment, he pictured an old gunslinger in a black and white film he'd seen as a child. He felt like one, having been used to down another work of darkness. He grinned at the silly image.

God always seemed to work His plans out, Joshua realized, through circumstances that made His people uncomfortable or inconvenienced. He now welcomed his walk home. He glanced back. John the clerk still stood there staring in his direction.

By the time the demons knew the Lightbearer was near, it was too late. And as the Voice rollicked within the boy, deafening the dark ones, they shrieked with fear and rage. This old one they'd infested for years was theirs—his life theirs, his warmth theirs, his gloomy moods and memories theirs to feed on. It was as if he was a puppet on their strings.

And then the boy's single touch had come—the life of God flooding in, the enemy having no choice but to scream and rage as they departed into the freezing oblivion of the wandering places.

When Joshua got home, he found the house unusually silent. On the kitchen table was a handwritten note.

Had to take Samuel to the hospital.

I'll call you guys later.

Love, Mom

Joshua sighed as he finished reading the note. He collapsed into a chair at the table feeling worn out. Samuel's condition had not improved—despite Joshua's praying.

"Lord," Joshua said aloud. "*What* is going on?" But there came only the still silence of an empty house. Going up to his room, Joshua dived onto his bed. The soft, cool blankets comforted him. Though the situation seemed uncertain, perhaps even out of his control, Joshua would not ruminate on the things he could *not* do, but on the things he *could*. He grabbed his guitar from the corner and strummed, his voice lifting praises to the One. Then, as his voice fell away, his fingers plucked the strings in a way that relaxed and soothed him. He prayed for the next several hours—not just for Sammy but for the old man, for John, for Freddie, for Lydia, for the Bible Club—and for the future that God was leading him towards. He prayed he'd remain faithful whatever challenges came at him.

Twenty-Two | Thirty Days

Lydia dialed a number on her cellphone and waited. She used a distortion app to talk to him.

"Garrett," she said. "Good job. But did you really have to go overboard and break his arm?"

"Hey, I did what you told me: Teach him a lesson!"

"Next time don't be so damn zealous. Did you pass along the message I told you to give him?"

"Yeah."

"Good. At least you did *that* part right!"

"Hey, I—"

"Are you sure there weren't any witnesses?"

"None."

"Good. Bye!"

She clicked the "end" button and then dialed Joshua's number. It rang half a dozen times with no one answering.

She considered what Joshua would do if he knew she'd been the cause of Freddie's present misery. Still, she bet the class clown wouldn't be in a mood to jeer and jest for a long time.

Just then, Lydia heard a car pull into the driveway. She expected it to be her mom. Looking out the window, she yelled out, in a near panic. "Oh noooo!"

With a jolt, her heart pounding in her chest, she yanked the front door open and stood in the doorway. With fall upon them, a chill engulfed her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

A tall musclebound man stepped out of the sleek black BMW car. He wore dark-tinted Gucci sunglasses and a heavy, black leather jacket. Gold necklaces sparkled in the sunlight. His face, framed by raven black hair, sported a well-groomed dark goatee on his square jaw. In his forties, the man wore a tanned complexion that included his hands—obviously gained elsewhere and not from the Iowa sun.

"Just stopped by to see how you're doing," he said, his eyes fixed on her, a tinge of menace present.

"This is definitely not a good time for a *visit*, Frank!" She glanced at her small-face, gold watch. "My mom will be home any time."

"A brief visit, sweetie," he replied. "How's the recruiting?"

"It's all good, Frank. Now, can you get back in your car and leave?"

"Don't talk to me like that," he said, threat in his voice. "We *need* more recruits. Can you make it happen?" He stepped toward Lydia before stopping just shy of the bottom porch step. Lydia stood just in the doorway with her arms crossed.

"Sure, with some time," she said, impatience growing in her voice. "But what's with this social visit? I've already made the operation three times what it was when I came into this mess."

"Just making sure you don't get religion. It seems to be spreading throughout the school like an acute case of the flu. Even a few of the Hearts have caught it."

"Do I look like a girl who'd try on old-time Gospel?"

"What's with this church club that meets after school?" His voice was no nonsense in tone.

"It's a club for geeks, weaklings, misfits, Frank. No harm there."

"I want it shut down."

She gave him a fixed look. "All they're doing is reading their Bibles..."

"You heard me," he said turning and walking back toward his car. "I don't care for the competition. You have thirty days to make it happen," he shouted behind him.

“Thirty days?”

He opened the door and stood still. “Thirty days to get rid of this Bible thumpers group, and another thirty to double recruiting.”

“How do I do that?”

He stared back at Lydia. “One of the chief leaders—his name’s Joshua Phillips. He needs a new hobby after school. Make sure he discovers it.”

“Frank!” she said, flustered. “I only agreed to recruiting and the passing of goods. That’s it!” The man slipped on his sunglasses and smiled as if she’d just agreed to his demands.

“Frank!”

Climbing back into his BMW, he pulled his door shut, started the engine before reversing out of the driveway. Watching the car roar into the distance, Lydia considered Frank’s instructions. She stared down at her empty palms as a light-headedness swept over her. *How can I escape this place I’m in?* She slammed the front door closed before stepping to her sofa and plopping down. She hugged herself and closed her eyes.

The instructions troubled her. She just wanted to be with Joshua—to be held by him—and *not* to hurt him. She knew he loved her. But not more than he loved his god. She knew even now, he was probably praying somewhere—her being the last thing on his mind.

“Okay,” she said aloud. “I’ll do it...I’ll bring down Joshua’s little empire. And when it’s all finished, he’ll have no one left to cling to but me.”

Twenty-Three | Lil' Samuel

Through the thin veil of his praying, Joshua heard someone enter the house; it was almost eight o'clock. Sensing it was appropriate to end his prayer session, he came to the top of the spiral staircase that led to the kitchen and stopped when he heard voices—his little brother and mother talking.

"But what is it?" Samuel asked.

Joshua wondered, *What is 'what'?*

"It's what's making you sick, honey. But the doctor will help make you well, okay? I'll heat some chicken soup for you."

"Okay," Samuel said.

Joshua descended the staircase. "Hi," he said as he reached the bottom.

"Oh, hey!" his mom said, a surprised look on her face. "Want some chicken soup and crackers with your brother?"

"No thanks, Mom." Joshua stepped over and hugged his seated brother from behind.

"Hey, Josh," Samuel said looking up at him.

"Mom, what were you saying to Sammy about the doctor?"

"He will be fine," she replied.

"But what's wrong?"

Joshua watched his mom stop what she was doing and stand still, too still, as if to compose herself. Finally, she turned, a tinge of red framing her eyes. "I've been waiting for the right moment to share with you and your brothers. Something's wrong with Samuel's blood. It explains why he's been so weak and fevered lately."

"Samuel's blood?" Bailey brushed against his leg and looked up at him. He bent low and rubbed his fur coat and the top of his head, the dog squinting in delight. Joshua waited with patience for his mom to reply. She turned back and stirred the soup.

"So, it's serious?"

She gave him a quick nod before throwing him a glance. "You sure you don't want some soup with your...brother?" Her voice wavered on the last word.

"Okay, Mom. Sounds good." He sat down beside Samuel and placed his arm across his shoulders.

"Mom says the doctor's going to make me better." Samuel looked up at him with a smile.

Joshua leaned toward him and pulled him closer into a hug.

After Samuel had eaten and been ushered to bed, his mom returned and sat down in front of Joshua. Her voice soft, she steeled herself before speaking. "He has an aggressive form of leukemia."

With immediate effect, the words hollowed out his insides. "How long have you and Dad known?"

"We've known he was unwell the past few weeks, but the official diagnosis came a few days ago."

He looked at his mom's face, suddenly so frail and worn, which frightened him. He dismissed his anger at not being told about this sooner. Joshua scrambled to think of a strategy for taking hold of this thing. He'd seen the power of God—he knew it could break in and change any situation.

"He will need all the support we can give him," Joan said, her voice firm.

The emptiness churned within Joshua, despite his internal strategizing. It disturbed Joshua how one word with just two syllables, the C word, could devastate his mind and rearrange his world in seconds.

Just before heading to bed himself, Joshua went to Samuel's bedroom. The lights out, Samuel lied on the bed on his back. Joshua kneeled beside his bed. "Sammy? Are you still awake?" he whispered.

"Yeah."

"Do you remember that time, two summers ago, when you were on the back porch and you turned around to find that opossum a couple feet from you? When it saw you, it opened its long mouth and bared its rows of sharp teeth at you?"

Samuel chuckled and turned toward him. "Yeah, I remember."

"Mom and me were watching from inside the kitchen."

Samuel laughed again. "Yeah, it scared me to death!"

"What did you do when you saw it?"

"I opened up the door and got inside as fast I could."

"Why?"

"Coz I was scared. And it was safe inside."

Joshua rested his hand on Samuel's arm and squeezed gently. "If we are scared about anything, anything at all, the Lord is our Refuge. We must run to Him where we'll always find safety."

Samuel nodded, a half-smile appearing. "Sounds like a plan."

Joshua grinned. He felt a glimmer of hope fill him, the sound of his words to Samuel somehow ministering to him, too. "Want to go to a movie tomorrow night? Maybe we can get Mom to take us."

After finishing his time with Samuel, Joshua walked outside, flashlight in hand, toward the solitude of the woods, Bailey with him. As a chilled wind swept past him, he spoke toward the expanse of the endless sky. The sun's pale light had dipped beneath the horizon, the thick darkness gathering overhead.

"Lord, I don't know what's going on," he said as he walked along the trail. "I barely have control of my own life, never mind my little brother and Lydia and my school. I need to know You're there, and that You won't leave me alone to mess everything up."

Joshua glanced up at the darkened tops of the tall trees that formed a canopy. He walked along the trail for a short distance, yellow, orange, and red leaves coating the flooring. His words lingered between heaven and earth, but there was no confirmation of message received in Heaven, nor a sense of His Presence to reassure him. But Joshua knew He was there. He knew he needed to be as honest as possible to release his burdens.

"You know everything; You know my thoughts. Over and over, I've prayed for Sammy. Yet my prayers accomplish nothing. What am I doing wrong? I need to know what to do. I gotta take care of my little brother." Then the thought came to him, which he verbalized even as the tears welled up: "I love him. I would gladly take his place if it meant he could live."

He fought the urge to break down in tears.

"Regardless, I pray what *You* want will happen, not what I want." Even as that statement left his lips, Joshua worried if he could accept that Will, whatever the outcome. "Help me to trust You, Lord. Help me do my part. I can't let Sammy die because of any failure in me. And don't leave me alone. I need You so much. And Sammy needs You."

Nothing came. No reassurance. No immediate sense of comfort.

Resisting the discouragement brewing inside, he still prayed. "Your perfect Will be done!"

The darkness smothered him—the boy’s focus on the storm surrounding him so intense that it made the dark ones’ constant screams and shrieks in his spiritual ears even more effective. Their strategy of blocking out and preventing any Word from On High reaching the boy had worked wonders. Soon they would wear the boy down like time, water, and wind erodes even the greatest of mountains. Anointed though he might be, the boy lacked experience or maturity to weather these attacks. They would amplify his discouragement at not sensing the Lord’s comforting Presence. Soon enough, they would make him ineffective and vulnerable.

Twenty-Four | Lydia's Confession

The next morning Joshua went to school, the aftertaste of knowing his younger brother faced an indescribable ordeal lodged in him. In just a matter of hours since his chat with his mom, his perception of the world had shifted; he wished the quiet, lighthearted chit-chat of his bus mates was his own. Instead, a heaviness pressed down on him as if to squeeze the very breath from his lungs. Not that he distrusted the Lord. It was that no matter what he did, no matter what he prayed, he couldn't budge the burden from his heart regarding Samuel.

Stepping off his bus, Joshua met Sergio, Allistair, Brad, and Jennifer at the white stone bench that sat off from the walkway to the school entrance. A still haze clung to the green of the football fields that surrounded the high school into the distance. A *clanging* came from the flagpole nearby.

Joshua eyed his friends. "How's everything?"

They each nodded, pleased expressions on their faces.

Joshua continued. "How's the praying and seeking going? Are you finding the heart of God?"

Sergio spoke up. "It hasn't been easy. But I'm still plugging away."

Allister let his heavy bookbag slip from his back to the ground like a ton of bricks. "Same here. But my parents are wondering what's happening to me," he said, laughing.

"Yeah, that happened to me, too," Joshua replied. "When they ask, just tell them the truth: You're seeking God's heart."

"Easier said than done," Allistair said. "They're atheists. As far as they're concerned, I'm wasting my time praying to nobody."

"Then look for opportunities with your parents to counter that notion. *Show* them He's real."

"How? If I do more chores, my parents just think that should be normal for us kids. If you lived in an Asian household, you'd know this," he said, beaming a smile.

Joshua laughed at that. "Ask for sensitivity from the Holy Spirit. He'll show you how."

"Yeah, I think that's the only way."

Joshua turned to Jennifer. "Going good with you, too?"

Jennifer nodded. "When my little brothers aren't harassing me."

"Keep at it, Jennifer. Use that harassment as an opportunity to reveal God's reality to them through acts of kindness."

Jennifer acknowledged that with a nod and a smile.

Joshua fixed his gaze at the grassy ground. "Guys, can you please remember my brother, Samuel, in your prayer times? I found out last night some terrible news."

"What?" Brad asked, concern in his voice.

"They found out why he's been sick of late. An aggressive form of blood cancer is attacking him."

"Oh my," Brad said, sadness blanketing his face.

They each gave their consent that they'd pray for Samuel every day until he was healed.

Having several minutes left before the beginning of class, they lingered at the stone bench. Sergio pointed toward a crowd of students making their way into the school. "Look, there's Freddie."

Joshua saw him, his right arm bent in a bulging, white cast.

"This city's getting dangerous to live in," Jennifer said. "Poor guy."

"At least it's only a broken arm," Allistair added. "Could've been much worse the way he was attacked."

Freddie saw them looking at him. He changed direction and walked toward them.

"Does he want us to pray for him?" Brad asked.

Joshua scanned Freddie's face, contorted with anger. "I don't think so!" He prepared for the worst. As Freddie drew nearer, he screamed out in rapid Spanish, his furious eyes and outburst directed toward Joshua.

"What's wrong?" Joshua asked, facing the angry boy. Freddie became silent as he stepped nose to nose with Joshua who was a few inches shorter.

"Is this how you spread your Message?" Freddie asked, throwing a glance down to his cocooned arm.

"What are you talking about?" Joshua implored.

"The guy who did this to me gave me a message when he attacked me."

"*What* message?"

"He told me I need Jesus!"

"You think I had someone attack you? I wouldn't do that to anyone."

"Look at my arm. It's done. Are you happy now?"

Joshua raised his hands defensively, troubled. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Throwing a disgusted look at Joshua and then at the entire group, Freddie stepped backward before walking off, again sputtering in indecipherable Spanish.

"What was that all about?" Jennifer asked.

"I'm not sure," Joshua said, pondering the accusation. He excused himself from the group and headed toward homeroom. As he walked, he tried to figure out how in the world Freddie had thought him involved, and why the boy who had attacked him had mentioned Jesus. He was about to push it all aside when he remembered the teasing words by Freddie days before. He'd said, "She needs Jesus."

Joshua remembered Lydia's seething rage after Freddie had spoken those words. Was it true? Had Lydia been involved in Freddie's beating? But how?

In Mr. Opal's class, Joshua wrote a note and dared to have it passed to Lydia. He'd written: *Hey, Lydia. Need to talk to you after class.*

She wrote back. *Okay, talk to you in ten minutes. Hope Samuel's doing better.*

When class ended, Lydia joined Joshua as they made their way to the cafeteria. He told her about Samuel. Saddened, she offered to do anything possible to help.

"There's nothing anyone can do, except pray."

"Is it bad? The cancer, I mean?"

"It'll be a tough fight for Samuel," Joshua said, his voice breaking.

She stopped him and reached her arm around Joshua giving him a hearty hug. They held each other for a few seconds. They continued down the hallway holding hands. Joshua finally spoke. "About my note I sent you in class. Do you know what's going on with Freddie?"

"Huh?" She gave him a frosty look.

"I mean, did you have someone beat him up?" Joshua kept his face neutral yet resolute.

Lydia stopped mid-stride and turned to Joshua. "What are you talking about?"

"He came to me this morning and told me the message he'd been told."

"What message?"

"That he needed Jesus. Just like what Freddie said to us." Joshua studied her face to see her reaction. If she lied to him now, that would be the end of their relationship. He'd always been honest with her. He expected the same.

"I asked a friend to talk to him, Joshua. It wasn't meant to get violent."

"Wasn't meant to get violent'? Who was this friend?"

"Just a friend." She looked flustered by his questions.

"What's going on, Lydia?"

Lydia locked her eyes onto his. "Okay, you want to know the truth? I'll tell you."

"Go on," he replied, his face growing hot.

"I have friends in the Jaded Hearts."

Joshua blinked at her words. "What kind of friends could they be? No one just has friends in that gang."

"They're more like acquaintances than friends."

He grimaced as heat gathered in his chest. "I can't believe you'd do this. I'm a follower of Jesus, Lydia. And you made it look like I was involved in having him beat up."

"I'm sorry, Joshua."

"Me too!" he said, walking off without her.

"Wait!" she shouted. "Joshua?"

He stopped and half-turned, but avoided eye contact. "I'll talk to you later about this."

"No, we'll talk about it *now*," she replied matter-of-factly and walked after him.

Joshua took a deep breath while keeping his gaze fixed on the end of the hallway where he wanted to go. "Listen," he said, looking her in the eyes. "I have to think about what you've just told me. I'm wondering if I really know you, Lydia. I have too many other things on my shoulders as it is."

"Okay," Lydia managed. "Can I call you tonight?"

Joshua hesitated. "I guess. Bye, Lydia." He walked off.

Joshua struggled to reconcile that Lydia had *friends* in the Hearts gang, and been involved in Freddie's assault—though she said she'd only asked for Freddie to be talked to. He appreciated Lydia's honesty, but he struggled to know if he could continue in a relationship with her.

Entering the cafeteria, Joshua approached Freddie. At the sight of him, Freddie became disgusted, the others around him displaying the same looks. Joshua did not retreat. "I'm sorry about what happened to you. I just want you to know I wasn't involved."

Freddie glanced up at Joshua. "And if I don't talk to you now, are you going to have my other arm broken, too?"

Some other classmates were now talking to each other in low voices as they watched and listened in on the conversation.

"Listen, I had nothing to do with what happened. My girlfriend asked her friend to talk to you, that's all," Joshua said. "He wasn't supposed to attack you!" He heard his own words and still found it hard to believe this had happened.

Freddie swore under his breath. "Man, there wasn't any talking involved! Just me being attacked from behind. What did I say to you or to your girlfriend to deserve this?" Freddie asked, lifting his cast toward him.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Joshua asked, saddened.

"Yeah, leave me alone!" Freddie shouted, punctuating his sentence by lifting his lunch tray off the table and slamming it down—peas and carrots and a bread roll scattering onto the table and floor.

Joshua saw how futile talking to him was now. He conceded defeat before walking off.

"Oh," Freddie shouted after him. "I'm sure the police will want to talk to you later about your confession."

Joshua stopped and faced him. "Do what you have to do!" he said, pressing his lips together.

At that, he left the lunchroom, the weight of a concern squeezing his heart that he'd likely be questioned by the police, and Lydia, too. "Lord help me," he whispered. His life seemed to be unraveling in every area and seemed only to be getting worse.

Twenty-Five | Tentacles

After school, Joshua met with the Bible Club which had grown to fifteen members. As was usual now, Cary showed up. After their gathering, Cary approached Joshua.

"I did some praying," he said, pushing back the long, black strands of hair half-covering his eyes. "To be honest, praying isn't easy for me. But I believe it'd be wrong not to tell you some of what's going on. But remember, it will change how you see this school and city."

"Great, more weights to carry around," Joshua said, grinning.

"What's wrong?" He rested a heavy paw on his shoulder. "Is it a bad time for me to talk to you about this?"

"No, it's not that. You know about my brother's cancer; that's just one thing. My grades are suffering. My girlfriend and I are having troubles." Waving goodbye to everyone, Joshua walked down the empty hallway with Cary's large mass beside him.

"Sorry to hear about all that," Cary said.

"Well, tell me what you know." Joshua took in a deep breath.

Cary nodded. "The Jaded Hearts are affiliated with a drug network that operates throughout this school, other schools, the local colleges, and throughout the city. They help Mr. Tony, who I told you about before, by being his arms of distribution and occasional muscle. He's the one who runs the drug network making sure the demand for drugs remains high."

"Go on."

"Well, they run the network by using teenagers to distribute the drugs discreetly. They look for those most popular in the schools—those with pull with other students."

"I see."

"I told you before about Mr. Tony. But the guy who oversees everything is Frank Gelb."

Joshua had suspected something like this might be happening. "How do we reach the other members of the Hearts with God's love and redemption?"

"I've been reached. And others are considering the direction of their lives, too. But it won't be easy. For a lot of them, they'd be giving up the only real family they've ever known."

"But you came to know Him. And you left the gang. Why?" The question lingered between them.

Cary stopped and rotated his mass toward Josh. "I left because for the first time in my life, I experienced something I'd never known before." At that, tears brimmed his black eyes. He turned his head away for two seconds before turning back, managing a smile. "I realized I was loved and experienced His complete acceptance. My eyes were opened."

"You've never told me...but what happened to you when you were stuck on the ground?"

"I would love to tell you, but I can't...not yet," he said. "Maybe...when the time's right."

Joshua nodded, understanding. "How's your seeking?"

"I'm doing it. What else is there for me to do? My wild days are over, at least in the natural."

Joshua's face lit up. "That's so true! Just remember, you have something unique to drive you."

"What?"

"You know what it's like not to have experienced His love. That alone should motivate you to strive to reach God's heart—and eventually, bring that same love to others."

"Agreed," Cary said with a satisfied grin.

Just then, Joshua's mother drove up. The window lowered. "Joshua, does your friend need a ride?"

Cary waved coupled with a warm smile. “No thanks. I’m staying at my friend’s house just down the street.” He turned to Joshua. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you!” Joshua climbed into the car, asking about Samuel.

“He’s doing fine,” his mom said in an upbeat tone.

Once at home, Joshua considered the new information he’d just learned about this Tony character and the Hearts’ enterprises. God had laid the impression upon him previously that there would come a great harvest—but not without first dispersing the darkness that had attached itself to the very fabric of the school and community.

Inwardly, Joshua prayed that God would have His way in the hearts of his schoolmates in the coming days and weeks—and those within the Jaded Hearts. Equally, he hoped Lydia would soon find Him as he had, something that would fill him with endless joy.

“Arrest Lydia like you arrested Cary,” Joshua said at his bedside to the One. “Like You did me. In Jesus’ Name, amen.”

Joshua saw comatose forms walking around with heavy chains weighing down their arms. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people moved about—surrounded by a thick, ink-black atmosphere. As he looked closer, he found the darkness shifting beneath their feet, and to the sides, and above them—slithering nests of gloss-coated cockroaches. The creatures bore evil faces and needle-fanged jaws. They snapped at the people—their eyes forever fixed on them.

Without warning, Joshua watched in horror as one person was yanked downward into the black horde. Only his head and one arm remained above the ground. Struck with terror, the person cried out, “Help me!” He grabbed at others hoping they’d stop him from slipping under. But no one cared or reached to help him. “Please, save me!”

He fought to stop from being pulled under, but his cries into the darkened air went unheard.

Joshua sat up with a start. He glanced around his room, the darkness around him familiar like that within the dream.

Then came a Voice within him as prominent as anytime experienced before. *I have heard their cries!*

At that, Joshua slipped to his knees as the burden settled around his shoulders and anchored deep within him.

He prayed.

Twenty-Six | Interrogations

Several loud knocks at the front door followed by Bailey barking, interrupted Joshua's nap. Dashing to the window, Joshua looked out to find a police car in the driveway. His heart dropped within him even as he lifted a rapid prayer for strength to the One, and for His peace to remain with him. "I trust You," he said despite the brewing panic.

Going to the third step from the bottom, Joshua hid behind the retaining wall on his left as he listened to what was said. His brothers, Bruce and Kris, gingerly stepped down behind him. Joshua raised a hand toward them and by the force of his will, kept them back.

"What's going on?" Kris whispered.

Joshua lifted a finger to his lips indicating not to say a word.

A low, booming voice laced with authority asked if he could speak to Joshua Phillips.

"Joshua?" his dad asked.

"Yes sir. Are you his father?" the voice asked.

"Yes, I'm Dennis Phillips." His father's voice was both ominous and curious. "Joshua?" he yelled behind him.

"Right here, Dad." Joshua stepped down into the living room. He turned and glanced at his brothers' puzzled faces—awe planted there.

Two county deputies stood, holding their black and dark blue brimmed hats. The officer with the low voice, significantly shorter than Joshua had imagined based on his voice, addressed him. "Evening, Joshua. I'm Officer Thomas." His sharp, no-nonsense eyes fastened on Joshua, making him mildly uncomfortable. "I need to ask you a few questions about an incident that took place yesterday morning."

"Okay," Joshua replied, trying to remain calm.

"A classmate of yours, Fred Gonzales, was attacked on his way to school yesterday morning. Do you know anything about that incident?"

Like a butterfly about to have its wings pinned, Joshua eyed his father who now held his arms crossed in front of him, his face too dark for Joshua's tastes. He'd not even done anything wrong, yet it appeared he'd been an accomplice to Freddie's woes. He feared he was about to become the cause of Lydia's worst troubles.

"Joshua," the officer said amiably at his hesitation. "You need to help us out. That boy's arm was shattered. I need all the facts you know."

Joshua managed, despite his nervousness, to let out a breath. He glanced at his father—whose face remained neutral. Would his father, or the officers, detect if he now withhold information to save Lydia from trouble? What would happen with his relationship with the One if he didn't tell the truth about what he knew?

"Lydia's my girlfriend. Freddie mocked Lydia and me causing the whole class to burst out laughing at our expense two days ago. She didn't like that at all."

"What did you or her do after this?"

"Nothing, as far as I could tell. But then the next day, yesterday morning, I heard Freddie had been attacked. I didn't connect that incident to Lydia—not until Freddie told me what the attacker had said to him."

"What did Fred tell you?"

"That he remembered what the attacker had said to him as he attacked him."

"What was it he said?" the officer asked.

"That Freddie 'needed Jesus'."

"Why does that stick out to him or to you?"

"Because Freddie had said those exact words to Lydia and me. He'd joked that she 'needed Jesus'."

"Go on," the officer said.

"When he came to my school this morning, he told me what the attacker had said and accused me of having him attacked. Then I remembered what Freddie had said when he teased us, that it was the same."

The officer scribbled into a small notepad. "I see. Do you know the attacker of Fred Gonzales?"

"No."

"Has she told you she had Fred attacked?"

Joshua's next words would affect Lydia for the immediate future—perhaps the rest of her life. But he would not, could not, lie. "No. According to her, she only wanted Freddie *talked to*...not attacked."

The officer said nothing further for a few seconds. "What is your girlfriend's address?"

Joshua gave him the information he needed.

"Okay, Joshua. Thank you for your time. That'll be all, for now."

His dad escorted the officers out. Upon returning inside, he turned to his son with a serious look. Joshua eased down into the armchair and prepared for the worst. His two brothers came into the living room just as his dad stopped them with both hands raised. "I need a few minutes with your brother," he said with no hint of discussion about the matter.

"Everything okay?" Kris asked Joshua.

"Your brother's fine," Dennis said. "Why don't you two go upstairs to your rooms so I can talk to your brother?" His directive sent the two reluctantly up the stairs. Somehow, Joshua suspected they'd be listening to everything said from the top of the stairs.

His father plopped down onto the sofa. "I'm very proud of you, son." He ran his long fingers down through his beard. "It took guts to admit the truth despite what it might mean for Lydia. You were responsible only to tell the truth—what you knew. Everything else is out of your hands."

"Yeah, but I've just got Lydia into a heap of trouble."

"You did the right thing, son. If she's had any part in this boy's attack, it needs to be scrutinized."

Joshua pulled out his cellphone. "I have to at least warn her."

His father leaned forward, a hand raised toward him. "Not a good idea, Josh. Just let things be. She'll learn soon enough."

Dispirited, Joshua let his phone fall to his lap, unsure if his father was correct. He shook his head with regret that he'd mentioned anything to Freddie. And now, because of him, a great deal of trouble was about to be heaped on Lydia.

Just at that moment, Bailey stepped near and laid his head on Joshua's lap and let out a single whine as if sensing his burdens. Joshua rubbed his dog's head and ears that were pricked tall and directed toward him. Leaning forward, Joshua wrapped his arms around Bailey and rested his cheek against his dog's head. A momentarily flood of wellbeing filled him.

"Things have been crazy lately," Joshua said, unsure if he should say such a thing. It'd only lead to countless questions.

"Anything you need to talk about, son?" his dad asked, concern in his eyes.

"My main worry is Sammy." He sighed. "Is it really that bad with Sammy?"

The same hue of darkness from earlier settled around his father's face. He spoke soberly. "The doctor's not sure." He rubbed his fingers against his temples for two seconds before Joshua saw a spark ignite his father's face, weak but sustained. "I know one thing. If I could do anything for him—*anything*—I would."

"So would I," Joshua said.

"I know you would. For now, we just need to be there for him and make sure we don't give up on him. He still has exceptional strength, and he has us. We can't let him think he's alone in this fight."

Joshua nodded, sentiment threatening to erupt from within him. He swallowed the lump in his throat.

His father spoke. "Joshua, I would like to know one thing: Why did God use you to heal that boy at your school? Yet, when you've prayed for Samuel so many times, nothing happens?"

Joshua shrugged. "I'm not sure, Dad. I've been wrestling with this too. But I know for certain we shouldn't give up on the Lord. I suspect there's something bigger going on than just Samuel."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure. I just know that God hasn't touched Sammy like he has others that I've prayed for. I don't know if it's a failure in me," he said, disappointment sounding in his voice, "or something else. But my friends and I are focusing our prayers on Sammy as much as we can."

Saying goodnight, Joshua returned upstairs to his room. Yet despite his thoughts about Lydia and Fred, he couldn't shake the question his father had asked. Why hadn't God's power healed Samuel when he'd prayed for him many times, while touching and healing complete strangers? It was an enigma. Still, Joshua would continue to do his part which offered great comfort. He would be his brother's keeper and never stop resisting this enemy seeking to steal Samuel's life.

His cellphone rang.

"Hi Lydia, you doing okay?" He wished he'd not asked that question knowing how things might be for her in another hour.

"I'm good," Lydia said, sounding upbeat. "How 'bout you?"

"Lydia, the police came by my house in the last half hour. I think they're on their way to talk to you."

"Talk to me?"

"They're trying to find out what happened to Fred."

"You mentioned my name to the police?"

"They already had your name through Fred, Lydia." He wished he could slow down the runaway train he was on. "If I lied, it'd be worse for both of us. I had to tell them what I knew."

"And what do you think you know, Joshua?"

"I didn't lie to them. I told them what you told me, that you had someone *talk* to him. But I also told them you didn't intend for Fred to be attacked." Joshua's face reddened with irritation that *she* should be angry. "Lydia, I have to go."

"Joshua! You do this to me, and *you* have *to go*? I can't believe you'd let them haul me off to Juvenile without even a second thought."

He shook his head. "Why, Lydia? Why'd you have to create this mess in the first place?" And Joshua allowed his anger to have its way. "Good night!" He punched the *END* button.

Moments later, there came several quiet taps on his bedroom door.

"Come in."

The door opened and his father's large, lingering frame leaned into his room. "Everything okay?"

Joshua shook his head. "No. Lydia thinks I betrayed her. She's so angry at me. But I feel angry, too!"

"You told her the police are coming?"

"She called, and I couldn't pretend. I had to tell her, Dad." Joshua looked down and shook his head. "Everything's such a mess!"

His dad reached forward and rested a hand on his shoulder. "Pray. Refocus on the Lord when life goes out of focus, son."

He locked eyes with his father. "I will. I'll pray right now."

His father gave a single nod. "I'm downstairs if you need me, son."

"Thanks, Dad." As his bedroom door closed, Joshua turned and closed his eyes, even as he lifted the eyes of his heart toward the One.

Lydia heard the doorbell ring. She pictured the look of shock that would be on her mother's face. Lydia stepped to the top of the steps but remained unseen. She heard her mother open the door.

"Hello, officers?" her mother said, concern heard in her voice.

"Good evening, ma'am. I'm Officer Thomas. This is Officer Smith. Are you Lydia Claremont's mother?"

"Yes, I am," she said, her voice sounding weaker by the second.

"We need to speak to your daughter. Is she home?" the officer asked.

"Yes, she's upstairs in her bedroom. What is this about?"

"I just need to ask her a few questions about an attack that happened to a classmate yesterday morning outside the school grounds."

"What would my Lydia have to do—?"

"May we please come in?" the officer insisted.

"Yes, by all means."

Lydia heard the front door close and then her mother's elevated voice. "Lydia?"

"Yes, Mom?" she replied, hating this whole scenario thrust upon her.

"Come downstairs, please. Officers Thomas and Smith want to speak to you about an incident?"

As she descended, Lydia saw both officers standing with their eyes' fastened on her. They were young looking in appearance. The subordinate had the mustache and glasses that reminded her of the Todd Flanders character from *The Simpsons*.

"Have a seat, Lydia," Officer Thomas requested. Not very tall but stocky, he wore a pale complexion and combed, gel-set red hair.

Lydia took a seat beside her mother who kneaded her hands in her lap. A fleeting thought passed through her mind that she'd not sat beside her mother like this in such a long time. Stacy stealthed her way down the carpeted steps and sat down about midway. She pressed her face between the white wooden railings.

"We've received information that you ordered a person, someone from the Jaded Hearts gang, to confront a classmate at your school, Fred Gonzales? Is this true?"

"What? Where did you get—"

"Miss Lydia. We have a statement from your boyfriend that you—"

"Yes, I had a friend speak to Fred."

Officer Thomas resumed. "According to the victim, he was attacked from behind as he was walking to school, and then words were said to him that may link you to the attack."

"I don't know how or why he was attacked," Lydia said, attempting to give off an innocent look.

"I need the name of the person you directed to speak to Mr. Gonzales."

"I don't know his name."

Officer Thomas's eyebrow shot up. "You don't know the name of your friend?"

"Well, we're not actually friends—just acquaintances," Lydia said, upset with herself for not being more careful with her choice of words.

"I need a name." Thomas loomed over her.

"Lydia," her mother said in an appeasing tone. "You should tell the officer all—"

"Butt out, mother!" Lydia retorted through clenched teeth without looking at her.

"If you won't tell me his name," Officer Thomas said in a serious tone, "I'll have to take you into custody for impeding an investigation."

"I don't have a name," Lydia said, her arms crossed, her eyes fixed on her hands in front of her.

"Then I'm sorry but I must arrest you. Stand for me."

"Why?" Lydia asked.

"Please, Lydia!" her mother pleaded. "Tell the officer whatever you know."

"I don't know anything!" Lydia sighed and stood up. She resigned to the strong current carrying her. Officer Thomas pulled her arms behind her back and secured her hands with a plastic zip tie. He advised her of her Miranda rights.

Lydia realized at that moment just how silly she'd been to start this debacle. But it was too late. And most of all, Joshua had been the one to betray her. *How could you do this to me?* she seethed. The officer led her out of her home's comfort into the chilled air of the outside and then helped her get in the backseat of the police car. The image of Joshua's face amplified her fury. She clenched her jaw and her nostrils flared as hatred now coursed through her, flowing in one direction: Joshua.

Twenty-Seven | A Mother's Plight

Arriving at the front of Joshua's house, Dottie Claremont turned the car off and allowed herself a moment to listen to the calm of the night air. The car's engine cooled, subtle pings and taps escaping from some mysterious place deep within her old car. She regretted that she'd come here to Lydia's boyfriend's house. Still, she had to know if the accusations directed at her daughter might be true.

Dottie had thought her daughter to be a typical teenager, with good looks, inborn wit, and a sharp mind. She'd witnessed her daughter's vivacious social life without a second glance. Despite her suspicions that there might be more going on with her oldest daughter, she'd been shocked when Officer Thomas had shown up, complete with the probing questions about a boy at school being attacked. Dottie had stood by in disbelief, listening to the questions, helpless. Instinctually, she wished to shield her daughter, to stand in the way of any harm to her. Yet a foreboding alarm at the deputy's questions had settled deep inside her. What kind of person would know gang members, and, have someone *talked to*, or attacked, by someone in a gang?

Officer Thomas had been polite and professional, even when he'd taken Lydia into custody. She'd been charged with impeding their investigation into the assault of Fred Gonzales—and being complicit in his assault and battery. With Lydia's abrupt absence, Dottie had stood in her living room shocked at the sudden silence, unable to believe what had just happened. Her younger daughter sat on the carpeted stairs—even she, the biggest talker of the household, stunned into silence.

She glanced at Stacy. "Stay here. I won't be long."

She got out of her car. The air had a chilled nip to it, Fall's grip on the region growing stronger by the day. She approached the Phillips' front door. Dottie needed to know from Joshua if a violent act orchestrated by her daughter could be possible. Or was this all a big misunderstanding? Was her daughter telling the truth, that she had only asked a friend, oh, an acquaintance who happened to be a gang member, to *talk* to the boy who had teased her the day before?

The door opened to a towering, ruddy-bearded man. Dottie's first impression was that he was a good-looking man. A textured imprint spread out across his cheek and temple.

"Can I help you?" he asked with a hint of irritation.

"I'm sorry it's late. I'm Lydia's mother, Dottie Claremont. May I please speak to Joshua—just for five minutes?"

The man offered his hand which she shook. "I'm Dennis, Joshua's dad. Please, come inside."

"Thank you," Dottie said, stepping into a cozy, spacious living room. The home's quietness gave her the impression the house had settled down for the evening. She stood with her hands in front of her.

"I'll get Joshua for you," Dennis said, stepping to the bottom of the stairway. He inclined his head. "Joshua? You have company. Again."

A door upstairs with a slight screech opened. "Who is it, Dad?"

Dottie heard a slight tremor in Joshua's voice.

"Lydia's mom is here to talk to you."

"Lydia's mom?"

Dennis sighed. "Yes. Please come downstairs." Turning to face her, Dennis gestured to an armchair. "Please have a seat, Dottie."

"I'm sorry, but I just couldn't put off till tomorrow."

"No it's fine," Dennis replied, grinning. "Being parents of teenagers isn't easy!"

Dottie nodded at that and relaxed a bit more.

Seconds later, a lady wearing a baby-blue body lounge, followed by Joshua, descended the stairs and stepped into the living room.

"Mrs. Claremont," the woman said with a pleasant smile. She stepped to her and shook her hand. "I'm Joan. Welcome to our home."

"Please, call me Dottie," she said, her lips upturning into a smile. She could already tell she liked Joshua's parents.

"Would you like some coffee or tea, Dottie?" Joan asked.

"No thank you. I won't keep you guys up. I just needed to ask Joshua about a matter to do with my daughter, Lydia."

Joshua took a step closer toward her. "How is Lydia?" Etched concern showed on his face.

Dottie answered, struggling to keep her voice from wavering. "The police arrested her an hour ago."

Joshua looked away, saying nothing more. An awkward silence lingered.

Dottie locked eyes with Joshua. "Do you know if Lydia had that boy attacked?"

Joshua looked at her with sympathy and sorrow in his eyes. "Lydia said she'd had a friend talk to Freddie. I don't think Lydia intended him to be attacked. When the officer asked, I couldn't lie to him."

Dottie nodded. "I know you're a decent boy. Do you know the boy who attacked this Fred?"

"I only know he's part of the Hearts gang."

"How would Lydia know anyone in a gang?"

"I'm honestly not sure," Joshua said. "Mrs. Claremont, may I come with you to visit her...when you go see her?"

Dottie's eyes widened at the question. It seemed hard to believe she'd soon be visiting her daughter in a jail for kids. "I'm not sure about that, yet. She has a lot of anger in her right now—toward everyone, I think. Let's give her time."

"Yeah, that sounds like the right way to go," Joshua answered. "Thank you, Mrs. Claremont."

Ten minutes later, Dottie stepped outside, Joshua accompanying her. She opened the door to her dark-green Ford Taurus before turning back to Joshua. "Please, keep praying for her."

"I have been, and won't stop, Mrs. Claremont. Good night," Joshua said as she got into the car. He eased the door shut.

Headed back home on the darkened roads, Dottie replayed Joshua's words about prayer. They had, for a few moments, caused her stomach to roll with confusion. She had no one to turn to for help, strength, or comfort. Yet something in Joshua had ignited a hope in her. Out of desperation, she found herself compelled to speak to the Unseen, even as the tears slipped down her cheeks. She asked for His help and direction, both in her own life and in the life of Lydia—her first prayer spoken in years.

Twenty-Eight | Accusers

Joshua awakened the next morning both tired and emotionally drained. There was also something else—an impression that did not dissolve with his usual time spent in morning prayer. A burden clung to his spirit as he pictured Lydia. Joshua prayed for her heart, through all that was happening to her, that it would change ownership—from her to the Lord.

Arriving at his homeroom where Joshua and Lydia normally chatted outside the classroom, he recognized his world was now off-kilter. Most notable was her nonappearance at his homeroom's door when they'd normally exchange hugs and talk before she'd head off to her own homeroom down the hall. This new pattern might be something Joshua would have to get used to for a long time. As he took his seat, her absence from the school settled within him leaving him feeling like his heart had been ripped out of him. The whole idea of her being taken away and housed in a juvenile facility had seemed unreal—until now.

Fred, however, *was* there. He stepped over to him, his eyes unfriendly and angry, his arm wrapped in the bubble-like white cast. He had short curls of black hair that matched his brown-black eyes and caramel skin. He stood in front of Joshua's desk and stared down at him. "I haven't seen your girlfriend yet," he said, a smug look appearing on his face.

Joshua looked at Freddie, not happy. "She's in custody," Joshua replied in a low voice; he didn't want to broadcast it to everyone.

"That's comforting," he replied. "But it won't help me when baseball season comes around, will it?"

Joshua allowed his face to soften. "I'm sorry what happened to you, but I had nothing to do with it."

"Yeah, whatever. If your God was real, maybe He'd fix my arm and all this would go away," he said as he moved toward his desk on the back row.

Joshua heard the words but did not react. He'd learned the best way to be used of God was for the vessel to be used by the Master, not the Master to be used by the vessel.

After school, upon reaching home, Joshua saw Lydia's mom's car parked along the front of the house. As he came inside, his mom shouted toward the front door.

"Joshua? Is that you?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Mrs. Claremont will visit Lydia shortly."

Entering the kitchen, Joshua saw his mom and Dottie seated at the table and shot them a big smile. Mrs. Claremont seemed much happier than the previous night. "Hello! You're visiting Lydia now?"

Mrs. Claremont nodded. "Visiting hours are from five till eight. I had the chance to call Lydia before noon. She wants you to come visit her with me."

Euphoria gripped Joshua at the invitation. "She asked for me to come?"

"Yes," Mrs. Claremont answered.

Arriving at the single-story, brick-faced juvenile facility, Mrs. Claremont and Joshua were escorted to a waiting area that had a cozy feel to it. The chairs that lined the room were set in various bright colored leathers; the walls decorated with various framed pictures of nature; a television perched from the corner looking dejected, its blackened screen off.

A long wait ensued before a tall woman guard appeared and opened a door. Behind her stood Lydia, dressed in drab gray, long sleeve sweater and sweatpants, her black hair dangling loose. Despite everything, she appeared well. Mrs. Claremont extended her arms and stepped toward her daughter to hug her. Their touch, however, was one-sided. Lydia said nothing, her arms dangling, her eyes fixed over Mrs. Claremont's shoulder on Joshua—seemingly unblinking. As the two separated, Joshua dared to step forward, despite her defiant stare, and gave her a quick hug. Again, her response was flat, unresponsive, cold.

"Lydia, are you all right?" Joshua asked as he took a seat on a red leather chair.

Lydia kept her eyes fastened on Joshua's eyes, but did not reply. Without removing her gaze, she plopped down on a green leather two-seat sofa opposite his seating position, a square wooden coffee table between them. Mrs. Claremont sat down next to Lydia on her right.

What is this, a staring contest? Joshua wondered.

"Lydia, how are things here?" Mrs. Claremont asked, her voice upbeat.

Lydia shrugged her shoulders, but her eyes remained fixed on Joshua. He kept his gaze fixed on the shiny floor, feeling uncomfortable.

"How's the food here?" asked her mother.

Lydia crossed her arms and threw a quick glance at her mother. "It's okay."

"That's good. Mr. Derby said you can receive one care package per week, but it has to be mailed to you and the contents shared with the others."

Joshua was glad for Mrs. Claremont's small talk and questions, which helped ease the discomfort.

"I wouldn't be here if someone had shown loyalty," Lydia said. Joshua could sense she was staring at him again. Maintaining a neutral stance, he kept his eyes fixed on the dark wood coffee table.

"Lydia, that isn't fair," Mrs. Claremont said, appealing to her daughter.

"He betrayed me!" she said, her face growing red, looking away from Joshua to her mom.

Joshua remained silent while switching his eyes between Lydia, Mrs. Claremont, and the table.

"Did you want him to have to come here for lying to the police?" her mom asked. "It seems *you* put him in this predicament, not him."

Glaring at her mom, Lydia seemed to hold her breath as her face grew redder with each second. Almost leaping to her feet, she walked around the table and loomed over Joshua. Remaining calm, he leaned back even as she drilled into his skull with her fury-filled eyes.

The same tall lady guard seen earlier opened the door and stuck her head into the room. "Everything okay in here?" she asked, but her eyes were fixed on Lydia. "Hello?"

Finally, Lydia backed off. She turned to look at her mom for a moment before stepping toward the open door with the guard in the doorway.

"Take me to my room," she demanded. The guard nodded and closed the door behind her.

Silence.

Joshua stared at the doorway she'd just passed through in disbelief. Besides his friendly greeting, Joshua hadn't said a word, but his mind now churned in turmoil. He didn't blame her for expressing her feelings to him; but he hadn't expected the glaring face of someone who now hated him.

Joshua pleasantly thanked Mrs. Claremont before getting out of her car. He looked up as he walked toward his front porch. The sun was descending—a chill coating everything as the shadows replaced all

the sun's light, the reds, oranges, and yellows of the trees taking on a darkened hue. Walking into his house, Joshua went to the sofa and collapsed. The scent of delicious meatloaf—cooked beef with onions, garlic, and tomato—filled the house. At least he had that to look forward to, he mused.

"Joshua? Is that you, honey?"

"Yes, Mom."

She came to the small opening that connected the kitchen to the living room. "How's Lydia?"

"I was a dart board...and she used her eyes as darts."

"She's that angry with you?"

"Anger is not the word, Mom."

"Okay," she said, leaning on the windowsill. "Be patient. Give her time to think about what's happened."

"That's just it...she doesn't see what she did at all. It's all my fault, according to her."

"Juvenile hall will help her realize the real cause of her problems."

Joshua sat up and repositioned the pillows before plopping back against the softness. "I guess."

"Keep praying for her," she said, stepping away. "Dinner will be ready in ten!"

Joshua forced himself to his feet and climbed to his room. When he entered, he closed the door, turned on some worship music, and prayed. Even if Lydia never spoke to him again, even if she cursed him from now on, Joshua was ready to pray for her, to bless her, and do everything he could to usher her into the graceful, loving hands of the Risen One.

"Miss Lydia Claremont, we are trying to make this easy on you. But your noncooperation is grounds for the harshest legal punishment the law will allow. We want to know the name of the boy who attacked Fred Gonzales." The judge sat still, awaiting a response, her head propped up on her hand. Despite being no-nonsense in her demeanor, the judge's persona exuded fairness, of wanting to mediate this situation. "Do you have anything to say?"

The room was tiny, rectangular-shaped, and its light suffocated by the expensive wood panel walls. They had created this room, Lydia thought, to make a person want to leave as quickly as possible. The claustrophobia was probably key to getting juveniles to confess to the authorities what they wanted to hear.

A large guard stood at the closed door behind Lydia.

Her mom, next to her, spoke. "Lydia, Judge Peterson is trying to help you avoid harsher consequences. Are you going to ignore her kind offer?" The hope between all parties was that little or no court would be necessary, that the punishment could be meted out through cooperation and contrition on Lydia's part.

Lydia lifted her shoulders as she pulled her arms in closer to her body. She kept her eyes fastened on a swirling wood grain on the mahogany table.

"Your action cost a classmate a shattered arm," Judge Peterson said. "According to the physician, he'll be fortunate if he can play baseball for his team next spring. Does that mean anything to you?"

Again, there was only silence, as if no one else was in the room with her.

"Well, Mrs. Claremont...I cannot regard your daughter's behavior as cooperative. Her record is spotless, but if she wishes to live in a juvenile facility for a year or more, so be it." The judge pushed her chair back on the ceramic floor and then stopped herself, her eyes on Lydia.

“Lydia,” her mother said forcefully. “Please! You need to tell the judge what she needs to know!”

As if jolted awake, Lydia blinked twice before lifting her face toward the judge. “Garrett Collins.”

“I need his address, phone number—anything you can give me,” the judge said and pushed a stencil notebook with a pen on top toward her.

Lydia wrote for ten seconds, her head cocked to one side. She pushed the pad back across the table and resumed her blank stare at the table surface.

Taking the pad into her hands, the judge hovered over the table. “Mrs. Claremont, the court will be in touch with you.”

“Thank you for being willing to work with my daughter.”

The judge gave a single nod, the corners of her lips curving upward before the door was opened and she stepped out.

Twenty-Nine | Sorting Things Out

Coming home from school, Joshua dialed Lydia's landline number. He hoped to learn good news from Mrs. Claremont.

"Hello?"

Joshua recognized Mrs. Claremont's voice. "Hi, Joshua here. Any news about Lydia?"

"Hi Joshua. Well, the good news is she's now cooperating with the court. And I just read today's newspaper. They picked up the boy that attacked Fred Gonzales early last night."

Joshua expected the news of the attacker's arrest to make Mrs. Claremont happy, at least hopeful. Instead, she sounded upset and troubled. "That's great...but what's wrong?"

"Wait, I'll read the news article for you. 'Supposed Jaded Hearts gang member, 17, who cannot be named for legal reasons, was taken into custody last night by Sterling City police for allegedly attacking a teenager that resulted in the victim's arm being broken. According to officials, the gang member's actions were allegedly instigated by another student from Knott's End High School, a student who also cannot be named for legal reasons.'"

"Oh no," Joshua said almost in a whisper. "I suspect she'll never stop hating me for putting her in this mess."

"Well, Joshua, I would never expect you to have lied to the police. This whole matter was never in your hands to begin with. Lydia made choices...and although I do not understand why, and how she even had connections with this Garrett-character who's older than her and a gang member, she will need to learn the consequences of her choices." She paused, briefly. "Joshua?"

"Yes?" he replied.

"Has Lydia been involved in anything suspicious...at school, after school? Have you heard anything, maybe rumors about her?"

"None that I can think of."

"Joshua, I'll text you if I learn what's going to happen to her."

"Do you think it would be okay if I send Lydia a letter or postcard?"

"Why not? It can't hurt. Want the address?"

"Yes, please." Joshua took down the address of the facility. He hoped to write her and try to resolve the issues between them. Perhaps she'd never date him again, nor walk with him or talk with him in school...but he wanted and hoped for peace between them, and the best for Lydia's life.

He remembered the day they'd gone to church and walked out on the church grounds together. Although they'd broken the rules of the youth group, Joshua had felt the electricity of their connection when he'd stood next to Lydia, hands held, their sense of connection strengthening with each second. Joshua had been disappointed and relieved when Tamara had ended their alone time.

He missed Lydia now.

Pulling a notebook to himself, Joshua settled back on the sofa and began to write:

Hey Lydia,

How are you? Listen, I just want to tell you I'm sorry. I don't know if this will mean anything to you, but I do feel that way. I regret any hardship put on you because of me. When the police questioned me, it was the most difficult situation I've ever been in. I didn't mean to get you in trouble, Lydia... I hope you can believe me.

Then Joshua moved off the whole affair between them and wrote about normal, everyday stuff—what was going on at school, how Samuel seemed to be getting better, and how he'd satisfactorily beat both his older brothers in basketball the day before. He kept the letter short, as it made little sense to write a ten-page letter when she might not even open the envelope.

As he finished writing, he signed it, placed it in an envelope, and inserted a wallet picture of himself. Then, he clasped the envelope between both of his hands and squeezed his eyes shut: "Lord, I pray that You would minister to Lydia where she is right now that she would come to know Your love, and the love I also feel for her. Please help her get through this time and find You. Amen!"

The Club met after school. The whole affair between Lydia and Joshua had become fodder for the masses, but he wanted to make sure the Bible Club knew exactly what was happening. When all had gathered, twenty-one in number, including Sergio, Allistair, Jennifer, and Brad, Joshua addressed the group. It was growing each week and there was an unspoken sense of expectation in the air, but all of it was tapered by the rumors spreading regarding Joshua and Lydia.

"I realize that there may be gossip flying about because of what has happened to my girlfriend, Lydia. She was placed in the juvenile facility because of a matter involving Freddie Gonzales. I was surprised to learn about this as I'm sure all of you were. Lydia is not a believer, yet, but I'm confident the Lord is working in her and will bring her to Himself."

"Missionary dating?" Jennifer asked with a grin.

"I know it may seem that way. I have had to keep on my toes to keep from doing anything that I would regret later. But this whole relationship came about so quickly that—"

Sergio interrupted. "—that you forgot to ask the Lord about it?"

"Well, I didn't feel a prohibition from the Lord in being with her," he said, which was truthful, although he could remember the Holy Spirit recede within him while talking with her on a few occasions.

"I just read the other night not to join light with darkness," Sergio said. "It would be the same as if Allistair and I were hanging out at parties on the weekend."

Joshua recognized that this had become an issue in the club. "I see. Do all of you agree with Sergio?"

No one spoke up, but most faces looked grim and avoided eye contact with him.

Brad rose from leaning on a desk. His voice was friendly and reconciliatory. "Joshua, what Sergio is saying is that you need to be careful. You had nothing to do with the attack on Freddie, but some think you did just because of your link to Lydia."

"I regret," Joshua said, "that anyone would think that. *Maybe* I moved too quickly in dating her, but now, I want to pursue this to its natural end, whatever happens. I don't want to give up on Lydia. Not everything is black and white."

"Did you say *maybe*?" Sergio said, standing up. His caramel skin reddened as anger reached his eyes. It's clear that God's used you to impact so many, Joshua. But when we confront you about you and her, you tell us that not all things can be labeled black and white. Listen, I have nothing against Lydia as a person."

Joshua responded. "Sometimes, God crayons outside the lines. His way of doing things doesn't always fit into our little boxes nice and neat."

"Yes, God does that. But you aren't God, Joshua. Look, I love you as a brother," Sergio said. "But has it occurred to you that Lydia came into your life just as you made up your heart and mind to follow the Lord?"

Joshua nodded. "That's true."

"I do not believe it is God's will for you to date her," Sergio said. "To be her friend, perhaps. But not to be joining yourself to her when she rejects Christ."

"I see you feel very strongly about this, Sergio. What about the rest of you?" He scanned the others' faces.

Brad spoke up. "I agree that you should be very cautious. It is your decision and only you know what the Lord is speaking to your heart." Jennifer and Allistair nodded in agreement, as did others in the group.

"Or," Sergio interjected, "perhaps the Lord has already tried to speak to you, but you didn't listen. You were blinded by her beauty or something else. You should also consider that the Lord is using me to speak to you now."

"I am, but I feel I have kept myself pure and upright before the Lord. My first heart's desire is to bring her to Him. But I will not dump her. Not until He tells me, or I know it's not working."

"Joshua! She had a guy beat up—" Sergio said, flustered.

"She told me she wanted Freddie *talked* to, not attacked. The guy that attacked him did it of his own volition."

"C'mon, Joshua! That's silly," Sergio said in a mocking tone. "The attacker is a part of the Hearts gang. Do you really think the boy wanted to sit down and have a cuppa with Freddie? Like it or not, she had him attacked. And her connection to the Hearts makes the whole situation even more strange."

Joshua shook his head. "I know Lydia. She isn't like—"

Sergio leaned forward. "But you *don't* know Lydia, Joshua. You've been with her for what, a month or little longer?"

"Yes."

There came silence.

"Listen," said Joshua with a tone of appeasement. "I'm trying to sort this out, and I'm asking everyone for patience." What troubled Joshua was the realization of how little he really knew about Lydia. Sergio was right about a lot of things. Was the Lord now speaking a warning through him?

Sergio turned away in a huff and moved to the rear of the room and took a seat. Allistair joined him.

Joshua shifted to the others. "How are you guys doing in your praying?"

Brad replied. "It's been a challenge, but I've been spending lots of time with Him."

Joshua nodded. "It will take diligence. Distractions will test your focus. But as you seek Him, just remember that the first hour, just like the first day of a fast, is always the hardest. Keep your hearts focused."

The students nodded in agreement.

Sergio folded his arms and interrupted. "It is good to pray to the Lord." Everyone turned their heads to listen to him. "But praying endless hours is the same as praying while a house is burning. No one would do such a thing! We should be out there introducing people to the King and His Kingdom. If we pray just an hour a day, God will still honor us as we work to rescue people."

Joshua shook his head. "Firefighters train so they will be more effective—so not to get others or themselves killed. When you spend time before the Lord, you learn what His heart is for the lost, and

about your own heart. You learn how much you don't love people. It's as much about seeing the truth about yourself as it is seeing the truth about God and others."

"I can discover that through reading the Word," countered Sergio.

"Then why did Paul spend three years in Arabia after he encountered Christ, Sergio? Why did our Lord Jesus go into the wilderness for forty days and nights?"

Sergio struggled to reply. A flustered look crossed his face. "I'm sorry but I'm starting a new group for those who want to be practical. Everyone here is welcome."

Joshua shot a look in Sergio's direction. "You'll divide the group?"

"Not divide. Find people like me who will work for change without spending hour after endless hour in prayer. God wants practical people, Joshua, not mystics who live in a monastery."

"But this seeking is only for a season. It's a major key to having the power of God work through us." Joshua looked around, wondering if there would be anyone in the room with him after Sergio left.

"Brad? Jennifer? Allistair? The rest of you guys?" he said, scanning the room. "Do you agree with him?"

Brad shook his head. "I have experienced the power of God. I will stay the course here."

Jennifer agreed with Brad.

"Can we pray for you before you go, Sergio?" Allistair asked.

"You're not coming with me?" he asked his buddy.

"I don't feel right about leaving. God isn't about division," he answered.

Sergio threw up his hands in disgust. "No need to pray for me!" With that, he walked out.

Everyone stared at each other in stunned disbelief.

"Allistair, how long has he been feeling this way?" Jennifer asked.

"For the past week. He was feeling frustrated that he couldn't settle down enough to spend time with the Lord. Then the stuff about Lydia and Freddie set him off. And he also wasn't sure why it was presumed that Joshua should head the club."

"What about you, Allistair?" Joshua asked. "Are you okay with me leading here?"

"I have no problem with you at all. But I echo Brad: Be careful with Lydia."

"And what about your seeking?"

A wide, satisfied grin appeared on his face. "It's been a challenge. But I continue to seek Him. Since seeing Brad's miracle, I'm convinced totally."

"But," Joshua added sadly, "Sergio also witnessed that miracle."

Everyone nodded. Joshua spontaneously took the hands of those around him, and they all formed a circle. "Let's pray for Sergio. He's angry about a lot of things, and only the Lord can break through and help him."

That night, Joshua covered his face with his hands as he prayed for Sergio's spiritual well-being. But also playing through his mind was the realization that Sergio was right, at least partly. He'd not stopped and sought the will and direction of the Lord regarding Lydia. He knew he had violated the Scriptures, which warned not to be unequally yoked. Still, he'd hoped to be a catalyst for change in Lydia. He had never planned to do anything unwise or impure. Had he been persuaded because of Lydia's outward beauty alone?

As Joshua sat in the Presence of the One, he hoped for a renewed sense of direction. But nothing came. After fifty minutes of still silence, Joshua came off his knees and plopped down on his bed.

“Do I already know the answer?”

Joshua remembered watching a film about a Carolina preacher called Sheffy in the late-1800s who had come upon a poor family whose wagon-pulling horse had died in the middle of the path. The preacher had intended to go off and pray when the Lord stopped him. There was no need to pray because the answer was already provided: he’d give the family the horse he’d traveled upon and loved for many years.

Was this the case for him? Had the Lord already answered, but he’d ignored Him? Was only obedience needed in this case? Over near the window sat a white telescope on its tripod, its lengthy lens stretched toward the blackness of the distant stars. He wished he could peek through it into deep space to find a placard with all the answers he needed.

“Is it true that I’ve overstepped, that it was never Your will for me to date Lydia?” Joshua still remembered the sense of withdrawal he’d experienced when talking to Lydia on several occasions.

“I ask Your forgiveness, Lord. I have grieved You.” He fell back to his knees and leaned on the side of his bed. “Just give me time, Lord. It would be wrong for me to just abandon her. Wouldn’t it?”

Joshua splayed his hands out wide to stretch, then relaxed them. He slammed his fists down on the bed, his reward for this time with the Lord only silence and circular thinking. Because of his insensitivity to the Spirit, he’d left himself vulnerable. And it had spilled over to the Bible Club and Sergio. The worst thing was, it might soon result in Lydia being hurt deeply as well.

Thirty | Mr. Frank Gelb

Upon Garrett Collin's entrance into the juvenile facility the same day that she had submitted his name to the judge, Lydia had considered the seventeen-year-old's look: shaped like an upside-down pear, his mass began with a large head atop a massive torso that tapered to long legs. He had curly black-hair and exhibited tattoos on his tree-trunk arms. Brought in after the evening meal, Collins had been given a paper bag containing a sandwich, chips, a lime-green apple, and a small plastic cup of juice. The television blared some ten feet in front of them, the others doing various activities throughout the room—some playing table tennis, others pool, and a few huddled at the various sofas talking. Lydia joined the same table as Garrett.

"Hey," Lydia said.

Garrett lowered the sandwich to the table and looked at her. The look said, *why are you speaking to me?* Irritated but remaining silent, he turned back to his half-eaten, soggy sandwich.

"Mr. Tony has a message for you."

This time he turned and focused his eyes directly at Lydia, his expression softened. "Is that right? What message would that be?"

"He knows you've already done a great job of putting that Gonzales boy in his place. But in doing what you did to him, *I* am now sitting here."

"Who are you?" he asked, taking a hefty bite of his sandwich leaving only a small portion.

"It doesn't matter who I am."

"I did what I was told," he said without apology. "That kid needed a lesson on manners and nothing works like pain." He lobbed the last part of his sandwich into his mouth.

"Pain is one thing. Disability another!" she said, biting her lip to suppress her anger. "Did you tell the police you were told to attack that boy?"

"No, I only told them I wanted a lawyer."

"Forget the lawyer. Mr. Tony wants you to admit that the instructions given to you were only to talk to the boy, not hurt him. Do you understand?"

Without hesitation, Garrett picked up the small green apple and took a huge bite, eliminating half. He turned and smiled with a mouthful of apple. "He wants me to be the fall guy?"

"This is Mr. Tony's instruction, not mine."

"Did you give my name to the cops?"

"I did not," she said, lying. "Either someone saw you and turned you in, or the Gonzales boy picked your photo out of the police database. From what I hear, you take up a lot of pages."

The boy chuckled. "Nothing new in that department. Coming to juvie is like a homecoming for me; three meals a day, a bed to sleep in, basketball almost every day... Hell, I even get to learn a trade if I want."

"What about your family?"

"The only family I've known are the Hearts." He took a monstrous bite leaving only an apple core.

"But you're just seventeen."

The boy swallowed. "I've seen enough in my seventeen years to fill up three lifetimes."

"Will you do this for Mr. Tony?"

"Yeah, I'll do this for him. If they send me upstate, that's cool. I have friends up there anyway." He ripped open the bag of Lay's potato chips. "So how do you communicate with Mr. Tony?"

Lydia smiled. "I have my ways. Most workers here make minimum wage."

Mrs. Claremont cleaned the house. When she went upstairs to get something from her bedroom, she stopped in front of Lydia's room. She surprised herself when her hand held the door handle and turned it. The door floated open as if inviting her inside. Darkened and a bit stuffy, she made Lydia's bed. Walking to the window, Dottie pushed the curtains to the side and adjusted the blinds until light flooded the room. As she stepped away, she heard something fall to the carpet floor. Bending down, Dottie noticed Lydia's cellphone. She presumed it had been sitting behind the blinds on the windowsill. She picked it up and sat on the edge of the bed to take a breather. Leaning to replace it on the dresser, she stopped and pressed the menu button which brought up different options. She navigated the phone hoping to see whom Lydia had talked to or texted on September 12th. A call to someone named *Pistol*. And a call to someone identified as Gelb.

Who are these people? And who in the world has a name like Pistol? With a need to know, she clicked on Gelb's name. Dottie heard the intermittent dialing.

An older man's booming voice answered. "Hello? Shut up, I have a call!" the man said to someone in the background. Loud music played. "Mr. Tony? You get out of jail already?"

"Who are you? Why does my fourteen-year-old daughter have your number on her phone?"

It took a half-second before the call ended.

Her hands shaking, not sure what to think, Dottie turned off and replaced the cellphone where she'd found it. Writing the phone numbers of the two names, she went downstairs, confused, dazed, and troubled. A clenching weariness settled in her gut. Then, she remembered the face of the police officer, Officer Thomas, who had arrested her daughter. Perhaps he'd check the numbers and give her info on who these two characters, Pistol and Gelb, might be.

"Mrs. Claremont? Where did you get the number for Gelb? *And Pistol?*" the man asked. "They are both considered dangerous men."

"They are?" Dottie scooted herself back against her dining room chair to steady herself. "Why would they be involved with Lydia?"

"I'm not sure about that myself, Ma'am. Pistol is the Jaded Hearts' gang leader. And Gelb, Frank Gelb, is wanted on several arrest warrants out of Sioux City, but no one's been able to catch up to him as yet."

"What has he done?"

"He's had run-ins with the law related to drug activities in Iowa. He's known to travel to Chicago often, as well as Milwaukee and Detroit."

"Why is he here?"

"Not sure, but he's been around these parts going on twenty years."

"Thank you, Officer Thomas." She'd hoped calling the officer would make her feel better. Instead, troubling thoughts now coursed through her.

"We will be using the number you gave us to locate this man. If you get any more information about Mr. Gelb, please let us know."

"I will," Dottie said.

"I encourage you to support your daughter every way possible so you can find out what may be happening with her."

"I will." She ended the call as the phone slipped out of her hand. With a bang, it slapped against the kitchen floor. All at once feeling powerless, she leaned forward placing her face in her hands before sobs erupted deep within her.

Dottie sat down on the bolted-to-the-floor steel bench awaiting her daughter to be brought to the visitor room. Finally, the door opened and in stepped Lydia. She wore a dark blue sweat suit with large white letters that showed Radford Juvenile Facility.

"Hi," Lydia said, calm and a lot happier than on the previous visit.

Dottie sat ramrod straight and looked at her daughter without a blink.

"What's wrong?"

"Frank Gelb? *Pistol*?"

Irritation appeared on Lydia's face for a split second, and, if it hadn't been for the fact that Dottie knew her daughter intimately, she'd surely have missed the traces of alarm that had flashed across her face. "Who are you talking about?"

Looking down at her lap with a feigned smile, Dottie interlocked her hands and brought them to her lap forming a V with her arms. "I can remember," she said, looking away and then up to the corner of the room, "the very first day that you told me a fib. Do you remember that day? I think you'd just turned six."

Lydia slouched as she sat. "No," Lydia said, her voice plain but pleasant.

"You had asked me if you could make some blueberry Kool-Aid, and I told you no, that we still had half a gallon of fruit punch in the fridge. Before I knew it, glass shattered from the kitchen." Dottie laughed. "I thought the worst had happened. I dashed into the kitchen and remember you turning to me, you with the pigtails, your face covered in blue dust as if you were Smurfette, your eyes scared and as big as golf balls. Do you remember what you said?"

"What, Mom?" she asked, a slight grin forming.

"You said, 'Mommy, I didn't do it!'"

Lydia looked down at her hands on the table, and, for all of two seconds smiled. "I remember that now." She laughed. "My problem was there wasn't anyone else around to blame."

Dottie smiled but then her mouth became a thin line. "I don't care about anything in your past. I don't care about what you've done or not done. But I want the truth. Who's this Gelb character? And *Pistol*?"

"I don't know them. My friends at school asked me to find some pot, and their names came up. I was told they'd help us get what we wanted."

Dottie nodded. Although she did not show it, she was impressed that Lydia had admitted this, even if it was disheartening to think her daughter was experimenting with drugs at such an early age.

Lydia continued. "We didn't get any drugs. I guess we were scared to go through with it."

"I see. But how could you even think to have someone in your phone named *Pistol*? And a gang leader at that? And then we find out you have *friends* in the Jaded Heart gang?"

Lydia nodded. "You're right, Mom. I was stupid and I'm sorry about that. After I met Joshua, I realized I didn't want to try drugs anymore."

Dottie fixed her gaze on Lydia. "That Gelb character oversees illegal drug traffic business for Iowa and beyond. He's not someone you should know!"

"How did you find out about him?" Lydia asked, her voice flat.

"I called Officer Thomas, and he warned me as soon as I mentioned his name. Do you remember the officer who handcuffed you?"

"They were plastic ties," Lydia rebuffed. A few seconds of uncomfortable silence passed. "How's Joshua?"

"I think he was disappointed about the last visit. He really cares about you."

Lydia shook her head. "I don't know, Mom. I'm trying to forgive him. The fact is, he may care for me, but I'm not so certain it's *me* he wants, or whether it's just my soul."

"Can you separate the two?" Dottie asked. "And I understand if you don't want religion crammed down your throat—even by Joshua." She paused. "But, he is a good boy."

"You heard about the crippled boy at our school that was supposedly instantly healed?"

"Yes."

"Does that prove that God is real?"

Dottie felt her shoulders rise in a shrug. "I happen to believe in Him. The part I have difficulty with is the belief that He actually, personally, cares for me or my life."

A light knock sounded on the door. "Time to wrap up," a booming voice said from beyond the door.

"Well, thanks for coming by," Lydia said as she stood to her feet and turned toward the exit.

Dottie rose and darted around the table toward her daughter. Without warning, and before she could protest, Dottie wrapped her arms around Lydia from behind. She held her gently yet firmly for several breaths.

Lydia walked in front of the female guard till they arrived at room 35. Her face remained flushed at her mom's open display of affection toward her. She couldn't remember the last time, if ever, that they'd hugged. The gesture had only lasted a few seconds, but the effect stayed with her; it was strangely warm and reassuring.

The guard unlocked the door and Lydia spread her feet and arms apart to be patted down. Once inside, the door was closed behind her and abruptly locked. Her roommate, a chunky girl with deep blue hair, lay on her bed writing in a notebook. Lydia ignored her and plopped on her own bed. Thankfully the girl, named Stephanie, had kept mostly to herself since her arrival.

As the moment of her mom's touch replayed in her mind, however, there was also a fear for her mom's safety. Did Frank know what her mom knew about him? If so, was he angry?

As Lydia laid her head down on the hard, lumpy plastic that the juvenile facility called a pillow, she tried to think of how she could somehow appease Frank.

Another thing needled at the forefront of Lydia's mind: she regretted lying to her mother. Normally, she'd not have been concerned about the lie, since her involvement was purely business-related, not personal. But the alarm in her mother's face, and the sudden hug had awakened Lydia enough to rouse her conscience.

She remembered the stories she'd heard about Frank—how dangerous he could be.

And then there was the matter of Joshua. If she forgave him, could she look past his betrayal? Was it sensible that she date, or even befriend, a boy who represented everything opposite of herself?

Or, would it make business sense to use Joshua if it helped preserve her image for the greater tasks she was responsible for? But what good was any business if her family was destroyed in the process?

The next day, Lydia was surprised to hear her name being called at mail call. She retrieved the long envelope and saw Joshua's name written on the upper left-hand corner. She ripped the end of the envelope and pulled out its contents—a single, folded page and a wallet-sized picture. She read the handwritten letter which was warm and friendly. Despite the temptation to tear the letter into small pieces and flush it down the toilet, there remained a warmth inside her that he'd written her.

She held up the picture and stared at the open face, the thin blond strands of hair covering his forehead, the smile that was alluring and infectious. She was glad she'd have something that would remind her of him. But was there a future for the two of them together?

Thirty-One | The Turning of Events

Within seven weeks of Joshua's first letter, Lydia stood before Judge Peterson. Leaning forward on her elbows, the judge addressed Lydia in a firm voice. Standing beside her court-appointed public defender, a tall lady with short blond hair, Lydia tried her best to appear confident without being too confident as the judge's voice sounded within the courtroom.

"Your actions seem to me to have been minimal. The testimonies of both the attacker, Garrett Collins, and your boyfriend, Joshua Phillips, corroborate your earlier words to the court that you only intended Freddie Gonzales to be talked to, not physically attacked. Although you were reluctant to cooperate at the outset, your eventual cooperation, your containment for eight weeks within Radford Juvenile Facility, and the belief by this court that you did not order the physical attack of Fred Gonzales, all satisfy me that your account is true. Miss Lydia Claremont, you are free to go from this day."

Beaming, Lydia glanced over her shoulder at her mom. She noted her mother breathe a sigh of relief. Lydia turned back to the judge. "Thank you, your honor," she said.

"Very good," Judge Peterson replied. "I hope you'll be careful who you interact with in the future. You have great potential. It's up to you what direction your life will flow."

Moments later, Lydia walked past the court guards, joining her mother to go home.

Stepping outside the courtroom, Lydia wrapped her arms around her mom and held her. "Thanks for everything, Mom!"

Dottie returned the hug. "I'm so pleased you'll be having dinner at home tonight!"

Pulling back, Lydia grinned. "Burrito for dinner? I've been craving that for the longest time!"

Dottie laughed. "Yes, that sounds like a plan! We'll stop at the grocery on the way home."

Excited, Lydia walked side-by-side with her mom to the elevator. As they stepped outside, Lydia stretched out her arms as if a flower at the warmth of the sun's golden beams. She closed her eyes for a moment allowing the heat and light to penetrate her skin and face. Opening her eyes as if satisfied, she cast a smile at her mom who mirrored her excitement. Minutes later, they located the car in the parking lot. Out of habit, Lydia scanned nearby before noticing a familiar BMW parked opposite the courthouse. It was unmistakable. With considerable effort, she tried to act normal so not to alarm her mother.

Unlocking the doors, Dottie spoke. "Stacy's missed you! She'll be relieved to know you're back home."

Opening the door, the familiar, heated car interior smell rose and filled her nostrils. Lydia took her seat and smiled as she pictured her sister. "I can't wait to see her, too."

Starting the car, Dottie put it in reverse before suddenly stopping. "What the—"

"What?" Lydia asked. Turning to look, Lydia saw *Frank's* car blocking them.

"That's strange," Dottie commented. "I didn't see that car there a moment ago!"

Lydia, looking in the side mirror, watched as the tinted window descended to reveal the all-too-familiar face. He wore dark sunglasses. And sure enough, the face turned toward Lydia for several seconds. It was grim, menacing.

"Is he going to move or what?" Dottie asked, frustrated.

Finally, the car rolled forward out of the way. As it moved, the man raised a clenched fist before lowering it again.

Lydia tried to maintain a normal facade. "He's moved, Mom. It's okay. You can go ahead."

After getting out onto the main road to go back home, her mother talked about this and that. Although Lydia listened and made small-talk, she found her mind flooded with concern that Frank was angry with her.

"Did you hear me, Lydia?"

"What, Mom?"

"I said I will be leaving the house this weekend for a work conference in Chicago. Can you watch your sister for me?"

"Yes, no problem."

Nearly an hour later, Lydia, relieved to be back home, unzipped her small bag with her belongings and dumped the items on her bed. Immediately, and with a look of joyous satisfaction, she dropped into her garbage can the items she wasn't about to keep—the generic shampoo, soap, toothpaste, and stubby toothbrush. Then she pulled out the small stack of letters and cards from Joshua. She'd not replied to any of his letters. Her feeling toward him remained one of numbness, of indifference, and anger. His betrayal ran deep. Tomorrow in school, she'd see Joshua. She'd give him the news then.

Lydia laid on her bed glad for the stillness of the house. It was so quiet compared to the juvenile facility where there always seemed to be noise—people shouting, voices echoing down the hallway, doors slamming shut, chairs scraping across the floor above.

She was home, which filled her with gladness.

Something tickled across her cheek. Instinctively, Lydia wiped her cheek and her eyes shot open thinking an insect had invaded her space. Joshua backed off with a jolt and a smirk. She sat up and saw the dangling string in his hand.

"Hey," she said, shaking off her immediate irritation. Her mom stood in the doorway.

"Joshua wanted to welcome you home," her mom said, pulling the door halfway closed.

She threw a glance at Joshua acknowledging him but kept a neutral response to his presence. She ran her fingers through her disheveled hair while trying to shake off her grogginess. "What time is it?"

"Just after eight," Joshua answered.

"I must've been tired. I slept eight hours."

"Welcome home, Lydia," Joshua said, his voice hopeful. He stood with his hands held in front of him.

Lydia stood up, tossed Joshua a glance again before approaching and taking a seat in front of her mirror. This was their first time together since her first week at juvie. "I'm glad you've come by tonight. I want to talk to you about us."

Joshua lowered himself onto the end of Lydia's bed. "I still have no idea how you feel toward me."

She kept her back to Joshua as she sat on the padded stool and stared at her reflection in the mirror. "When I first went to Radford," she said, looking at his reflection, "I believed I knew what my heart said, that what we had, ever so briefly, was over...that what you did to me, your betrayal, was inexcusable...that I couldn't forgive you for that."

Joshua stared at her as silence filled the room. He leaned forward, his hands held in front of him.

Lydia continued. "Your letters were sweet. Your cards helped me think beyond where I was. I thought a lot in there—probably too much—about myself, my family, and you."

"And?" Joshua asked. "Was that a good thing?"

Lydia allowed silence again to fill the room between them. "Yes," Lydia finally said, her voice plain. "I needed that time-out to think about what is important, and what I want to do with myself."

"What's important to you is important to me, Lydia."

She swiveled on the stool and faced Joshua, his straight blond hairs dangling across his eyes. He looked cute. But she steeled herself for what she needed to say. "I am responsible for my own actions and choices."

"Go on," Joshua said, an impressed look appearing on his face.

A pang of sadness filled Lydia at what she was about to reveal; but it had to be expressed. "I recognized that I needed to own up to the reasons I was in the juvie facility in the first place: it was my choices that led me there. And if I was to be true to myself, to you, to everyone around me, I also could not date you again." Her expression remained neutral and revealed no emotion. She swiveled back to face the mirror.

A troubled look spread across his face. "You don't want me to be in your life?"

"It's not that you can't be in my life. It's that I don't think I can be in *your* life, Joshua. On the second week of my time at Radford, I realized that you are a quality person, a rarity among guys...that there's something bright and innocent and good about you. In the end, I realized, you've shown me the priority I have in your life."

"But I had to obey—"

"*And*," she interrupted with a pause, "I *expect* you to obey. But that is why I can't be your girlfriend. I have never been second fiddle for anyone, and that includes you. That includes even God."

Joshua stared down into his hands. His voice shook. "But Lydia... Don't you know by now...that...I really do love you?"

Is he almost crying? "You don't love me, Joshua. You love your God. It's Him you should date, not me. As you can see already, I'm no Mother Teresa."

"I just want you."

Lydia stood up, approached Joshua, reached down, and pulled him to his feet. She looked into his eyes, and for the first time since knowing him, she saw the tears welling up.

"I've missed you so much," Joshua said. "I didn't want to hurt—"

Lydia moved closer until her lips touched his. Then, as suddenly as she had engaged her lips with his, she pulled back. "Good night, Joshua."

He hesitated but eventually walked out. Waiting until she heard the front door close behind him, Lydia approached the stack of letters and cards bundled in a thick rubber band. She picked them up, stared for a moment, and then dropped them into her wastebasket. It was time for her to get back to her work. She had things to do and being in a romantic relationship was the last of her priorities now.

Joshua had been walking for ten minutes along the darkened road when a familiar Ford Taurus pulled up alongside him.

"Joshua, let me take you home," Dottie shouted through her lowered window.

With some hesitation, Joshua nodded and crossed the street. He wanted to refuse, but he couldn't find it within himself to be rude, not to Lydia's mother. Besides, perhaps she would have insight into what was going on. He climbed in and said hello.

"She ended it, eh?"

“I deserved it. I shouldn’t expect her to forgive me.”

“Just give her time, Joshua. At the least, she’ll always have a good friend in you. And the truth be told, I know she still cares for you...”

Joshua nodded. He didn’t quite know what to say. On the one hand, a sickly churning revolved within himself. On the other, he realized that he was free now to pursue the Lord, that his attention would no longer be divided. Even so, he wanted to be with Lydia. He’d not expected the brushing off he’d just experienced. But being brushed off wasn’t the feeling; it was his heart crushed.

Getting home, Joshua walked inside and headed upstairs to his bedroom. “Mom, Dad, I’m home!”

Happy no one had intercepted him, he closed the door behind him. Sitting down, he closed his eyes, lifted his hands, and approached the throne of his Father.

The next hour, he communed with the Lord, feeling the fullness of His upholding power course through him. As Joshua stooped low with a humble heart, there came a lifting as if the hand of God were sweeping him up. Joy flooded his being and a renewing strength came in mighty waves.

There was a temptation to be content with that and depart, but Joshua remained. He knew the secret. He knew that what was offered at the outset of entering communion with the Lord was just the edge of what a person could experience. He pressed in, keeping his heart and mind focused on the Father, lifting Him up in heart and spirit, with voice, with uplifted hands.

In those moments of reunion with the Most High, and with considerable effort of his own, everything in his life was forced to fall away, like the rockets falling away from a space shuttle climbing to reach its orbit. There wasn’t the heartbreak and disappointment of leaving Lydia’s house; there wasn’t any homework or tests to worry about; there wasn’t a sick little brother, or an angry Sergio leaving the club. It was just him and the Lord.

But one thing remained on his mind: The onset of the 15th of November. It was two days away, and the others had prepared. They still did not know where they would go, or what the results would be, but they were prepared, ready, and willing.

Thirty-Two | October 15th

“Where should we go, Lord?” Joshua asked as the group prayed for His guidance. “We want to be led by You.”

It was Saturday, early afternoon. Despite a chill in the air, Joshua, Allistair, Jennifer, Brad, and Cary had gathered in Sterling City’s city square. Brad and Jennifer sat on the cold steel of a bench. Allistair leaned against a tree and Cary stood to the side. Joshua paced as he focused his heart on the One. They’d been praying for a little over forty-five minutes seeking direction.

Allistair spoke up, punching his open hand. “I want Sterling City impacted! I want the people to know His power!”

Joshua rested a hand on his shoulder. “Allistair, I want the same. But let me say it: people don’t need fireworks. They need His love and His connection in their lives. The effects of power will fade; but something from Him that touches and gets planted in their hearts will last, maybe even generations.”

Allistair nodded in agreement and smiled broadly. “Amen, His love first! *Then* His power!”

Joshua grinned, then turned to the rest. “Anyone sense a leading from the Holy Spirit?”

“How ‘bout the hospital?” asked Cary. “Anywhere else, the Lord’s power could be questioned. But not a hospital.”

“Sounds like a good place to me,” Joshua said. “But is that the Spirit’s impression to you, Cary?”

“Yes, and I saw flashes of people in sick beds. We can impact those people!”

Joshua continued. “But how can we get in there? There are so many rules nowadays about protecting people’s privacy.”

“Leave that up to me,” Jennifer said with a grin.

With that, the five headed to the hospital which was located several blocks away.

Joshua queried the Lord within, his excitement strong. *What do you have in mind for us today?*

When they walked through the hospital entrance, Joshua noted a dark-haired receptionist behind a long desk who greeted the group with a polite smile. “Hi, I’m Sally. How can I help you?”

Jennifer took the lead, a friendly expression on her face. “Yes, is the chaplain in today?”

“I believe so,” the woman said. “May I ask the reason for your visit?”

“We’re from Knott’s End High School. As part of the Bible Club, we were hoping to glean how to minister to people who need help.”

“Oh,” the woman said, a pleasant surprise heard in her voice and displayed on her face. “Let me call him. That’s nice you youth want to help people.”

The teens nodded and watched with anticipation as the receptionist picked up the telephone and dialed. Joshua prayed a door would open for them.

“Chaplain Davis, there are five young people here from the high school’s Bible Club wanting to meet you.” She listened for a moment. “Yes, they’re here right now.” Her face brightened. “Very good. I’ll let them know.” She replaced the receiver. “Chaplain Davis will be with you in just a few moments.”

It didn’t take long before a tall, silver-haired man came walking down the hallway. “Hi,” he said cheerily. He wore a red, button-up shirt and dress slacks. He would’ve looked like a visitor to the hospital were it not for his official-looking identification hanging from his neck.

"I'm Chaplain Davis," he said, offering his hand. Joshua was the first to shake his hand followed by the others, the man's warm smile seen beneath his substantial silver mustache. Etchings of crow's feet around his eyes added to his charisma. He appeared stout with a slightly bulging stomach.

"How can I help you today?" he asked.

"We're from the Bible Club," Jennifer began, "out of Knott's End High School. We wanted to learn firsthand how you minister to people."

"Oh, very good," he said, his eyes lighting up. "Follow me." They walked down the same shiny hallway from which the chaplain had come. He unlocked a door and directed the teens into his office with a pleased smile. "Please, come in."

The chaplain sat down behind his black mahogany desk. "I must say, it's a rarity to have teenagers sitting in my office. What a pleasant change!"

"We were wondering," Jennifer asked, "if we might accompany you when you visit patients today."

"That's a tough request to grant," he said, pressing his lips together, a hint of regret in his face. "The people here...well, some of them are very private about their faith—if they even have a faith. We don't want anyone feeling uncomfortable or any kind of pressure."

"Chaplain Davis," Joshua piped up. "We came today because we felt the Lord lead us."

"How do you know He led you?" the chaplain asked.

"We just know," Brad said, his voice serious and unwavering. He pushed his glasses against his face. Chaplain Davis's eyebrows arched, an uncertain smile appearing. "Is that right, son?"

Joshua interjected. "It's clear you're being more than courteous with our request. Might we pray for just *one* person?" At that question, all five leaned toward the chaplain awaiting his answer.

"Well," the chaplain said, teetering on the edge of giving in.

Cary spoke up, a determined look in his black eyes. "We just want to pray for someone."

The chaplain shrugged his shoulders. "How can I refuse? Okay!"

The teens leaped to their feet and congratulated each other. Only Cary remained in his seat, but he looked pleased.

"I must say," the chaplain mused. "I've never seen such zeal from teenagers to pray for people!"

The teens sat down, controlling their excitement.

The chaplain continued. "Here's the deal. We have a patient who's in intensive care. He's been in a coma for three days now."

"What happened to him?" Allistair asked.

"A car crash," Chaplain Davis said soberly. "The point is, he's unconscious. I don't think he would mind if you said a prayer for him. His wife is at his side now. If she gives permission..." At that, the chaplain stood. "Follow me," he said, a tinge of resignation in his voice.

Together they took an elevator to the third floor where serious medical emergencies were kept under close observation. The chaplain asked the teens to stay in a specific area until he called for them. Several minutes later, the chaplain returned. "The man's wife says you can pray for him. She's happy about your concern for her husband."

Joshua's felt his eyes enlarge in pleasant surprise, glad how things were turning out. "Can we see him now?"

"Let's go," Chaplain Davis said before leading them almost to the end of the hallway. The stink of urine, excrement, and detergent assaulted the nose, but Joshua ignored it. This was a place of weakness and of recovery. And, he hoped, of miraculous recovery if the five of them had their way.

Entering the hospital room, they found a man with his eyes shut tight, laying in the bed, tubes of various diameters thrust into his mouth and attached to his arms. A heart monitor beeped incessantly.

A woman stood and stepped toward them. She appeared frail, her eyes red and puffy. "I appreciate your concern for my husband. His name's Tom Snyder," she said, fighting back her emotions. "I can't bear to think what I'll do without him. We have three young children."

Joshua lowered his head as he, too, fought to hold back tears. The atmosphere was thick with sorrow. "We will seek the One and petition Him to move in your husband's life—and in yours. There is always hope with Jesus no matter how difficult something seems."

"Thank you." She briefly touched Joshua's shoulder before stepping to the corner. The chaplain joined her.

The five surrounded the man. Jennifer spoke to the wife. "Is it all right if we lay our hands on him?" The wife gave a subtle nod.

Two on each side, they laid their hands on the man, Cary stationed at the feet. They knelt and prayed, murmuring their intercessions. Five minutes passed, and then ten. When fifteen minutes passed, the chaplain stepped beside the bed.

"Young people," he began, until Joshua lifted his hand gently to quiet him.

"In the Name of Jesus," Joshua raised his voice for the first time during their time praying. "We command the broken in this body to be made whole! We come against the spirit of darkness that wants to rob, steal, or kill Tom. In Jesus' Name, we give thanks for his complete restoration!"

A full minute passed. Several more minutes. But nothing seemed to change for the man. Finally, Joshua stood up with his eyes fixed on the floor. The somber atmosphere matched the darkened room. Nothing seemed to have changed for Tom.

Joshua looked to the wife. He spoke, his voice flat. "We will continue to pray for Tom."

The wife carried a smile which struggled to keep from crying. She reached out and took Joshua's hand. "Thank you for caring enough to come here today." She let go of Joshua's hand but then wrapped him in a hug before hugging the others too.

Walking down the hallway, Joshua's eyes narrowed as he tried to understand what had just happened. He avoided looking at the others. He didn't want them to know his uncertainty of why the man hadn't been instantly restored—after weeks of preparation.

"What happened?" Brad asked from behind as he followed the others. "Did we do something wrong?"

"It's all in God's timing," Jennifer said, though she seemed to be trying to convince herself as much as the others.

As they got to the elevator and pushed the button to call it, Joshua couldn't hold back any longer. The tears slipped down his cheeks. He wanted to be alone.

Jennifer rested her hand on his shoulder. "Don't be disappointed, Joshua. We did all we could."

"I just wanted the best for that man... for Tom," he said, his voice shaking. "I can just imagine if that was my dad in there—and it was me and my brothers facing the prospect of losing him."

As the elevator doors opened, there came a shout from down the hall to hold the doors. They saw the chaplain dashing toward them. They stepped inside the elevator holding the doors open until the chaplain reached them.

"Splendid job, young people!" he said facing the teens, panting.

They each nodded, though their demeanor remained brooding.

"What's wrong?" he asked, a puzzled expression on his ruddy face.

Jennifer answered. "We were hoping to see God do a miracle in that man. And nothing happened."

"I see." The chaplain nodded. "But, you are wrong." The chaplain's lips upturned.

"How?" Allistair asked, wearing a distressed look.

All five were attentive to the chaplain as the elevator reached the ground level.

"Didn't you see how special that prayer—that show of support—was to that lady? For a moment, my God, you helped her carry her heavy burdens. You gave her hope and you helped her to believe in God. You let her know that others care about her seemingly hopeless situation."

They stepped out of the elevator. Joshua walked several steps before he collapsed to his knees. He hid his face from the others even as his shoulders shook and the tears flowed. The other three knelt beside him, Cary stood behind them, as they comforted and prayed for Joshua.

The chaplain placed his hands on the boy's head. "The Lord comfort you," he prayed, "and make His face to shine upon you. May you know the richness of your service today, that it was *not* in vain."

A moment later, Joshua raised himself and wiped away the trail of tears on his cheeks. Nearing the hospital exit, the chaplain gave the group his business card and asked them to return soon. He would be waiting for them.

Stepping outside, the blustery wind met them and reminded them that winter was coming. They walked for some time, silent.

Then Joshua lifted his hands heavenward. "I praise You, Lord God. I thank You for the joy of walking in fellowship with You. We are obedient...we want to be obedient even if not one is healed. But we cry out for those who need Your healing grace. Extend Your hand, O Lord, and show forth Your power, that Your Name might be glorified, and many people come into Your Kingdom and Your love."

With that, the others sensed the spoken prayer at an end and spoke as one saying, "Amen!"

Joshua had expected a monumental move of God, and yet all that had happened was that his own faith was moved in a direction he'd not expected, if only briefly, but enough to shake him. Had their work and preparation of almost two months been for the wrong motivation? He didn't think so. They had been careful to ascribe all glory to the Lord. They had sought to do this work for the purpose of testifying to people of the Resurrection of Jesus, just as the early Church had done.

Still, the whole situation brought Joshua to a point of self-examination. It was conceivable that something in his life had caused the lack of power to flow. Or was this all a test of their hearts? Some people would lose heart and give up. Others would scoff and make fun of the whole idea that God wants to work miracles through His Church, through human vessels. This idea Joshua ignored entirely. He'd witnessed with his own eyes the power of God in Brad, in Cary, and in the drunk who was made sober in minutes. The fact remained that those genuinely called, or chosen, would not, could not, should not give up! He, and the others, would continue regardless of the hardships along the journey.

Joshua arrived home and as was custom, he ascended to his room and quieted himself before the Lord. He prayed for a heart that would reflect His character and the likeness of Christ, that he would trust regardless of outward appearances. And it was there that the air of dread seemed to drop into his spirit like a lead weight in a fish tank. It was almost as if a dark cloud had drifted into his room. There

seemed to be a physicality to it. Like before, Joshua sensed that the group, specifically the five, were about to enter a time of grave testing, and that before things broke loose in the natural, the hearts of each of them would come to realize who they truly were in Christ.

Joshua interceded to the Lord to help and strengthen them for the days ahead.

That night, Cary took the city bus to his mother's home. After she'd let him in, she went to her burgundy recliner chair in the living room and sat down, her gaze fixed on the blaring small television. Two old men stood on a stage holding folding chairs about to swat each other, a young, doe-eyed lady sitting between them. The audience roared with laughter and mockery. On his mother's left sat a three-shelf bookcase, strewn with bills, loose papers, and books. A nicotine-stained ashtray rested there, overloaded with twisted cigarette heads and gray ash.

"Can you turn it down a bit, Ma?"

"Why? You got something to say?"

"I have a question for you. The TV's too loud."

She picked up the remote and stabbed a button. The TV was muted. "*Happy* now?"

"Thanks," Cary said as he hovered at the living room entrance.

"Aren't you gonna sit down?"

"No, Ma."

"Hungry?" Miss Adessi asked without removing her gaze from the television.

"Not tonight, Ma," he replied.

"Then why are you here?" She cast him a glance. "You not eating? Are you sick or something?"

"No, I'm fine. Listen, can I use the spare bedroom the next few weeks?"

"Why?"

"I just need a place to bed down."

She fixed her eyes on him. "Does that mean you'll start helping with the rent from now on?"

"Yes, Ma," he replied. "I've been looking for a job the past week."

"No rent money to give as a down payment, eh?" Her mouth twisted in disgust.

"I'll get it for you as soon as I can."

"Good." She settled back against her chair.

"Ma, I'll just go to my room now. Is that okay?"

"Why?" She locked eyes with him. "Something suspicious is going on!"

"I'm fasting. And I want to do some praying."

"*You? Fasting?* Will wonders never cease! What's got into you?"

He beamed at that. "Jesus. And doing His business."

"You'll eat tomorrow then?"

"No. And don't tempt me, Ma!"

She shook her head. "I don't like it. It's unnatural not to eat."

"Ma, look at me?" He grabbed at the bulk of his stomach. "Do I look like I will die if I don't eat a few days?"

She shook her head. "Do whatever you want, then!"

"Good night, Ma," Cary said as he moved toward the spare bedroom. He closed the door and went to his knees, resting his elbows on the bed. "Lord, touch my mom. Let her know Your great love, and may

her eyes open to You.” He grew quiet and still. “And help me be closer to You, to know Your voice, and be prepared to act when You speak.” He worshipped and relaxed in His Presence.

The darkness had watched with the equivalent of bated breath—their forces arrayed and pressing in on every side to keep the comatose man named Tom Snyder from recovering.

Even with reinforcements, the strong ones, brought forth from the rear, there was little that could stop the Spirit’s power from entering the man, Tom Snyder, as the five prayed and petitioned and commanded that the broken body be restored—to move toward life, and not toward death. They shrieked at the holy offense intruding upon their empty spaces.

During the next days, the trickle of an onslaught began. The darkness moved in concentrated patterns—their strategies in place as they attacked in various ways against those who bore the Risen One’s light throughout the city and its surrounding regions.

Part Three | Saplings

*“a young tree, especially one
with a slender trunk”*

Thirty-Three | Something Amiss

On the Monday morning after their visit to the hospital, all gathered under the flutter of Old Glory, the rope and metal *cling-clanging* against the pole as if beckoning everyone to draw near. The usual people, Jennifer, Allistair, Joshua met beneath its shadow. All, that is, except for Brad.

"Where is he?" Jennifer asked. Today she'd worn her hair pulled back into a braided ponytail that reached down the middle of her back. "He never misses school."

"I hope he's okay," Allistair said, dropping his book bag on the pavement.

Something amiss in his spirit, Joshua considered Jennifer's words. It wasn't usual for Brad to miss school. Even when he'd been wheelchair bound, he still was vigorous about being in school every day. "Is everyone doing okay?" Joshua questioned. He cast his eyes toward the horizon, the sun now hovering over the treetops. A brisk chill filled the air, making the group to keep in motion to keep warm.

Everyone nodded, but there wasn't a great deal of enthusiasm.

Joshua spoke, trying to sound positive. "Listen, let's gather after school to seriously pray!"

Everyone nodded.

Allistair rested his arm and hand on Joshua's shoulder and spoke. "Good idea! I don't know about the rest of you, but I could use it."

"If you can," Joshua asked Allistair, "please invite Sergio? Let him know we're missing him. And I'm sorry if I offended him."

"I'll see him in a few of my classes. I'll tell him."

"Cool, thanks."

The warning bell pierced the still, morning air. Just as Joshua and the others walked toward the entrance, Lydia moved past them at a steady pace. Seeing her jarred Joshua. He realized how much it hurt that she had said nothing to him nor acknowledged him as she walked by. He tried to move with the others and act unaffected, but perhaps he tried too much, for both Jennifer and Allistair rested their hands on his shoulders to reassure him. A warmth of comfort filled him at their touch, but then as Lydia pulled open the door, she turned and looked him in the eye. He wasn't expecting this. The look was flat—no emotion exhibited, neither anger, regret, nor gladness to see him. It lasted only a split second, but it was long enough to make his insides churn.

He was no longer with Lydia.

He was the furthest, it seemed, that a person could be from her. It would've been one thing to experience the break-up and still be friends; in their case, however, all ties seemed to be severed.

He went to his locker and retrieved several books he'd need for his first three classes.

When he walked into science class a couple hours later, he'd already prepared himself. Though he'd be in the same class, two aisles removed, from Lydia—yet it'd be as if they were on opposite sides of the planet from each other. He took his seat at his desk and kept his eyes directed toward his textbook and notebook. He didn't know why he was avoiding to look at her except to avoid feeling any worse than he already felt.

"Hi Joshua," came a familiar voice.

Joshua turned toward Lydia and tried his best to hide his surprise. "Hey Lydia," he said to her. He maintained a calm, friendly, and neutral expression. Heat filled his cheeks as he faced the chalkboard feeling awkward. He threw her a glance. "How are you?"

"Okay," she said, giving a slight smile. "You?"

"Been better, to be honest," Joshua answered.

Mr. Opal entered the class and gave his customary greeting. Joshua sat staring forward, astonished. *What do these things mean? Has she forgiven me? Does she want to be friends? More than friends? Or is this some scheme to get my hopes up? Could she really be that spiteful?* It still bothered him that she'd been involved in Freddie's beating and seemed to have connections with the Jaded Hearts.

When the bell rang an hour later, everyone exited to head to lunch. Joshua, however, loaded his book bag slower than usual waiting to see what might happen with Lydia.

"I saw Brad earlier," Lydia said as she rose and prepared to leave.

"You did? I thought he was absent today."

Lydia slowed and there appeared a smug expression on her face. "He was in a wheelchair again."

"He was?" Joshua couldn't believe the look on her face. *Is she glad?*

"You seem surprised."

"I am," Joshua admitted. "I saw the Lord heal him."

"Are you sure it was God?"

"Who else would it be?"

"The mind is powerful. Perhaps Brad's mind unlocked his own healing. And you helped him?"

Joshua didn't like that answer. "No. You can have your theories about how it happened, but I know what happened to Brad was God's hand."

Lydia nodded, but it was the *I-know-better-than-you look*. "Okay, let's say it was. Then why is this miracle suddenly not so miraculous? Doesn't this validate that God doesn't really care?"

Joshua did not give an answer.

She moved to the doorway before slowing. "Bye Joshua." Then she walked out.

Joshua waited a few seconds before leaving the class. A gaping hole enlarged within him for each breath he now took.

Joshua searched the hallways to find Brad. He didn't know what to say. Along with the hollow feeling within, there was the hint of something else roaming within him: anger.

Could what Lydia said be true? He knew God was good, and that He cared for people. A part of Joshua had receded at her words. As he thought about it, he came to realize there was something else also present: a firm sense of betrayal. If Brad's healing had been reversed, what did that say to the school? About him as a servant of God? As much as he tried to reject these emotions growing in his heart, it resonated within him like angry waves lashing a beach.

Seconds later, Joshua saw the wheelchair moving down the hallway. He raced to catch up. "Brad?"

The wheelchair stopped and swiveled toward Joshua. Brad didn't say a word but stared at him.

"What happened?" Joshua asked in disbelief. He saw the twisted look of the boy's wrists and hands. His face was ashen, appearing thinner than he'd noticed of him the previous week.

"I don't know," Brad said. "Yesterday before going to church, I felt fine. But in the afternoon, I had extreme pain everywhere. Then last night and this morning, I could barely rise out of bed." Brad lowered his head. Joshua could tell he was trying not to cry. "This morning, I had to have my parents help me get out of bed and get dressed. I was helpless...again. They took me to my doctor who said whatever reverse took place before isn't holding."

Joshua shook his head not believing this was happening. "What about your spiritual connection?"

"Not sure." He looked around him. Seeing no one nearby, he added, "I'm scared." He took in a deep breath. "Do you think I did something wrong?" His voice was low, tender.

"No, Brad," Joshua answered. "Absolutely not! Any healing from Him is according to His grace and love—not based on things we've done or not done. Do you feel conviction within you about anything?"

"No."

"Lydia told me she saw you in the wheelchair." He shook his head in disbelief. "I can't believe this is happening to you!"

Brad spoke up in a low but resolute voice. "I don't understand what's happening, but I'll trust Him no matter what."

Joshua placed his hand on Brad's shoulder. "I know you will."

"What's going on?" Brad asked, a confused look flashing across his face. "How can I ask or expect God to do miracles if He won't even do them—or sustain them—in me? I'm afraid I won't be much of a faith-builder when they see me bound in this chair."

"Trust Him despite these circumstances," Joshua said. "And you can always testify to the reality of God's change in you after you followed Christ. Forgiveness and sonship with God are vitally more important than any physical healing!"

Brad nodded. "But it's so embarrassing. I feel like I'm a reproach to the Lord," he said as he began rolling toward the cafeteria. "Everyone's been looking at me, and without words, they shout, 'Where's your God now?'"

"Your testimony remains the same," he said walking along with Brad. "You were healed. You came to trust in Jesus. There's nothing wrong with your testimony. And you can't control what happens to your body. But you *can* aim to control your mind and position your heart so it doesn't grow bitter—that you remain open to Him and His love."

Brad moved off down the hallway at a slow rate. "That's easier said than done!"

Joshua walked alongside matching his speed. "Do you want me to pray for you again...now?"

Brad shrugged.

A growing frustration filled Joshua at this whole scenario. He knew full well that although he himself believed in healing, even though he wanted it for Brad, it was ultimately the move and power of God's Spirit that brought any healing. "Let me pray," Joshua said, resting his hands on Brad's shoulders. After a minute, Joshua ended his prayer.

Brad looked up. When nothing seemed to change, he spoke. "What happened specifically last time...I mean, did the Lord direct you to start a conversation with me?"

"I remember the way the thought dropped into me as I walked by you. The Voice spoke softly, yet so strong. And I was so scared, but even more scared not to obey."

Brad nodded and grinned. "I was surprised because few kids ever talked to me. So, when you began to, it got my attention. I knew it must be important, especially when the irate teacher came at you."

Joshua chuckled. "Yeah, that was proper scary. Mr. Bell, the ex-marine, Tyson-double!"

"I will always be thankful to the Lord for that gift of goodness I experienced," Brad said. "No matter what happens to me."

"Amen! Brad, let's get lunch."

Later, after school, the Bible Club met—thirteen students in all. When they saw Brad enter the classroom in the wheelchair, everyone gathered around him and effortlessly showed their concern and support. They prayed, hugged, and talked to him, giving him encouragement.

Joshua quieted everyone. “Listen, we mustn’t lose our focus or our hope. It is God Who has called us out of darkness, and it is He Who will keep us from it. We mustn’t allow the distractions—any distractions—to cause us to be sidetracked. Do we all agree?”

“Amen!” everyone shouted in unison.

“We will face tests, trials, and tribulations,” he said. “As we are seeking the Lord, we must not forget that the enemy is going about like a lion, seeking whom he may devour. But we will not be victims to his attacks. We will fight back, but not alone. The Lord will go before us, and He will be our rear guard!”

They prayed, spoken praises to the Lord on their lips. As they moved into worship, a sense of joy and unity filled the room. They reached for each other’s hands.

Brad noticed a change in his own heart toward his own predicament by the time their time of *vertical alignment*, as Joshua called it, was complete. He determined that he’d trust in the Lord and wait on Him. He would not allow the torment of fear to fill his mind; instead, he would steady himself and keep his eyes on the One Who could give him the power to pass through the challenge—even if it meant remaining in a wheelchair the rest of his life.

Thirty-Four | Migrations

Arriving home, Joshua went into the kitchen to find something to eat. His mom sat at the kitchen table working a crossword puzzle, her small dictionary beside her.

"Hey Mom," he said as he opened the refrigerator and scanned it for anything quick and easy to snack.

"How are you, son?" she said without looking up.

"Fine," he said, which was partly true. The Monday had been difficult until the afternoon club had their time of rigorous prayer. From then forward, however, the day had improved. Even Joshua's very breathing had become easier, less strained.

"What's been going on with you and Lydia?"

Joshua preferred not to revisit that pain again—at least not now. But then he reconsidered: Perhaps it would help to talk about what he'd been going through of late. "We broke up. She couldn't handle me giving her up to the police."

"And you didn't tell us?"

"I needed to know if it was permanent before telling anyone."

"I see. It didn't seem like her to be involved with that gang, did it? She seemed so nice when I met her."

"That's true," he said, pulling out lunchmeat, cheese, a tomato, ketchup, and Miracle Whip. Setting the things on the other end of the table from his mother, he continued.

"Are you both still friends?"

"Nope. She doesn't want anything to do with me. And then Brad had a relapse in his healing. He's had to revert to using his wheelchair." He avoided his mother's eyes. "Lydia seemed glad to find that out!"

"Really?" she asked, disbelief in her voice.

"Yep." Pulling out four slices of bread, he began to build his sandwiches. "She wanted me to admit that God's abandoned Brad, that if He is there, He doesn't care." Joshua spread globs of Miracle Whip across the bread slices.

His mom took in a deep breath. "Stay strong, son. You've seen Him move in others, and in your own life. He can be trusted to move in hers, too!"

Joshua nodded, appreciating his mom's reminder.

She continued. "Sam's relapsed a bit. He was sick this morning."

"Oh no!" Sadness coiled within his gut. "I'll go sit with him."

A short time later, Joshua plopped down on the edge of Sam's bed. "Hi," he said, reaching down and resting the length of his hand on Sam's forehead. It blazed hot against his palm.

"Hi, Joshua," he replied with a tiny voice.

"You're feeling bad, eh?"

"Icky," he answered.

"Sorry to hear that. Hey, wait a second," Joshua said, walking out into the hallway to the bathroom. Retrieving a hand cloth, he placed it under cold running water before returning to the bedroom. He folded the cloth and placed it on his forehead. He pressed it gently. "There you go, Sammy."

Samuel grinned. "Hey, that feels nice."

"I will pray for you. Do you believe God can heal you, you know, make you well?"

Samuel nodded.

Joshua laid his hands on his brother's sandy-blond head for the next hour as he prayed. As Joshua stood to leave, Sam sat up, excitement showing on his face. "Hey, I feel better!"

"You do?" Joshua asked, surprised. "Come on downstairs then. We can sit on the sofa and watch the cartoon channel."

Sam smiled at that suggestion. Dressed in pajamas, he followed his older brother downstairs to the living room where Joan was seated on the sofa reading a book.

"Hey Mom," Sam said, his eyes lit up. "Joshua prayed for me and I feel better."

"Very good," she said, reaching out and drawing him into her arms.

Joshua grabbed the remote. "I think the Stooges are on in a few minutes. We could all use a laugh!"

In her bedroom, Lydia received the call just after 7 p.m. "Hello?"

"What have you done to disrupt that club?"

"Frank, nothing, yet. If you recall, I've only been out of Radford a few days now."

"That was careless of you regarding that Gonzales boy."

"That situation could've been handled much better, I admit."

"I don't like it you would risk blowing our entire operation on something as trivial as that."

"It won't happen again."

"I know it won't," the husky voice said. "You have a job to do, and it needs all your attention."

"Please tell me what I'm supposed to do to the Bible thumpers? If we have them attacked, they'll get a martyr's complex. If we threaten, they'll just gather and pray even more. It could make them even more influential."

"Hey, you were hired to take care of the details. Use your imagination."

"Frank, it's a group of less than twenty. They're not going to be a threat to anything we do."

"How can you be sure?"

"There haven't been any major migrations out of the Jaded Hearts, not since that first week after school started. The fact is, this club has settled down. Even the boy who was majorly healed is back in his wheelchair. They're not worth our time or energy, Frank."

"Fine. If it stays as is, leave it as is. But monitor it. If there's any significant changes there, it'll need to be shut down!"

"Okay."

"And what about increasing the network, especially within Knott's End?"

"I've been doing that as I can. But I don't want to increase our numbers too much or else those already involved will feel stepped on."

"Either make the network increase or the sale of goods increase. You make sure one of those two happen as soon as possible," he said, his voice deep and without emotion.

The phone went silent, Lydia refusing to say a word.

"Got it?" he asked.

"One more thing, Frank."

"What is it?"

"I want you to find a replacement for me. I want out before spring."

"You want out? Why?" he said, his voice conveying reserved frustration.

"I don't know. My heart isn't into the whole thing like before."

"Don't tell me you've caught this religious bug."

"No, I just want out. I don't want to continue doing this all my high school career."

"You won't give up your post. Don't even think about it!"

Lydia didn't answer immediately. She ground her teeth, fighting to keep from shouting. "Still. I want you to be on the lookout for someone else to take my position. This is my notice."

The call ended abruptly. Lydia wondered if she had just made the biggest mistake of her life. She knew Frank and the gang might try to bully her, but she'd stay true to herself.

"Hey Lydia." Her mom's voice came from down the hallway. "How's everything?"

"Not bad," Lydia shouted back and turned to see her mom standing in the doorway.

"Just a reminder that I'm away this weekend. Can you keep an eye on Stacy?"

"Sure."

"I wish you would reconsider about Joshua. He was such a charming young man." She stepped away. "And this house was lighter when he was in it."

Lydia stared at herself in the heavy mirror that leaned against the wall parallel to her bed. There were a lot of things she was reconsidering. But it would take time. She didn't know what was happening, but she felt the possibility of change in the air, of positive change, of new directions.

Thinking back, she thought about what she'd said earlier that day to Joshua about Brad. She regretted her nastiness, even though there was some satisfaction at having said what she'd said to him. She honestly couldn't care less if Brad was in a wheelchair or happily healed. Her questions and comments had been directed at Joshua because she knew they would make him squirm and hurt him. She still resented the way he'd disregarded her when the police came knocking.

Can things ever be good for me—to just have a normal life? She plopped down on her bed and leaned her back against the headboard. *But what will a normal life even mean for me? Can I find contentment outside the life I've created for myself? And was there a reality to Joshua's God?*

"Please help me, whoever You are. I'm lost, and I can't seem to find my way to a normal life," she murmured into the darkness. At that, she laid her head on her pillow. "I just want my tomorrows to be better than my yesterdays."

Thirty-Five | In the Face of Fear

“Mom? What’s wrong?”

“We’re at the hospital. Sammy’s had a seizure.”

Joshua held his breath, feeling the familiar, ominous hopelessness anchor within him, his feet like heavy lead weights. His prayer for his brother which had shown visible improvement in Sam had lasted only two days.

“Kris will pick you up from school so you boys can come visit Sam.”

“Okay, Mom. I’ll be here waiting.”

The news lodged like a splinter in his heart. A conflict wrestled within him, questions arising as to what was happening, what he should do, what he *could* do.

Within fifteen minutes, Joshua had been picked up by Kris. Bruce sat in the back seat.

Initially, there was no talk, something Joshua was glad for. Although the day displayed the sun’s brightness with carefree blue skies, it was extremely cold.

A voice broke through Joshua’s thinking. “Joshua,” Bruce asked from the back. “I just want to know why God heard your prayer for a stranger but not for Sam, your own flesh and blood?”

“His name is Brad,” Joshua said unflinchingly. “And I don’t know why. I’m not God, am I?” he replied, allowing irritation to be heard in his voice.

“Just doesn’t make sense,” Kris added, steering the car around a corner.

“Maybe you guys should consider God’s waiting for *one of you* to pray for Sammy.”

“It’s all madness!” Bruce said, his booming voice filling the inside of the car.

No one else said another word.

They arrived at the hospital’s intensive care section. Joshua learned they’d moved Sam upstairs and would keep him overnight for observation. All three brothers stepped into the room where Sam rested. Joshua stepped up to his little brother, his face white as chalk, dark circles beneath his eyes. Samuel managed a smile at his brothers’ approach.

“Hey little guy!” Joshua said, taking hold of his hand. Mom sat on the other side of the bed.

Samuel nodded at Joshua and managed a reserved smile. Touching his arm, Joshua felt the fever raging through his body. An intravenous line was taped to his forearm.

“Hi Kris. Hi Bruce,” Sam said, which animated both brothers. Joshua stepped out of the way as the two approached and stood near the bed. Both ruffled Samuel’s hair as they doted on him.

“Joshua, did God forget your prayer for me?” Sammy asked.

His big brothers turned and looked at him even as the statement struck him. He fought to keep his face from showing the weakness he suddenly felt.

Joshua answered him. “He always listens. But we have to trust Him, no matter what happens.” Joshua looked at his brothers and his mom. “We’re all here for you!” Sam gave a weak smile at that.

Bruce, locking eyes with Joshua, gave a subtle nod. “Amen. We’re here for *each other*.”

Joshua felt strengthened by Bruce’s affirmation.

“Stacy, can you turn the TV down? It’s blaring!” Lydia yelled from upstairs in her bedroom.

Lydia enjoyed having the house to herself, but not babysitting. Still, it was a pleasant change to be king of the hill, even if it was only for a short time.

The last time she'd had the house to herself had been two years before. To celebrate her finishing seventh grade, she'd thrown a party with just a few friends.

The plan had been perfect: Mom gone and Stacy away at her friend's all weekend. But when Stacy had returned home unexpectedly because of illness, she'd walked into the midst of a world unknown to her. The *few friends* had morphed into dozens of classmates, plus many from the high school, who had descended on her home and turned it into the place-to-be on the weekend. Music boomed, young people huddled in groups throughout the house, and lots of food, alcohol, and smoking filled that world.

To Stacy's credit, she'd been better than Lydia expected; she'd not told their mom about the party for a whole two days. Lydia had experienced one weekend of freedom, but it had cost her the next month at home grounded.

Some good had come out of that party. Under the coaching of high school friends, Lydia had been introduced to Frank, a baby-face guy in his 40s who drove an immaculate, sleek, black BMW with tinted windows and shiny rims. After a twenty-minute talk and some upfront cash from him, Lydia's involvement, effectively a partnership, had begun with an initial two months set forth as a trial run. She'd done so well that she'd never stopped working. In truth, Lydia couldn't pinpoint the reasons for accepting the role, whether it was the power she wielded, the money, or the little bit of excitement in an otherwise drab life. Perhaps it had just been the challenge.

At first, the coordinating and moving of items through the Knott's End middle and high schools had been exciting. Vetted students were under her command. But with her success had come increased responsibility. Soon the distribution had spread to several other schools in the region and the college campuses—all with her as its lead.

She'd completed all her goals with fevered attention and no complaining. The higher-ups were pleased, including Frank. And therein was birthed Mister Tony. Lydia would represent one who would be forever whispered but never seen.

But since that time, Lydia's mindset and heart had shifted. She wanted out. But would Frank allow her to leave unscathed?

It came—a sustained shrieking from downstairs, intermixed with the too-loud music videos blaring from the TV's surround sound speakers.

Worried for Stacy's wellbeing, Lydia leaped up and ran downstairs into the living room, her eyes alert, her ears focused. Stacy slept on the sofa, a half-empty popcorn bowl in her lap. Lydia's heart racing, she grabbed the remote and muted the TV.

The black kettle in the kitchen shrieked. Gray-white steam billowed from the kettle's throat—clinging to the ceiling areas. With caution, she approached the kitchen. Extending her hand, she spun the knob to the *OFF* position which hushed the kettle.

Silence collapsed in on her making the room smaller, more dangerous.

Then she saw it. The mug with leftover black grains sitting atop the counter. She had washed dishes earlier, and she knew Stacy wasn't a coffee drinker—this cup shouldn't *be* here!

Lydia looked about her, aware of everything. She needed to be, for she realized what was happening right in her own home. Frank had been in the kitchen. She remembered stories whispered about the man before—stories that now frightened her. She found herself not ready to meet God.

Yanking on a drawer, Lydia retrieved a large butcher knife and held it in front of her as she approached the living room, keeping herself next to the wall on her right.

Could this be a prank by Stacy? Lydia noticed the front door unlocked. *Did I leave it unlocked?*

"Stacy?" Lydia called in a hushed voice.

Stacy did not move.

"Stacy!" again in a voice just a tad above a whisper.

A sigh escaped from her lips, becoming a groan. "What? It's still early. I don't want to go to bed."

"Stacy...come over to me," Lydia whispered, and she realized how much she loved her sister.

Stacy sat straight up as if a rag doll being propped up by an unseen hand. Her eyes enlarged, she stared at Lydia as if she'd awakened from a nightmare.

"What's wrong?" She sat there paralyzed, only her eyeballs moved. "Why...are you holding a knife?"

"Stacy, look at me."

Biting her lower lip, her little sister fixed her round eyes on Lydia.

In a low voice, barely heard: "Come over to me...now."

She unstuck herself from the sofa and shuffled behind her big sister.

Lydia scanned about them, more with her eyes than her head, as if even moving her very head might attract unwanted attention. "I think someone's in the house with us," she whispered.

Lydia looked around as if the very shadows of the room might dash out and grab her. With apprehension, she scanned the long drapes that touched the carpet spread across the wide front of the living room that was the face of the house. *Is Frank or someone behind those drapes?*

She was afraid to check, but she had to. She crossed to them and started poking along the drapes with the blade, Stacy behind, until she reached the end. She locked the front door on her right.

The staircase to their left, Lydia took one step at a time, Stacy behind her. Nearing the top, Lydia skipped the step that squeaked just as Stacy's weight came down on it. The step creaked loud, interrupting the silence. Lydia stopped and glared at her sister.

"Sorry," Stacy whispered, teetering on crying. "Shouldn't we call the police?"

But Lydia had had enough of the police the past few weeks. She would find out what was happening on her own. "No," she replied.

The hallway ran to the left—four doors along the length of the hallway, two on the left, two on the right. Lydia's mother's room sat on the left followed by a roomy bathroom. On the right was Lydia's door followed by Stacy's. All four doors were open—which both comforted and terrified her. At any moment and without warning, someone might rush at them.

Stepping into her mom's room, Lydia scanned the room and saw no sign of anyone's presence. Stacy closed the door behind her and locked it. Lydia whispered to her, "Get down and watch under the doorway. If you see or hear someone move past, tell me."

She gave a quick nod.

Lydia noted the closet which sat on the left and was large enough for a person to hide. There were four knobs, each with a door that folded outward and slid open. Pulling on the first and second, Lydia jolted backward, her knife's blade pointed in front of her. Several boxes and her mother's many shoes sat along the carpeted floor; women's jackets, suits, and dresses hung along the railing. Satisfied no one was hiding within, she stepped to and pulled the second set of closet doors; only boxed odds and ends within.

Dropping to the carpeted floor, her knife held in front of her, she lifted the edge of the bed duvet and scanned beneath. Only quiet filled the house. Lydia's heart thumped against her chest as she saw in the darkness two shiny orbs glaring at her. "What the—" Lydia forced down a shriek of terror as she recognized Stacy's tattered teddy bear staring at her with forlorn eyes.

Happy the first room was secure, she released pent-up air from her lungs. Lydia turned to Stacy. "Stay here. The telephone's there if you need to use it."

"You can't leave me," Stacy whispered, her mouth contorting under the spell of fear.

"There's a lock on the door. I'll be back for you. Now *lock it!*" Lydia said leaving no room for discussion. She walked past Stacy, unlocked and eased the door open, took a peek, before pulling the door shut behind her. There came the hearty *click* of the door lock engaging.

Cautiously, Lydia stepped across into her own room before closing and locking the door behind her.

All remained quiet within the house.

She slowly slid open her mirrored closet doors. No one was hiding inside—the hanging clothes appearing like ominous creatures. Nothing amiss, she then checked under her bed—no boogeyman present. With stealth, she proceeded to step out into the hallway, pausing to listen for any sounds, and continued toward the last two rooms, the knife held with two hands in front of her.

As she stepped into her sister's bedroom on the right, she noted the eyes focused on her—those of celebrity teen boys on posters spread out across the bedroom's wall. The room had a feminine look to it which Lydia despised—pink bed covers, a pink dresser with attached wooden mirror, and dozens of stuffed animals on the bed. They all eyed Lydia as if she were trespassing. With caution, she slid open her sister's mirrored closet doors and searched under the bed but still, thankfully, all was clear.

She stepped to the black tiled bathroom, thankfully no *Psycho* shower curtain present. Instead, a glass partition separated the shower area from the rest of the bathroom. One quick glance granted her the all-clear.

She relaxed, but having seen plenty of horror movies, she forced herself not to be at ease just yet. She approached and knocked on her mom's door.

"Everything looks okay," Lydia said in a normal voice. The door unlocked and opened a few inches. Stacy peered out, uneasy, her eyeballs bulging out of her head.

"Were you playing with me?" Stacy challenged.

"No," Lydia said. "I wouldn't play like that."

"What made you think someone was here?"

"Did you turn on the kettle on the stove?"

"No," Stacy said.

"I've heard stories about this guy I know. He's known to go into people's homes—people he doesn't like. He does something as simple as making a coffee and gulping it down—his way of saying, 'I'm the boss and I can go wherever I want, whenever I want!'"

Stacy's eyeballs shot both directions of the hallway, troubled. "You're scaring me."

"I'm scaring myself," Lydia admitted. "Let's go check the rest of the house."

"Can I stay here?"

"Okay. I'll be back." She still held the big butcher knife.

Within twenty minutes, Lydia had checked the house, made sure all the windows and doors were locked, and returned upstairs.

Stacy went to her room and locked the door. Lydia did the same in her own room.

She rested on the bed, suddenly feeling tired from all the excitement. She lowered the knife so it rested on the carpet floor beside the bed.

The house was still. She wished the next day would come so she could take comfort that the night was over, that she'd scared her sister and herself and nothing else. But her mind kept replaying the kettle's screeching whistle and the image of the cooling coffee mug set out—which defied all explanations.

Lydia fell asleep.

Something like a detonation jolted Lydia awake. She searched the darkness, expecting a hand to reach out and close off her windpipe. The house had seemed to shake. Terror, of near paralysis, extended to all her limbs. *What's just happened?* Her clock's red numerals glared at her—3:04 a.m.

She'd been asleep for two hours, if that. She reached for the knife but her hand couldn't find it. Cautiously, she lowered herself so her back remained against the bed. Her hand and fingers probed for the knife. *It should be here!*

She turned on her phone's flashlight, the light shining about the room casting shadows everywhere. She could see her door handle's lock disengaged. *But I locked it!* She stared at it, convinced the door handle would now turn before someone hurried inside to snuff out her life.

The house dead quiet, the crying child's voice reached to her from beyond her door.

"Stacy?" she queried aloud. A lingering regret needled her that she hadn't had Stacy sleep in her room with her.

Approaching her door, she turned the doorknob slipping the door open. And then she saw it: the blade of the kitchen knife she'd had, embedded deep into the wood of her door's center.

She heard something from her right. A door opening. Lydia snapped her head to her right and saw Stacy's head peering out, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her voice shook as she asked, "Are you trying to scare me again? 'Coz I won't ever make you mad again. I promise!"

"Close your door and lock it," Lydia yelled. Her sister did not question; she slammed the door shut, the heavy click of the lock engaging.

Stepping out into the hallway, Lydia grabbed and worked the knife out of the door. Adrenaline now coursed through her. She hated feeling powerless and at the whim of another. She'd had enough! With only a little caution, she descended briskly down the stairs and found the front door wide open, the brisk winter air flooding the house.

Before going upstairs to bed previously, Lydia had turned on every light in the house. Yet here she stood—every light now off!

"Okay, Frank! I know you're here." Though her words came out with an air of confidence, inside she was terrified. Closing the front door and locking it, she stepped cautiously toward the kitchen. Several items rested upon the island counter—butcher knives, their blades facing in her direction, sat on the shiny counter's center.

At this, she couldn't handle it anymore. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and dialed 911.

"Nine-one-one emergency services. State the nature of your emergency," a woman's voice asked.

From outside, a car's tires squealed before it roared down the street. Lydia ran toward the window to see what kind of car had sped off, but it was too late.

"How can we assist you?" the operator asked again.

"N-No," Lydia said. "Everything's okay. False alarm." She pressed the *OFF* button.

She walked into the kitchen. Then she saw it. A second coffee mug rested in the sink. With grave reluctance, she reached and touched the cup's exterior; it was warm to the touch.

Thirty-Six | Taking Risks

At some time after three in the morning, Joshua's phone vibrated against his bedside. Groggy from getting home so late the previous night, he was surprised to see Lydia's name and face on his phone display. He answered the phone.

"Lydia? Are you okay?"

"Can you come over *now*?" Lydia asked, her voice stressed.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I can't explain on the phone."

"My parents would kill me if—"

"I need you. Right *now*!"

"I don't know—"

"Please, I have a lot to tell you."

"Like?"

"Oh, forget it! Silly of me to think you'd be around for me when I needed you."

There came silence as the call ended.

Joshua considered dismissing her and waiting till the next morning. But the fact she'd called him must mean something was wrong.

Joshua dressed before heading downstairs as he weighed his next action. He listened for Kris if he might be up but there was only stillness. Waking him to take him to Lydia's would be futile, if not a health risk. He turned halfway and noticed his brother's car keys on the kitchen table.

It took several seconds of knocking until a porch light came on and the front door opened.

"Joshua?" Lydia said, astonishment in her voice at seeing him.

"Are you okay?" Joshua asked. She didn't reply before the door was yanked open.

"Come in," she said, visibly jarred, a tremor seen in her hands.

"What's going on?"

She closed the door and locked it. "He was here."

"Who?"

"Frank Gelb."

"Cary told me about him before. He's a top leader for a drug network? Is that right?"

Lydia nodded and approached the sofa. She eased down onto the seat cushion. Joshua had never seen Lydia so afraid. She also looked frazzled.

"You said he was here earlier. Tell me what happened."

Lydia stared down at the beige carpet. "Joshua, I want change in my life. I told Frank I want out. He came here earlier to terrify me."

Joshua scanned the house, worried. "Are you sure he's gone?"

Lydia nodded. "I believe his car drove off earlier."

"Want out from what, Lydia? I don't understand."

She rested a hand on Joshua's shoulder. "Listen, there's a lot you don't know. About me."

"What do you mean?"

She hesitated.

"Go on, it's okay." Joshua sat down beside her, wondering what he was about to learn.

"After completing seventh grade, I was approached by a high school student, a brother of a friend of mine, who asked me if I wanted to make some easy money. At that time, I didn't want to work in a grease-trap like White Castle Burger."

"Okay, go on."

"Not long after that, I met Frank. He gave me a trial run and the results impressed him. In fact, he made me a leader."

"A leader of what?"

"An illegal drug distribution network."

Joshua stood up and paced the room.

"I know this must be a shock to you. And I'm sorry."

"So, to say you were involved with the Jaded Hearts would be an understatement!"

"Yes," she said, this time with regret in her voice. "I need your forgiveness."

"This is huge, Lydia." He paced back and forth.

"Joshua, can you forgive me?" she repeated. A troubled look flashed across her face.

"Why are you asking me to forgive you?"

"For living a double life. And for something else."

"What, Lydia?"

"After I met you, a bully came to the school to challenge you."

Joshua looked intently at her. "You had me beat up?"

"Cary wasn't supposed to hurt you, only to test you and get you to waver in your convictions."

"And Freddie? Did you ask for him to be beat up?"

Lydia looked troubled. "Not to disable him. But to give him a beating, yes."

Joshua shook his head. "I can't believe all this."

"I'm so sorry, Josh."

Joshua sat down and placed his face in his hands. He looked at Lydia. "And who's this Mr. Tony guy?"

"Mr. Tony? How'd you hear..." Then she answered her own question. "Cary, right?"

"Yes."

"Joshua, I am Mr. Tony."

Joshua stared at her wide-eyed unable to say another word. It felt like he'd been knocked off his feet by a rogue ocean wave.

Thirty-Seven | Revelations

Joshua was sitting in the living room of a major drug dealer for Sterling City. He still couldn't believe Lydia's confessions. But now it was necessary to find out if she wanted to truly change or not. For the first time since knowing her, he saw contrition in her eyes.

"I'm sorry to pile all this on you, Josh," she said, her face downcast. "it's so complicated—I don't know what to do or where to start."

Joshua nodded. "Thanks for opening to me. I'm glad you did. But how did Frank get into the house?"

"I heard he learned locksmith skills years ago for nefarious reasons. I don't know for sure."

Joshua looked away for a second. "I don't know what I feel right now. For whatever reason, I guess I'm not mad. To be honest, I can't believe what you've just told me." He was inclined to hold back, but instead shared his feelings. "No matter what, I care about you. I only want good things for you."

"Thanks." She cast him a fleeting smile. Then, standing up, she stepped in front of Joshua. She swept her long fingers up across Joshua's cheeks as her eyes fixed on his. "I know I was angry before...but I care for you too, Joshua. A lot."

What's happening to me right now? His emotions surged within him—the sensation of her touch nearly overwhelming all restraint. Joshua shot a quick prayer to the Lord asking for inner strength. Despite this, another part of him reminded him that he'd done nothing wrong, that no lines had been crossed. *Don't be a prude.*

The room's ceiling light shone atop her head creating a halo effect, the light shading her features.

Without thinking, almost instinctually, Joshua placed his hands over hers before lifting them away from his cheeks. He stood up and held them even as he felt himself being swept up by the moment. Face to face, he stared at her, examining her smooth features and neutral expression, minutes ago apprehensive, but now at ease.

"Would kissing me be a sin, Joshua?" she asked.

"I don't know—"

Without warning, she leaned forward and kissed him. He moved to pull away, but she followed and held him, the kisses becoming deeper. Finally, he resigned, even as he struggled to understand what was happening, and what he should do.

"Lydia?" said a small voice from atop the stairway. "Are you there?"

Lydia stopped but indicated she was poised to restart. "Everything's okay, Stacy. Go back to bed!"

"I had a night terror," she said.

"I'm gonna be a night terror to you if you don't go—"

Joshua leaned forward and gave Lydia a quick kiss on her lips before sidestepping her and heading to the front door. He prayed in the Spirit. He needed to leave as soon as possible, but he also wanted to make sure Lydia was safe.

"Go to bed, Stacy," Lydia yelled, louder. No reply came from her sister.

"Let's pray for your situation," Joshua said. He noted the disapproval on Lydia's face. Praying was obviously the last thing on her mind. Finally, though, she agreed. Standing next to the front door, he held her hands.

"God, we come in Jesus' Name. We just ask—"

"Oh, what's the use of praying?" She let go of his hands. "This is pointless!"

Joshua stopped out of respect. "Lydia, I won't force you to do anything. But I believe. And I know He hears, even if sometimes I have to be patient and wait—or when I have to learn to trust Him."

Lydia nodded with a look of resignation. "I guess."

He resumed. "Lord, we pray right now for You to give help and direction as Lydia seeks direction on removing herself from these illegal activities. And I ask for Your protection over her tonight and in the days ahead."

Joshua gave her a tight hug before pulling away and placing his hand on the door handle preparing to leave. "We'll talk tomorrow. I need to head home now."

"Wait. Please don't leave yet," she said. "I'm still spooked. And I don't want to be here by myself."

Joshua nodded, understanding. "I'm sorry. Look, it's nearly five o'clock in the morning. Me staying here is *not* a good idea. If my brother wakes up and finds his car missing, or if my parents come home for any reason, you won't see me for the next six months!" He managed to smile as he waited for Lydia to respond.

Lydia conceded Joshua's decision, disappointment etched on her face. She relented as a subtle smile flashed. "Look at you...stealing your brother's car. Getting spoken to by the police. And dating a *criminal*!" She again stepped in front of Joshua and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Can't we have some *us* time—when there's no one around, when we can just be ourselves?"

Joshua embraced her back. "I want that, too. But I don't trust myself. And I don't want to do anything that we might regret later."

She sighed before letting him go, her arms slapping against her sides. "Fine."

Opening the front door, the chilly night air met them. Joshua stepped outside, looked about before turning to Lydia. He held his arms close to his body to ward off the cold. "I won't be at school tomorrow, but I'll call you tomorrow afternoon—if you want to talk."

"Why won't you be at school?"

"Sammy's gotten worse. I was at the hospital after school till late last night."

"Not better, eh?" she asked sadly.

Joshua shook his head. "But we're still hopeful for his recovery."

"Please let Sam know I'm thinking of him."

"I will!" Joshua leaned forward, took her face in his hands and gave Lydia a kiss on her cheek.

Driving home on back roads that would get him home without risking a run-in with the police, Joshua thanked the Lord for interrupting him through Stacy. But the actual question pressing upon his heart was what he'd do with the information he just learned from Lydia. How would it affect his relationship with her? What could he do to help her? And it was then he began to do the most powerful thing he could think of for her and for himself—he prayed with all his heart for God's wisdom and help.

Thirty-Eight | The Warning

Finally, the last bell rang.

Joshua headed to the club gathering, still thinking about Lydia's situation, still voicing prayers to the Lord on her behalf, when in his peripheral vision he detected movement—something like a massive blue wall moving toward him. Grabbed by his collar and jostled into a darkened corner of the hallway, Joshua stared into the face of an older teen wearing a denim jacket—typical of the Hearts gang. Two teenage boys also in blue jackets stood off to the side savoring the scene.

"You're gonna end the Bible Club as of today—or else!" The older teen's oblong face snarled at him with disdain.

Joshua's throat closed off, his breathing halted, Joshua struggled to break free. His body pinned against the wall, he touched the floor only with the tips of his shoes. Finally, the bully relented allowing Joshua to reply, but it came with great difficulty. "It's...not my decision...if we meet or not."

"You're the leader, aren't you?"

"I just do...what the Lord...says. He's the Leader. Take it up...with Him."

"If you don't do as I say, if you so much as show up at that meeting today or any other day, I will find you and inflict enough pain on you to make you wish you were dead! Am I clear?"

Joshua couldn't agree. "Do what you want to me. Our group is bigger than just me."

"I'm warning you," he said, his teeth clenched. "You better go straight home. If I find out your face was in that classroom, you're dead!"

Joshua listened for an inkling of leading from the Holy Spirit. But nothing seemed to surface in his mind. Except for one thing he'd read that morning: "Offer your other cheek."

"It's a sad day for me!" Joshua said.

"What did you just say to me?" the bully asked, tightening the noose around his throat.

"It's sad that you...don't know Him. That you don't know how much He loves you."

The bully laughed before turning to his teenage accomplices who stood behind. "The boy's trying to preach to me about Jesus. Do I need Jesus?"

The two teens nodded, one of them laughing. "Yeah, you do!"

Without warning, the boy jolted Joshua's head sideways with an open hand strike across his cheek—a loud slap echoing into the hallway.

Joshua yelled out, shocked at the abrupt speed and force of the strike.

"That's a foretaste. Don't go near that Bible club today, or ever again." The boy released Joshua's shirt which caused him to slump to the floor. The bully moved off while giving Joshua a foreboding look.

"Wait!" Joshua yelled after him.

The bully gave an incredulous look before stopping. "What do you want?" The sound of him grinding his teeth together escaped the bully's mouth.

"I can't do what you ask. So, do whatever you want with me here and now."

The boy rushed toward Joshua just as a voice boomed from down the hallway.

"Hey!"

Cary? Sure enough, his bulky mass was headed their way.

The leader didn't budge along with the two guys as Cary stepped near, towering over them.

"Joshua?" Cary said.

"Yeah?"

"Do we have a problem here?"

"No," he grinned. "But these three have an enormous interest in our Bible Club."

"Is that so?" Cary said with a cheerful tone, eyeing all three.

"No, we don't!" the leader said and stepped past Cary.

Cary raised a massive fist in front of him. "Sure about that?"

Entering the classroom for the meeting, Joshua, along with Cary and the three Jaded Hearts, found the gathering had already started.

Cary escorted the three and had them sit at desks at the rear of the class. They were not happy to be there, but Cary's *persuasive ways* had won over their decision-making.

The room reverberated with prayer from the students' lips. They were praying with gusto, the room thick with a sense of Presence greater than their own. As Joshua joined them, a peace washed over him—the Presence of the One—strong and inviting.

Joshua joined the others in prayer. He lifted all the concerns—for those who didn't know Him to have a change of heart, for obstacles to be removed so people could be more attentive to His call, and he lifted their enemies—those who wanted to persecute and harm them. They asked the Lord to turn the enemy's plans to the Lord's glory and gain. Some in the room cried as if brokenhearted. Yet others laughed or smiled in joy. A few had become still, unable to talk. Yet others voiced their prayers in utterances of song, sometimes in languages that seemed unknown or unlearned. Nearly an hour later, the group finished their prayers—all burdens lifted, uncertainties settled, and a strange goodness upon each person's face.

Joshua stood. "We face an enemy who is not flesh and blood." He eyed the three who sat like prisoners. Cary stood behind them off to the side. Joshua continued. "Our actual enemy is unseen. And our Lord goes before us fighting the battles that are too great for us. But we must do our part—to remain faithful to pray, to remain faithful to stand no matter who opposes us. Let's remain in prayer and not be shaken by any trial or tribulation that comes our way. He's worthy of our lives. He's worthy of everything we have and everything we are!" The others in the group nodded.

As the meeting ended, Joshua addressed the three, Cary nearby. "What do you guys think now?"

The leader looked down at his hands, then to the two with him before speaking. "You won't have any more problems from me or these guys. I don't understand it, but there's something good happening here."

Joshua nodded. He extended a hand to the leader. It remained there for three seconds before he blinked and reached for his hand. As Joshua's grip tightened around the same hand that had struck him over an hour before, the leader spoke. "Sorry what I did to you." The two beside him also nodded in regret.

Cary stepped behind the three and placed his bear-sized hands atop their shoulders. He asked the Lord to reveal Himself to them. Their response was one of openness and curiosity.

A short time later, Joshua headed toward the school exit, radiating joy at what the Lord had done in the three Jaded Hearts' lives. Their journeys were now beginning with the Lord, thanks to Cary's muscle, Cary's prayer, and Cary's shared testimony with them.

Joshua walked by a group of cheerleaders sitting in the hallway working on their banners. One of the cheerleaders caught Joshua's eye. She got up and approached him from behind. He faced her curious why she'd chased after him.

“Could you please,” she asked in a low voice, “pray for my mom and dad? They’ve been having a lot of problems lately. I’m Jenna.”

“I’m Joshua,” he replied, offering his hand which she took. “Let’s both pray for them Jenna. Lord, take control of this situation in Jenna’s family. The greatest prayer I can pray for this family is that they’d know You, too, as I and so many others know You.” He said amen before turning to her.

“Jenna, would you like to know Him personally? Would you like Him to come into your life so you’re not doing life alone?”

She heard the question but seemed to dismiss it. Her mouth drew downward, saddened. “I don’t think I can follow Him like you do.”

“He wouldn’t want you to follow Him like I do. That’d be boring,” he said, which caused her to laugh.

“Can you tell me more about Him?”

Joshua shared as the entire cheerleading squad surrounded him to listen.

Joshua’s time with the cheerleaders lasted almost an additional hour. He had to admit his amazement that the outsiders to the Gospel should be drawn to the Lord not through just words but through the evidence of His Presence upon His people after time spent with Him.

Joshua entered his bedroom as joy sprung up within him. The Spirit of God rested upon him and the closeness seemed only to increase with each second.

After showering, Joshua pulled back his bed covers and got into bed. An assurance of God’s Presence and reality clothed him. As his head struck the pillow, he prayed for his family, for Sammy, for Lydia, for the Jaded Hearts’ guys, for the cheerleaders who had just surrendered their lives to God, and for his enemies who wanted to harm him—even the mysterious man known as Frank Gelb.

Thirty-Nine | One Called Mr. Tony

It hadn't taken long for Lydia to get the call from Frank demanding a face-to-face meeting. She was to come the next day at 5:45 p.m. to the local park. Although she didn't like the idea, she thought it best to just meet up to get things ironed out between them.

Entering the park where the trees had given up most of their leaves and only a few remained dangling, Lydia scanned the area for Frank. The cold, stretching shadows of the distant treeline touched all, the sun plummeting toward the horizon.

Frank leaned against the back of a park bench dressed in basketball attire—his hands fidgeting with a black Spalding basketball. The sight of him made her cautious. She glanced about the park trying to identify anything out of place—but also looked for any bystanders who might discourage Frank from doing anything untoward to her. To her chagrin, no one else was here.

As she came to within a stone's throw of him, he looked up and fastened his eyes on her. He wore his black hair shortened on the sides and back, rising perfectly into one-inch-high spikes on the top. A neutral expression shielded his thoughts.

"Hello Mr. Tony," he said when she drew near.

"Why did you have to come to my house and scare me and my little sister?"

Frank snickered irreverently at her question while keeping his look fixed on the massive trees which lined the park's perimeter. "I go wherever I want. Whenever I want. You know that by now."

"My sister was there. You had no right—"

"*Whenever I want!* And I don't like it when things—or people—change around me. It makes me feel funny inside so I can't sleep. And I love my sleep."

"Did you forget to take your meds?"

He stood up from his leaning position, which made her insides twist. A disgruntled look flashed in his eyes.

She inched backward before locking eyes with him. She needed to have a backbone, or she'd never get free of this thug. "So, you will harass and scare me nonstop till I do what you tell me?"

"Fear is just an emotion. There's something much worse after fear, Tony."

"Just call me Lydia," she said, her voice betraying impatience.

He raised his eyebrows. "See? That's what I'm talking about. You've always been *Mr. Tony* since we met—the name I gave you. Why would I call you by a name I've never known?" He slapped the ball once against the pavement more forcefully than necessary.

"Frank, I'm sorry, but I want out!" She stared at the ground and kicked at a rock that was partially buried. "I've grown your business to sufficient levels. I'm no longer an asset to continue its growth."

His face contorted with repressed anger as his eyes fastened on her. "You have a choice about your future," he said. "So, you better think more before you finalize this decision of yours." His eyes rose to meet her's. "Give me your phone."

"Why, Frank?" she asked, protesting.

"Don't make me ask again," he said, warning in his voice.

With reluctance, she handed him her phone. "What about all my pictures and vids on there?"

Without a reply or another look, he handed her a folded sheet of paper before he walked off.

Lydia stood there stunned, unsure what to do. Her eyes followed Frank's movements to the edge of the park before he disappeared behind a row of trees. Her arms hung at her sides. Without her phone, she felt vulnerable and off-kilter.

Opening the paper, she saw a message with irregularly cut-out words from newspapers and magazines. It read:

*So many broken hearts to see you leave,
But Tony's still mine, do you believe?
Mine to control, mind to command,
Give your consent to avoid my backhand.*

Lydia rolled her eyes and scoffed. *Didn't finish eighth grade with that level of poetry, did you?*

But then her eyes shot to the edge of the park. And sure enough, standing at regular intervals around the park's perimeter stood guys and girls wearing the blue denim jackets of the Jaded Hearts gang. The reference to *broken hearts* obviously regarded the gang. Some leaned on tree trunks while others stood with their hands held in front of them—all facing in her direction. She saw the same behind her.

They moved in her direction as if taking a leisurely stroll. Despite their movements, she made her way toward the park exit hoping to get attention from anyone walking along the peripheral to call for help. The gang must've noted this and doubled their speed to intercept her. When she saw there was no way to get out of this situation, she thought she'd just face them and talk her way out.

Within 200 feet of her, surrounding her, five of them stepped forward. She waited for the leader to address her—or perhaps this wasn't meant to be a discussion at all.

"Who's in charge?" she asked attempting to remain in control.

A young man with reddish hair and heavy freckles stepped forward as the other four maintained their positions. His face showed no emotion, no hint of what they were going to do with her.

"So, this is what Frank wants?" she said, not allowing any weakness to seep into her voice.

"There's two ways out of here," he said. "Walk out of here as you came in—if you're a friend and partner of Frank's. Or get carried out—if you're not! You just need to make the decision in the next thirty seconds." He stood with his arms akimbo. "Make up your mind!"

Lydia nodded, understanding, her face resolute despite the threats. "I've already made my decision," she said pausing. She found herself in a situation without escape. But she couldn't let this go on or else she'd never be free again. "Tell Frank I said, 'I'm out!' And I mean it!"

It was then that all five of the Hearts pounced on her—fists and feet pummeling her until Lydia slipped to the ground. She curled into a ball and covered her head with her hands. Strangely, she pictured Joshua's face even as pain exploded across her body as the nonstop blows landed.

She knew it then. She loved him.

She yelled out as each punch or kick struck her. Somehow, she thought of Joshua's God. Will You help me despite all I've done—to my Mom, to my community, to people I care about like Joshua? Even as the beating continued, desperation had its way. She screamed out to the God of Joshua to save her.

Then her world was swallowed by darkness.

With the dark ones' ravenous desire to snuff out her life their chief aim, they manipulated the Jaded Hearts like puppets on strings. The gang members' lifelong harboring of violence found an outlet as they poured their anger and hatred out upon the teenage girl.

Initially, there had been just the empty space of an unlit vacuum within and surrounding her—nothing to resist their onslaught.

But then His face appeared over her—pure light that deflected the demons' attack and tamed the physical attack enough to save her life.

Despite all her sin and rebellion, He stood over her, protecting her, loving her—fighting for her—against the onslaught of inky-darkness.

Part Four | Mature Trees

"Storms make trees take deeper roots."
-Dolly Parton

Forty | Double Life

When Lydia awakened, she saw only the hazy outline of Joshua's face hovering over her. Confusion clouded her mind until a ripple of pain radiated across her body. Nowhere did she not feel pain. She struggled to draw in a breath, the pain filling all her chest cavity until she winced.

"Lydia," he said, concern on his face. "You're gonna get through this."

"What...happened?" And even as she asked, she remembered her last conscious moment.

"A plainclothes police officer saw what was happening and intervened. The gang all ran off when he came to help."

"Oh," she said, lifting her left arm with significant effort—patches of black and blue bruises and red cuts along its surface. "I *guess* I'm lucky." She gritted her teeth.

"Or, maybe the Lord saved you."

"Oh, my face...it hurts. Is it bad?"

"Swollen. They said you suffered a facial hairline fracture on your cheekbone and badly bruised ribs."

"How'd you find out?"

"Your mother called me and brought me with her to see you. She's getting a coffee."

Lydia cried and grimaced at the same time as a fresh wave of agony passed through her. "I don't know why. I...prayed. In the park. To your God."

Joshua gave a subtle nod. "That's good to know."

"I don't think my life, though, is one He'd want."

Joshua's face brightened. "I heard this saying and it's true: 'He isn't looking for golden vessels or silver vessels. He's looking for yielded vessels.'"

"But what if I'm just asking for His help," she said moaning as she sat up, "for selfish reasons."

Joshua nodded. "He knows us in our contradictions. He knows us completely. Yet, that doesn't change or shade His love for you."

Just then, her mom entered the room, a white-paper coffee cup in hand. "Lydia? You're awake!"

Lydia's heart leaped at seeing her mom. There was something good, soothing, and genuine; never would she find a better ally in this world. "Hi, Mom." Although her mom wore a concerned, cautious smile, there was also relief. She put the cup down on a side table and stepped beside her, Josh making space.

"How did this happen to you?" she asked in disbelief. "What were you doing in that park alone?"

"I've been living a double life, Mom. I'm so sorry." With that, she cried, her body trembling as more shooting throbs of pain enveloped her.

"Lydia, look at me," her mom said with an unwavering look.

Lydia's eyes met her mother's, her cheeks wet.

"No matter what you've done, that's all in the past. The main thing is that you rest, get well, and whatever the future holds, we face it together."

"I'm sorry, Mom," she said almost in a whisper. She held the off-white pillow to her face as the tears soaked the pillowcase. Her mother leaned over and kissed her forehead.

A nurse stepped in and gave a broad smile. "That'll be all the visiting for now. Lydia needs her rest. You can both come back in the morning, or, if you wish, Mrs. Claremont, I'm sure you can come back later and use the empty bed overnight," she said, gesturing toward the second bed.

"I'd like that. I'll run Joshua home and come back."

Lydia waved moments later as they departed the room, feeling something good inside her she had the support of her mom and Joshua.

On the way home, the two of them sat in silence for several blocks before Dottie addressed Joshua. "Should I prepare myself for what she's been doing?"

Joshua decided not to focus on what would be a shock to Lydia's mother regarding her daughter being Mister Tony, as well as overseeing the illegal running of drugs through the area's schools. "She wants a change in the direction of her life. It doesn't mean it'll be easy—and there may be consequences she has to face. But at least she's asking for help. I think she wants to open up to you."

"But who can I go to for help?" she asked, worry etched on her face. "I don't know how I can handle this by myself."

"We can pray together."

She nodded, tears brimming her eyes. Pulling the car to the shoulder of the road, she shut off the car's engine and turned to Joshua. Metallic pings escaped from the car's engine area as they sat there.

"What is it about you that's so different?"

Joshua was taken aback. "Different?"

"The way you do life—different, but good."

"I just follow Jesus, that's all."

"I-I don't know what to pray. Or how..."

"Just talk to Him straight from your heart. Tell Him what you need. I'll agree with you."

She hesitated before reaching for Joshua's hand. "Lord, I'm new to this. I can't go on without Your help. Please... Help my daughter find her way to safety. Help me know what to do. Give us both strength—and Joshua, too..."

As her prayer trailed off, Joshua continued. "This situation is much bigger than any of us. But I know You'll help us. You'll help Lydia get through this."

As Joshua finished, Dottie glanced over at him. "Already, I feel something different. Wow."

Shortly after this, she looked to make sure the road was clear before pulling the car onto the road to finish the drive to Joshua's house.

As Joshua approached his front door after being dropped off, he scanned the neighborhood. An unfamiliar car was parked across the street from his house. The windows were tinted, but he could see the outline of someone in the driver's seat. A burning orange light intensified, a lit cigarette.

Joshua prayed a quick prayer as he stepped inside his house, wondering who the person might be. *And I hope You'll also be moved by our needs, Lord. I, for one, need You in a big way!*

Forty-One | The Cry

A nurse guided Lydia as she eased herself from her bed onto a wheelchair while her mother hovered nearby, ready to assist. Her stay at the hospital was about to end. She winced in pain from the throbbing that surrounded the region of her ribs, and the other parts of her bruised and aggrieved body. Upon settling into the chair, Lydia's face showed immediate relief. Just as they were about to depart the room, the three of them sensed someone else present at the doorway. A police officer stood with his brimmed hat in his hands.

"Hello," he said simply, stepping into the room.

Lydia didn't recognize the officer.

"This is the officer who intervened during your attack," her mom said politely as the nurse excused herself.

Lydia nodded and locked eyes with the man who stood before her wearing a somber look. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties with thinning brown hair, and a reddish complexion from too much time in the sun. She noted the officer's nameplate: Browder.

"Thank you, Officer Browder," she said, hesitation in her voice. Lydia sensed something about the man's demeanor didn't bode well.

"I don't know how to put this." The police officer met her eyes but looked down at the hat in his hands. "I wish it was for other business, but I've come to arrest you, Miss Lydia Claremont."

"Arrest her?" her mother asked taking a step toward the officer as if to stand between the two.

"Two witnesses, not wanting to be involved in the Jaded Hearts gang and its drug running activity any longer, have come forward and given their statement that you've been instrumental in the distribution of drugs throughout their school and the community at large."

"Is that right?" Lydia asked, as resignation rooted in her. Wincing, she adjusted until she was more comfortable in the wheelchair. "Mom," she said, her voice accepting. "It's fine. I've been living a lie for a long time now. I'm ready for change—and for whatever happens to me to bring that change."

"But she's not well," her mom pleaded with Officer Browder, ignoring her daughter's words. "Look at her! You can't just—"

Officer Browder raised both hands to appease Mrs. Claremont. He spoke with calm in his voice. "We'll take her to the station, book her, and talk to the judge about placing her under temporary house arrest since she's not fit to be held in a juvenile facility. She should be home by tonight, Mrs. Claremont."

They exited the hospital and headed to the special van that would take Lydia to the police station. Looking off across the hospital parking lot, Lydia noticed Frank puffing on a cigarette, leaning against the front of his sleek, black BMW. He wore a business casual gray jacket with a white turned-down collar shirt beneath, his black hair set slickly in place. She locked eyes with him before looking away, a look of calm delight on his tanned face.

After being loaded onto the van, Lydia tried to take in a deep breath before the pain stopped her. She could only think of the first day when she'd awakened to Joshua's face. She'd wanted to believe in his God, to share in the comfort that she'd witnessed in his life—despite the hardships of Samuel's cancer.

But there was also another thought that replayed in her mind—that it was too late for her to invite Him in her life after all she'd done. She agreed with that thought almost wholeheartedly. This was her reality, not the alien worldview that was Joshua's. Yes, there was a brightness in him—even something

attractive about it all. But that wasn't something she could honestly take hold of in her own life. She was too far gone, she concluded. She felt a strange peace at the realization.

It was after 9 p.m. when Joshua heard Bailey bark downstairs from the living room. A moment later, his dad called him from downstairs. He flew down the stairway to the living room. Dottie, Lydia's mother, stood there clasping her hands in front of her. Her eyes red and puffy, she tried to look composed. "Would you please pray for Lydia? For me? I just don't know what else to do."

"Where is she?" he asked, concerned.

"She's fine, at home but under house arrest. She has an ankle monitor and can't leave the house."

Joshua escorted her to sit down on the living room sofa. His dad sat in the chair opposite him nearest the front door, appearing tired from the long day.

"What happened?" Joshua asked.

"Two gang members went to the police and confessed to their own actions regarding a drug distribution network. They named Lydia as a leader." She looked down at her hands and shook her head. "I don't know what else to do."

"Listen, Mrs. Claremont. You believe in God," Joshua said. "And the passion you feel for your daughter will move Him to act. Like the other day, just talk to Him, and we'll agree with you?"

"But I'm not a follower like you are..."

A smile spread across Joshua's face. "There's always now. He'll come into your life if you surrender to Him, if you ask Him."

She shook her head at first until something changed in her demeanor. She nodded and spoke as if confessing. "You're right. I need Him so much in my life." She took in a deep breath before releasing it.

"Just ask Him to come into your life. And then we'll go from there."

She prayed to the Lord, and her voice wavered. "I have watched Joshua these last days and weeks. I think there's a reality to His beliefs, and You move in his life. Would You come into my life as You have his?"

Praying with her, his dad sitting there still and respectful, Joshua remained in awe. Here they were in his living room, Lydia's mom accepting Christ into her life, asking for His help, and about to be rearranged and changed forever!

Dottie cried, but it wasn't out of pain.

"What's happening to you?" Joshua asked.

"I feel different," she said, wiping away a tear. "Something good's happened to me just now."

"He's real. He will help you because He cares about you. Maybe you can sense a small part of His love for you."

Joshua left Dottie with his dad before flying upstairs and returning with a book in his hands. "Here," he said handing her a small black Bible. "This will help you understand more about God and His heart for you. It's His love letter to you."

She flipped through the Book.

"May I pray for you now?" Joshua asked.

"Sure," she said with a half-smile—looking overwhelmed by all that was happening around her.

Joshua placed his hand on her shoulder. "Lord, I pray that You would now fill Mrs. Claremont with the Holy Spirit, that she'd sense Your Presence right now to an even greater level. May Your personal love

and joy live and flow from inside of her to all whom she knows and meets.” He looked at his father whose face showed muted amazement.

“What’s happening to me?” she whispered.

“Just focus on the Lord. Ask Him to give you all He wants to give you.”

“Is there more?”

“Yes, there’s always more from Him.”

She thanked Him. And then she followed Joshua’s instructions. “Please, I need You. I need everything You want to give. And I want to give You all of me.” She remained in that exact position, her eyes closed, her hands raised, and a peace emanating from her face.

“He’s immersing you in the Holy Spirit as He promised to do to all who come to Him seeking more,” Joshua said, almost giddy.

Joshua’s dad continued to sit watching all. He’d closed his eyes during Lydia’s mom’s prayer and during Joshua’s blessing. As a few minutes turned to half an hour, Dennis tapped on Joshua’s shoulder.

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Would you please...pray for me, too, son? You know how I’ve been so worried, so consumed with Sammy’s situation. I-I just need more faith,” he said, his voice trembling.

Joshua led his father to pray from his heart, too. And then his father spoke words of contrition. “I surrender myself to You again, Lord. I’ve been a fool to live apart from You—and to carry all these burdens by myself. Please forgive me. I can’t go another minute—another second—without You,” he said as tears streamed down his face.

Something wonderful was happening in the living room. And Joshua was beside himself in wonder.

The darkness gathered—gleeful at the slowly fracturing world of the Lightbearer. Piece by piece, it was being torn asunder. The girl’s mother—herself chained, her eyes seeing yet not seeing, was as much a part of the dark kingdom as they.

But when the Spirit came—like the explosion of a cruise missile from beyond—He struck with such force and such abandon that all the darkness was knocked back. And though they tried, there was no getting past what was taking place within the Lightbearer’s home. They screamed and clawed—but their efforts were futile.

The ground had become free of all contamination; it had become holy.

The Spirit entered another—no longer a slave, no longer dead—blazing with Resurrection Life from the Risen One.

So, they turned their attention elsewhere.

As the evening ended, an inexpressible joy lit each face—but in double portions upon Joshua. Unplanned moments like this—like with the cheerleaders, like Brad’s healing, and Cary receiving His transformational love—Joshua could never get tired of such! He reveled in the Lord’s displays that resulted in powerful changes in those around him.

Just as Dottie left to go home, Joshua’s dad’s cellphone rang. It was late—probably his mom giving an update. His dad silent, Joshua could faintly hear a crying voice. *Mom?* Panic gripped his insides.

“My Sammy,” Joshua heard. “Sammy’s slipping away.”

A chill passed through Joshua.

“We’re coming,” Dennis replied. “We’ll be there as soon as we can!”

Joshua stood back watching his parents as they embraced in room 103. His two towering brothers stood in front of him, their shoulders rounded and the frames of their bodies sunken as if depleted of strength.

His dad held his mom, her appearance and demeanor all too fragile. Sobs erupted from within her depths. His father's voice soothed her. "All we can do is to be here for Sam. And believe that no matter what, there's always hope in Christ."

Joshua's chin fell to his chest. *Where are You, Lord?* Seconds later, he said, "I'll be back, Dad."

"Where're you going, son?"

"To the chapel."

"Don't be gone too long, okay?"

Joshua nodded before hurrying down the hallway. As they'd entered the hospital, he'd noticed the chapel which had drawn him. He would use it for its intended purpose.

Joshua stepped into the small, red-carpeted room. Set with three rows of upholstered chairs divided by an aisle, it was lit by thick, white candles set with large, built-in square shelves. The room was empty.

As he let the door close behind him, he ran to the front, falling to his knees and then forward onto his elbows. The front strands of his blond hair brushed over the red carpet, his forehead inches above it.

"Lord! Tell me! What should I do? Sammy's on the verge of disappearing from our lives. Please, Lord. Bring him back to us!"

All at once, the silence seemed no longer a comfort but a jab deep into his heart. Depleted, he cried, pounding the carpet with his fist. As the tears fell, he climbed to his feet feeling burdened and retrieved a large family Bible that sat atop a podium. He held the bulky Book close to his chest and closed his eyes as a sense of comfort coursed through him. "Your Word is a lamp for my feet, and a light for my path," he said, easing back to the floor. He opened it randomly and then his eyes fell upon a Scripture.

He read aloud the verse that seemed highlighted, written in the English of another time. "'Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.'"

Joshua nodded. "I want Your joy and peace—and hope. You are my ever-present help in a time of need. You surround me with Your love and Your grace." Joshua prayed in the Spirit. And soon the tears were no more, but a fury of faith arising from within him. Comfort was his again and hope. Yet despite it all, he did not feel a freedom—or a release—to go knock out the cancer preying on Sammy.

"But why, Lord?" he asked. "I *must* fight for him!"

Joshua closed the large Book. He climbed to his feet and set it back on the podium. As he set the Book down, the flash of His Word filled his mind. *This battle is the Lord's, not yours.*

And then, just as succinctly as that first thought had come, there followed another. *Give Me Sammy.*

Joshua crumbled to his knees as a realization was highlighted in his mind. He'd cradled Samuel in his heart so much that he'd never truly put him in the Lord's hands. "Lord, I'm...so sorry!" Tears stung his eyes.

And then Joshua noticed a change in the atmosphere around him as that familiar and comforting Spirit seemed to lean upon him once again. The weight pressed down upon him while lifting him to new heights.

Do you forgive Me?

“What?” Joshua asked, puzzled. The still, small voice had echoed within him. “Forgive You? What would I possibly need to forgive You for, Lord?”

Silence filled the room.

A booming voice shattered the stillness, causing Joshua’s heart to skip a beat. “It’s because He is a living Person, Joshua!”

Turning, Joshua noticed Chaplain Davis, a smile showing beneath his silver mustache. His blue eyes displayed compassion, and what Joshua thought must be the glint of wisdom. The chaplain stood half in the doorway, half in the hallway.

“What do you mean, Chaplain Davis?”

He stepped into the chapel letting the door slip closed behind him. “Even though He’s done no evil, in your heart, you’ve seen Him as aloof and indifferent. He’s not been in sync with your timing—and that’s because He is Lord, and you are not. I have a hunch you feel a hidden anger and bitterness toward Him.”

“But why would He ask me to forgive Him?”

“Because He loves you. And He knows you are hurting inside. He wants all the debris—any of it—to be removed from between you and Him.”

“I understand that,” he said, closing his eyes and praying aloud. He lowered his face. “I do, Lord. I...forgive You. I’d never want to have anger toward You!”

He sat there for a few moments as joy reappeared within his heart and mind, as if bathed with the first warm, golden beams of sunshine after a long, winter night. A great peace engulfed him, and a renewed hope.

“But I don’t know,” Joshua said, looking upward toward the chaplain, “if I fully trust Him. I can’t stand the thought of losing Samuel. I just can’t.”

The chaplain nodded, a look of understanding flashing across his face. “But you’re powerless as it is. You might as well put the whole situation in His capable hands and then trust Him with it...with *all* of it.”

“How did you know I was here, Chaplain Davis?”

“I was visiting Samuel and got to meet your parents. From what I can see, you’ve got quite an amazing family, young man!” His kind smile appeared again beneath his silver mustache. “They told me you were here, which didn’t in the least bit surprise me.”

“Why’s that?” Joshua asked.

“Because you’re a watcher for your family. I knew you’d be here praying and interceding for your brother and family. And, I trust, you’ve never stopped, have you?”

“No, I haven’t. I love them too much—sometimes maybe more than I love God if I’m honest.”

“Joshua, if there’s one thing I’ve discovered,” the chaplain said, “it’s that if you love God with all your heart, mind, and strength, you’ll be able to love everyone—your family, even your enemies—with incredible passion. You’ll love everyone in your life more perfectly if you love Him first.”

“Hmm, I hadn’t thought about it that way,” Joshua said.

The chaplain’s phone vibrated. He lifted it to his ear. “Thank you for letting me know. I’ll be there right away,” he said, ending the call. The chaplain opened the door and said in an upbeat tone, “Follow me, would you?”

They walked down the long corridor to the front reception desk where a mass of people now stood. Joshua recognized the faces—people from his church, New Horizons Fellowship. He waved, smiled, and shook hands with as many as he could.

Joshua’s pastor stepped forward. “I’m Pastor Hemmings,” he said, greeting the chaplain with a polite handshake. “We’ve come not just to show support, but to pray for Samuel’s recovery.”

“Very good,” Chaplain Davis replied.

Joshua led pairs of church members to stand beside Samuel and pray for him. About an hour later, Sergio, Allistair, Jennifer, and even Brad in his wheelchair, arrived. They, too, went to Samuel’s bedside to pray. Then, to Joshua’s surprise, Lydia’s mother and Stacy came to offer their prayers and support. News about Samuel’s grave prognosis had spread throughout much of the city.

Chaplain Davis came to check on the comatose boy frequently, and offering practical help.

Several hours later, the church members and Bible Club left to go home. Joshua and his family remained, wanting to believe that at any moment, Sammy would sit up and ask what all the fuss was about. The hours passed, however, with no significant change. Nearing midnight, Kris brought Bruce and Joshua back home to get a proper night’s rest for school the next day.

Seated in the back of the car, Joshua reflected on the entire day—so full of ups and downs—the good, the bad, and the ugly. During it all, he’d sensed the Presence of God, when Lydia’s mother and his father had opened their hearts to the One, and when the whole of the community had come to pray for Sammy. Joshua was heartened by the show of support and prayers going up.

The darkness struggled to maintain a foothold as the battle raged. The high-pitched whirl of incoming light struck their positions—scattering their forces, causing those advancing to retreat. Concussive thunderclaps of light shattered the enemies’ schemes of conquest.

Too intense for them, they hid and waited. They recognized one key to their strategy: the one called Samuel.

How else to dim the Lightbearer who continued to replicate himself in others?

They knew human nature. The prayers would falter—and the light strikes would fade. Then they would move toward their target with all speed.

Forty-Three | Into Your Hands

The next morning came too quickly. Joshua pulled back his covers and eased out of his warm, cozy bed. A chill in the bedroom air wrapped around him. Stepping to his window, he used his fingers to look between the wooden blinds. He sighed when he saw it was dark and dreary with steady rain.

Joshua thought to have a day off from school. He'd been through so much the past days. Yet, there remained in him a sense that he *must* go to school today.

"Okay, Lord. Let me get ready," he said, going into overdrive to prepare for school.

After showering and dressing, Joshua received a text message from his father. Every message now seemed to have grave implications.

Samuel's condition unchanged. Will keep you posted. Have a good day at school, son. -Dad

Joshua dialed Lydia's house.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Claremont. Can I speak to Lydia?"

"Yes, Joshua. I'll get her. By the way," she added. "It's been amazing to wake up feeling at peace—that He's present with me despite all that's been happening."

Joshua rejoiced. "That's great to hear, Mrs. Claremont."

"Let me get Lydia for you."

Seconds later, Mrs. Claremont's voice came back on the line. "Joshua, I'm sorry to have to tell you this. She's not ready to talk to you."

"What?" Joshua asked, a wave of alarm passing through him.

"I think she's just feeling low this morning."

"Please, can I stop by there tonight after school? Don't tell her I'm coming."

"Okay, Joshua. But just be prepared for whatever mood she's in when you get here."

"I understand. Have a wonderful day, Mrs. Claremont," he said, ending the call.

As Joshua stepped off the bus, Cary stood there, waiting for him. For a moment, it reminded of him of how he'd originally met Cary.

"Hey Cary! Have you heard anything through the grapevine about what's happening to Lydia?"

"I'm not in the loop like before, but B.L., the guy you met before, told me Frank Gelb's got it in his mind to make some examples."

"Examples?"

"Yeah, he can't let it be seen that he's weak. He answers to someone, too."

"But why bring attention to a drug distribution network within the community? That doesn't seem to be smart."

Cary laughed as they neared the school entrance. "A network like the one that's been operating can stop for a time and start again weeks later. Demand never ceases. But I hear the Hearts aren't happy."

"About?"

"The Bible Club. They want to stop it spreading. Remember the three Hearts guys the other day?"

"Yeah?" His mind flashed back to the abrupt strike that had come before that meeting.

"They left the Hearts. What we shared impacted them."

"Will they be safe?"

Cary nodded. "No matter what, if a person is in His hands, they're in the safest place they can be."

Joshua nodded. "I'm glad the club is His, not mine. We'll pray for guidance and protection for all of us."

The corners of Cary's mouth curved upward. "Yeah, if He goes after our enemies like He did me, they'll soon belong to Him, too."

Joshua nodded, smiling at that. "I pray the Lord will extend His hands to protect those who leave the Hearts, and also move on our enemies."

"Amen!" Cary clapped once, the loud smack echoing down the hallway.

"Do you personally know this Frank character?" Joshua asked.

"No," he said. "We've only heard his name, never seen his face. He's always stayed clear of the gang."

"I think I saw him or one of his goons parked outside my house the other night."

Cary stopped and looked at Joshua with a grave look. "Really?"

"Yes. This is beyond all of us! We just need to pray, Cary!"

His big friend nodded, but there remained worry in his face. "Okay."

The after school gathering took place. Joshua directed the group to go deeper than usual in their worship time. Allistair played his guitar with gusto. As their voices lifted in unison, Joshua sensed the Spirit filling the room, and every heart present.

Joshua glanced over the classroom. Jennifer stood with her hands uplifted, a glow upon her face, her long braids sweeping behind her as she relished the Lord's goodness.

Brad sat in his wheelchair with his face upturned, his eyes closed. Despite the strange relapse, he still looked better now than he'd ever looked prior to his amazing healing. Joshua remained puzzled, though, at the return of his friend to his previous condition. "I put him into Your hands, Lord," Joshua prayed in a whisper. "May You be glorified in his life and situation. May Brad be brought closer to You despite what's happened to him."

Joshua watched as Allistair played with all his heart while seated on a desk, his face lit with joy as he sang. Later, Allistair shared, while strumming, how his Vietnamese parents had responded to the changes in his life with genuine interest. He encouraged everyone present to take their walk with God up a notch, and trust Him to work in every situation, whether great or small.

Joshua's happiness increased, too, as he looked upon Sergio beside Allistair, worshipping with raised hands and a resolute face. Sergio's presence within the group blessed him. There was a strength in him that Joshua knew he could count on.

Then he scanned the unfamiliar faces gathered—over a dozen young people, some cheerleaders included, all now dedicated to knowing and walking with God.

A pulsing warmth swept over Joshua as the Lord's joy filled his heart. "And You are the most important One here, Lord—even if no one else was here, You are enough! Welcome!" Joshua whispered, smiling as he opened his heart to the Lord afresh. "Come and take full control of me and this group. If we have You, no darkness or deception can remain for long," Joshua said, grinning ear to ear.

When the time of worship ended, Joshua greeted several of the new attenders in the room. They'd come because they'd heard the stories—strange and wondrous stories—of God doing crazy things in the school and beyond.

Cary herded the newcomers to a back row of the classroom so he could share with them what had happened to him not too long before. Joshua chuckled at the spectacle of seeing this ex-gang member, once a bully doing works of the flesh, now a gentle bully-for-the-Lord herding people to hear his life-changing story—sometimes, whether or not they liked it.

Kris picked Joshua up and, on the way home, they stopped at the hospital and visited Sam until about nine o'clock. His condition remained unchanged. To ease his symptoms, the doctors had treated Samuel with transfusions which would help the boy have a respite from his heavy fatigue.

As Kris drove home, Joshua stared out the car window and prayed once again, putting Samuel into the Lord's hands. "He's all Yours, Lord. And Lydia. And my family. And the Bible Club. All of it, I place into Your capable hands. Prepare me to trust You, regardless of what comes my way. Amen!"

Forty-Four | Trials by Fire

"Kris, is there any way you can stop by Lydia's place?"

"It's getting late, Joshua," Kris said, releasing an exaggerated sigh.

"I know. But I've got to talk to her." Joshua gave his brother a concentrated, pleading look.

"Everything else is going wrong. I want a chance to make things right with her."

"And what will you give me if I do this for you?"

Joshua thought for a moment. "I'll admit to everyone I know that you're better at basketball than me."

"I am," Kris insisted. "By far!"

Joshua smiled. "Okay... Then I'll wash and clean your car three times in the next month."

"Wax included?"

"Wax included!"

"Vacuum inside?"

"Vacuum inside!" Joshua sensed his brother's looming surrender.

"Girls," Kris said, giving his brother a sidelong look. "They'll drive you crazy—when you're around them...and when you're not!"

Joshua nodded. "I know, tell me about it."

"I'll drop you off and pick you up in one hour."

"Thanks, Kris!" A dash of hope rose within him that he might be able to fix everything with Lydia.

"Hey," Joshua added with a laugh. "You can be all right sometimes!"

Kris mimicked Joshua's laugh before delivering a lightning fast jab to his younger brother's side. Joshua flinched, his seatbelt stopping him from escaping. Successive light jabs struck the side of his ribs.

"Stop, Kris! Not fair!"

"Life's not fair," his brother replied.

Moments later, they pulled up to Lydia's home. The porch light was on, which made his late hour visit feel less awkward. He waited until his brother drove off before approaching the front door and ringing the doorbell. Seconds later, Stacy opened the door.

"Hi," she said, her voice neutral.

"Welcome, Joshua!" Mrs. Claremont shouted with a warm smile, behind Stacy.

Joshua stepped inside. "Sorry I'm so late. I just returned from the hospital."

"How's Samuel?" Mrs. Claremont asked, empathy in her voice.

"He's stable but unchanged from the past days."

Mrs. Claremont nodded. "Just hang in there. So many are praying. Are you hungry?" she asked with a motherly tone.

Joshua smelled the lingering aroma of baked garlic bread and simmering tomato from the kitchen. "Something smells good, Mrs. Claremont. Sure!" He took a seat on the sofa that faced the TV. Stacy sat next to Joshua and studied him.

She piped up. "Is it true you made a lame boy walk?"

"Stacy!" bellowed Mrs. Claremont's voice from the kitchen.

"I just wanted to know," she said, petulance in her voice.

Joshua spoke up despite his slight embarrassment. "Yes, Brad was touched by God. I just did what God told me to do."

"Does He have anything to say...about me?" This time her voice was soft, inquisitive.

Joshua gave a quick smile. "Do you want to find out?"

Stacy nodded, enthusiasm seen in her eyes.

"Then let's ask Him," Joshua said. "One second." He leaped to his feet and stepped toward the kitchen. "Mrs. Claremont?"

"Yes, Joshua?" She stirred a saucepan being heated.

"May I pray for Stacy?"

"Of course!" She gave a pleasant smile.

Joshua returned to the sofa and sat next to Stacy. She looked up with an uncommitted, unsure look which made Joshua grin. "Don't worry. I promise this is painless. I'm just going to pray over you."

He invited the Holy Spirit to come. Seconds later, his eyes sprang open as he sensed the sweeping Presence fill the room. With gentleness, Joshua laid his hands on Stacy's shoulders just as Mrs. Claremont came into the living room and joined in the praying. Joshua spoke. "Stacy has a desire to know Your thoughts toward her, Lord. I just ask now to reveal a glimpse of Your heart for Stacy. Help me share only what You show me."

The room quiet, they stood waiting a few seconds. At last, Joshua spoke. "I just see a father figure picking you up, throwing you into the air, and catching you again. I believe God wants to be your Daddy, that even though your earthly father hasn't been here, that He desires for you to know that you're *His* special daughter. He wants you to experience His special love for you—and for you to know He delights over you. He's been waiting for you to call out to Him."

Her eyes shut, Stacy smiled at that. "I'd like to know Him," she said, tears slipping down her cheeks.

Mrs. Claremont reached and hugged her daughter from behind.

Joshua led Stacy in prayer—more of a conversation—between her and the Lord. When she echoed Joshua's amen, Stacy beamed with joy.

Her eyes enlarged, an enormous smile pushed out her cheeks. "I feel different! God is my Dad!"

Mrs. Claremont dabbed away some tears. "My baby girl, everything changes when He comes into our hearts!"

Joshua reveled in the Lord's goodness and love—and the unplanned result in Stacy. Moments later, he sat at the dining room table where Mrs. Claremont served him a minced beef spaghetti with hot, crusty garlic bread.

"Stacy, go tell Lydia dinner's ready," Mrs. Claremont said.

At that statement, Joshua's heart drummed against his breastplate, anticipation and fear intermingling. How would she react to him being there?

Seconds later, Stacy returned. "She said she's not hungry."

Joshua suspected Lydia knew he was there. *She doesn't want me in her life anymore!* His heart dropped within him as if attached to lead weights. At the dinner table, Joshua kept up pleasantries even though his appetite had vanished when Lydia hadn't joined them. Twenty minutes later, he stepped to the front door and prepared to leave. He'd wave Kris down when he saw him approaching on the road. For now, he welcomed the walk home and to be alone.

"Thank you for visiting," Mrs. Claremont said. He glanced at Stacy standing behind her and saw the smile yet remained. No matter what, tonight was beautiful for Stacy's sake.

He turned the doorknob to open the door when he heard his name called from upstairs. Joshua's head snapped toward the voice, then to Mrs. Claremont, who gave him an encouraging nod.

"First door on the right. Good luck, Joshua," she said.

He flew up the stairs.

He stood before the door and gave a light knock. His heart thundered within him. He forced himself to breathe as normal as possible as he anticipated what might happen in the next seconds.

"Come in." Her voice held a neutral tone. *What does that mean?*

"Hiya, Lydia," Joshua said, peeking inside. "How are you feeling?"

"Better every day. Just sore and a bit tender." She sat on the edge of her bed and patted the bed beside her. As he sat down, she reached around him and embraced him in a tight hug. Then, to his surprise, she rested her head on his shoulder. Elation and relief coursed through Joshua. *Is everything okay between us?*

"I've missed you, Josh," she said. He returned the embrace while feeling surprised at her unexpected display of affection. Recognizing his feelings racing within him, he wanted to separate himself from her to maintain a safe buffer. Her clinging to him, however, made it impossible. And, he feared he'd offend her and ruin their reconciliation if he made any wrong move.

"I've missed you, too," Joshua admitted.

"Under house arrest is better than juvie," she said with a quip of a laugh. She held onto him as if he might slip away. "Did I hear you praying for Stacy?" she said, releasing him, but interlacing her fingers with his.

"Yes. It was incredible."

"I see," she said with a hint of disinterest. "What if I were to show how I feel...toward you?"

Joshua nodded and beamed a smile. Although alarm bells sounded within him telling him to excuse himself, to insist on them visiting each other in another part of the house, he resisted those thoughts. He needed to know they were reunited after all the uncertainty, which required privacy. And he realized as he sat there on the edge of the bed, Lydia beside him, how worn out he felt—and the incredible burdens he'd been bearing, burdens uncommon for adults, never mind someone his age. For once, he wanted and needed to feel something good. *Is it so wrong to receive comfort from this girl who's so filled my heart and mind the past months?*

The thought of her, even at the worst of times, had, in the brief time he'd known her, granted him a sense of strength and well-being—even identity. He still remembered the looks on his brothers' faces when they'd heard he was dating Lydia—a tall girl with a fine body and even finer face. *For just five minutes, I want to feel normal. I just want to let my heart to be free to love her without second guessing everything happening between us!*

He wouldn't, he told himself, allow himself to go too far.

But even as all these thoughts cascaded within him, her hands lifted to his face and pulled him closer until their lips touched. The battle raged within him—the Voice present but increasingly diminished. Like flood waters appearing out of nowhere, he was carried along. He stopped resisting as he wrapped his arms around her pulling her closer to him, her alluring perfume, the flutter of her breath across his cheek. Never in his life had he experienced this.

Is this love? Or something else? His body endorsed his every movement and his touch upon her.

Joshua recognized what was happening, and the danger he was in—but each argument was side-swiped away as he surrendered to the driving passion within. There was no stopping what was happening to them. Within moments they were lying alongside each other, kissing and caressing.

Beep, Beep!

"Joshua?" came the muffled voice from downstairs. "I think your brother's just arrived."

Kris!

Joshua's neck stiffened. He couldn't leave—not yet. Finally, he was where he wanted to be—with his girl—reunited, reconciled. Stepping to the door and opening it, he poked his head out into the hallway toward the stairs. "Okay, Mrs. Claremont!" He tried to sound like nothing was out of sorts.

Joshua returned to the bed and sat down with a hearty sigh. Lydia raised to a sitting position before bringing her hand to rest on his shoulder. Even as he pulled out his phone and rung Kris, she planted light kisses on his right cheek.

"Kris?" he managed, trying his best to sound normal.

"Why aren't you out here yet? Dad told me to fetch you. It's getting late and you've got school tomorrow."

"Kris, please. I'll get Mrs. Claremont to—"

"If that's what you want to do," Kris said, his tone sharp. "Call Dad now and get permission or get your butt out here!"

"This isn't a good time for me to leave, Kris," his voice said, imploring.

"I don't care. You've got all of three minutes or I'll call Dad."

Joshua ended the call, throwing his phone down on the carpet. He reached over and pulled Lydia close. Then, just as he was about to kiss her goodbye, an idea popped into his mind. He had to do it as he needed, really needed, this time with Lydia.

Releasing her and retrieving his phone, he called Kris back. When he answered, Joshua spoke up. "I just spoke to Dad. It's cool. Lydia's mom will bring me home in thirty."

Even as he said these words, for all his justifying reasons, a sadness coiled down his spine. A growing emptiness ate away at any last vestiges of peace within him.

"Okay, fine." Kris ended the call.

"Whoa!" Lydia said, admiration in her voice. She laid back against the stack of pillows while pulling on his shoulders which drew him back to her. "I like this new Joshua." She leaned over him and kissed him again, running her long fingers through his blond hair. His smile wavered at her touch.

"By the time Kris finds out, when he gets home, it'll take him another twenty minutes to come back—if he comes back."

"Only forty minutes, kind sir?" she asked, pouting.

"It's the best I could do. But don't get used to it."

"Why do you say that?"

"'Coz I'll be grounded for three months when my family finds out what I just told Kris."

"Hmmm, yeah. So, I suppose we should take advantage of the time we have?"

"Are we back together now?"

"Do you really have to ask?"

"Well, I—"

She shushed Joshua. "Let's stop with the words. I'm tired of words. I just want to *feel* something together. Don't you want that?"

Joshua gave a small nod and leaned upward to kiss her. Already in his mind, he'd crossed several lines that he shouldn't have crossed. And now he'd lied to Kris, which astounded him. A fleeting glimpse of him praying for Stacy made him even more astonished—to go from such heights to such depths in so short a time! Yet for all the wrongs of his actions, he somehow felt justified. He needed this time with Lydia. This had been the make-or-break moment in their relationship.

"Hey," he said. "We should slow down—"

"I said, no words," she whispered, her tone corrective.

He thought to resist her but that thought was only fleeting as he allowed himself to surrender to her.

Forty-Five | Trespassers and Advocates

The vacuum-emptiness of Lydia's room had been the ideal spot—the place where the trap was set. The tethers tight around her, she moved and thought according to her dead nature, the dark ones leading her with ease and without protest.

The Lightbearer succumbed—the Voice replaced with the voice of another, and the Wisdom of the One replaced with an earthly, demonic wisdom.

Immediately, they clung to the boy like leeches—their fangs drawing from him the warmth of his life that they so craved. Their victory was now sure.

And soon, the victories would be further reinforced when the little boy breathed his last. When that took place, they'd have forever suffocated the life and light within Joshua Phillips.

After the door closed and the lock engaged, no more words were uttered within. Only Dottie's motherly instinct triggered concern for what might be happening in the silence upstairs. She gave a shout of warning as she climbed the stairs and stood at Lydia's door—her goal not to embarrass the teens. "Lydia? Joshua?"

There came a flurry of movement within the room and muffled mumblings.

"It's getting late. Joshua? Want me to drop you off to your home?"

"Yes, Mrs. Claremont!" The boy's voice sounded all-too-friendly.

"Five minutes, Joshua. I'm waiting downstairs for you."

Joshua gone, Lydia sat against the back of her bed. A tinge of anger remained toward her mother for interrupting them.

Yet for any anger inside her, there was also something else within her, feelings she'd not encountered very often before. They had lodged in her mind. Regret. And something akin to shame.

Her motives, not too long ago, had been to bring Joshua back to earth—to ground him by seeing his wings melted by the scorch of the sun's heat. She had wanted all of him, not just a part. She hadn't wanted to share him with his God.

Now, however, something within her had changed. She realized she didn't want to hurt him or to change him—she simply wanted to be with him.

He'd tried to hide it, but she'd seen it. A haunted look had appeared upon Joshua's face as he'd gotten up to leave. It was as if a light within Joshua, always present before, had been switched off. He'd appeared on the verge of crying as he left her room.

Lydia sensed he'd been crushed by their actions.

That image of him... She lowered her head. Why was it she now wanted to cry, too? She felt self-conscious, even foolish, yet there was something—a drive—to say something. But to whom?

Then something new was born within her and she prayed, her voice almost a whisper, her eyes closing. "God, I'm sorry for wanting to hurt Joshua to get what I want. Please, help me be a better person. I hate myself for what I allowed to happen with Joshua. Please help him get back some of the joy and life he had before he came here tonight. I'm so sorry."

Though she ceased praying, she kept her eyes closed, finding some strength in the stillness—and something akin to a Presence. She considered her mind playing tricks on her, or that too much time listening to Joshua had caused this. Or, that He was real, could respond, and intervene in any situation, even her troubles.

A tear trickled down her cheek which she dabbed away.

The night sky filled with heavy clouds as thunder rumbled from the distance. So many emotions rolled around in Joshua's heart and mind as Mrs. Claremont drove him home. Any traces of the One seemed to have receded in his heart until nothing but vague vestiges of His once vibrant, infilling Presence remained.

"Sorry if I interrupted you two," Mrs. Claremont said.

Joshua was surprised that she was the one to be sorry. There was only one in the car needing forgiveness.

"No," Joshua confessed. "I'm grateful you called me when you did."

Mrs. Claremont nodded. "I became concerned when it got a bit too quiet up there."

Joshua held his face in his hands. "I-I betrayed Him," Joshua admitted even as his voice struggled to remain strong. He was thankful Mrs. Claremont kept her eyes focused on the road.

Heavy rain pelted the windshield. The rhythmic slap of the wipers echoed within the churning emptiness inside him. He'd never felt so alone and disconnected.

"I was a teenager once." She quipped a laugh. "Might be hard to believe, but it's true."

Joshua was thankful Mrs. Claremont wanted to lift his spirits. But for now, the ache in his heart seemed so painful that he wanted only to curl up into a little ball and cry.

"Lately you've been through more than most," she said. "I understand why you'd feel vulnerable and overwhelmed."

Joshua spoke the raw truth. "I love your daughter—probably too much for my own good. How can I be in a relationship with her and God at the same time?"

"Boundaries will have to be kept without wavering or excuse. Look, you may've disappointed yourself and feel like you damaged relationship with the Lord tonight. But remember this is all part of a larger battle. So, get up, dust yourself off, and learn from any mistakes."

"Hey, that was insightful!"

"Thanks."

"But how can I ever trust myself again? I failed Him. It was so clear what He was saying to me—yet I ignored and pushed Him away. I just wanted to be with Lydia—to forget about every problem, to just be happy with her."

"Joshua, if it'll help you, I'll make sure you're not allowed to go up to her room again," she said as they entered the street that Joshua lived on. They pulled up along the curb in front of Joshua's home. "Living room only!" Mrs. Claremont's voice turned deep feigning a totalitarian tone.

Joshua chuckled at that.

Mrs. Claremont put the car in PARK. "Mind if I do the praying this time?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Claremont," Joshua said with a smile before lowering his head. The weight of her hand rested on his shoulder.

"Dear God, I want to lift Joshua. He's had a hard week. So please put your blanket of grace around Him. Let Him sense that special grace and mercy to him because You love him dearly. Amen."

"Thanks so much," he said, glad for the encouragement. "Please continue to pray for me?"

"Of course," Mrs. Claremont said with a smile, brushing away a long, black strand of her hair. "You're a warrior for God. I won't stop praying for you."

Joshua opened the car door. "Good night, Mrs. Claremont."

Joshua closed the door and waved as she drove off. A sense of dread accompanied him as he approached to his front door. Despite what might be said to him in the next seconds, he felt a comfort knowing he had returned to a safe place.

Joshua's father called from upstairs. "Is that you, Joshua?"

"Yes, Dad." As Joshua waited for what his father would say next, Bailey came over and reared up on his hind legs. Glad to see him, Joshua gave his dog a hearty hug and rubbed behind his ears.

"You're running late tonight, aren't you, son?" his father said, descending the stairs.

Has Kris somehow covered for me? "Yeah, Dad. I had to patch things up with Lydia."

"Oh, so that's the reason you lied to your brother?" he asked, entering the living room.

"Sorry, Dad!" Joshua said, locking eyes with his father. To his surprise, his father's face didn't display anger, but instead, a puzzled, concerned look.

"You were meant to return home with your brother. How many weeks should I ground you?"

Joshua looked down at his hands as he collapsed on the living room sofa. Bailey came and sat next to him as if to give comfort. "A year? What does it matter, Dad?"

His father eased himself into the armchair nearest the kitchen. He leaned back, placing his hands behind his head and stretching out his legs in front of him. "What's going on with you, son? It's not like you to lie."

Joshua leaned forward, lowering his head, trying to keep himself composed. Unable to stop himself, he fell forward slipping onto his knees as all his internal conflicts rushed out of him at once. He lost control as sobs erupted and shook his body. "I sinned against God," he said. As Joshua remained on his knees, his father shot forward and wrapped his arms around him. In response, Joshua clung to his father—the first time in a long time he'd felt his father's embrace.

"I don't need to know the details but was it something to do with Lydia?"

"Yes." Joshua rested his forehead against his father's chest as the sobs slowed. "I'm such a fool!"

His father pulled him closer. "Hey, hey. Easy, son. Whatever's happened, you're going to get through this."

"But Dad. He clearly spoke to me!" His tears dripped to the carpet. "I pushed Him away. And I lied to Kris. And Lydia and I, we—if it wasn't for Lydia's Mom..."

"Joshua, you've been under so much strain of late."

"I can't sense His closeness like before—"

"I didn't say anything about the Lord. How about...ice cream?"

"Ice cream?" He looked up at his father, puzzled.

"Want some?"

A smile played at Joshua's lips as his father rose and pulled him to his feet.

"Let's get some!" his dad said, a grin appearing beneath his beard.

Moments later, they sat at the kitchen table both enjoying chocolate ice cream sandwiches. The box of eight were dwindling. Joshua felt his spirits lifted, and hope beginning to return. "Great idea, Dad!"

His Dad smiled, then reached over to the kitchen counter and retrieved a Bible that was between some cookbooks. "Let's see what the Bible has to say about your situation."

Joshua watched his father flip the pages until he reached the Book's rear portion. He found his place before reading. "'If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus the Righteous One.' What does that mean to you, Joshua?"

"He's not against me. Even though I've grieved and disobeyed Him," Joshua said. The words his father read lingered in his mind. He saw for a moment a way out of his self-made maze.

His father grinned. "Aside from the fact that you are grounded for lying, I don't think your Heavenly Father will ground you when you have the Lord Jesus standing up for you."

Joshua chuckled and gave a nod at his father's encouraging wisdom. "Is Kris upset that I lied to him?"

"No." His father almost laughed. "He actually thinks you're human like the rest of us, now."

Joshua laughed again. But then he gave his father a pointed look. "But what about Lydia? What should I do about her?"

Dennis thought for a second. "A woman will either complement your relationship with the Lord, or, take away. What does Lydia do for your relationship with the Lord? That's the question."

"Thanks for the encouragement, Dad. I'll just spend some time with the Lord here before I go to bed."

"Four weeks, if you're wondering," his father said, getting up from the table.

"One?" Joshua asked, pleading and negotiating at the same time.

"Three."

"Two?"

"Two and a half weeks," he rebutted, smirking as he walked to the spiral staircase to go upstairs. Halfway up, he stopped and lowered his bearded face until he caught Joshua's eye. "Your mom will be home from the hospital in the morning before you head to school. Good night, son."

Joshua nodded. "Thanks, Dad. Love you."

"Love you too. Two and a half weeks, son!" he said with a laugh.

Joshua returned to the living room and sat, leaning forward in an attitude of prayer. The house seemed still and quiet. He squeezed his eyes shut as he focused on the One.

"Lord, I seek Your forgiveness. I don't trust myself; I will trust You to pick me up from this place I've fallen. I'm sorry for hurting You and ignoring Your Voice. Please, make me a safe landing place for Your Spirit. I pray this in the Name of Jesus. Amen."

He sensed anew what had been so familiar to him the past weeks and months—the abiding Presence of the Holy Spirit. Comfort and hope seemed to wrap around him. Yet despite everything said to him, the truth of the Scriptures, and the comfort of the Spirit that surrounded him, there remained a lingering sense that he'd lost *something* when he'd chosen the voice of Lydia over and against the Voice of the One within him.

"Please, Lord. Teach me to be rooted in You, to listen only to *Your* Voice. I pray for this, O God."

They clung to him, like wolves feasting on a downed deer. Every bite with razor-sharp teeth taking from him what was, for them, rare and precious.

Then the ringing of that Word like bells in a church tower shook the atmosphere—the sound piercing and shaking all their surroundings.

The truth resettling into the son of Adam, its life and light brought forth the One with all His power and glory. In one clean swoop, they were repelled from the son of Adam.

They tried to return to him and their onslaught was strong—but not strong enough.

Then, they saw in the distance, the thickness of the blackness so great, the little one's life about to be theirs. They would get their way and take his life.

And they rejoiced.

The call came in the wee hours of the night. The landline phone's too-loud twerp invading the night's still silence with jarring effect.

Joshua heard the phone and sat up. Even Bailey at his bedside let out low barks as if sensing something amiss. Heavy footsteps hammered the hallway floor. He heard mumblings between his father and Kris, and he heard Bruce in the background.

Then Joshua's door opened.

"Joshua?" his father said in a panicked tone. "Get dressed and come downstairs. We need to get to the hospital right away. Sammy's in trouble."

Part Five | Snag Trees

*“a standing, dead or dying tree that becomes
a refuge of life for many creatures”*

Forty-Six | “The Incident”

The boy’s life gone, all the prayers lifted on his behalf of no consequence, the darkness rejoiced. Their task complete, they now turned their faces toward the family—to chip away at their trust in the One.

But then, there came a movement that shook all around them—as if a great giant were awakening. They saw, in the distance, a heretofore unknown Lightbearer approaching, his every step drawing their ire and their screams. He appeared to be so distant from them, yet they sensed what was going before him—something they despised: His Presence.

“What’s going on?” they cursed and spat to each other.

“Bring the strongest ones forward *now!*” they screamed. “We cannot lose this battle!”

When he arrived at the room, it was as if a hurricane’s 150-mph winds came to bear upon them. Yet, they clutched onto the little boy with fevered determination.

Cary went to the hospital, a brisk walk of twenty minutes. The weight to go landed upon him with such intensity that there remained no other recourse but to obey.

When his large mass entered the hospital foyer, a sensation that this might have something to do with Joshua’s younger brother, Samuel, settled over him.

Cary locked eyes on the nurse’s station. Not being family, he thought he’d have a real problem getting past, but then his gaze fell upon a dark-haired nurse sitting at the station who looked familiar. Cary recognized his babysitter from years ago.

“Lauren!” Cary said as he stood in front of the desk.

“Cary? Is that you?” A surprised smile lit up the young nurse’s face.

“Yes, wow, how have you been?”

“I’m well. Hard to believe it’s you.”

“I know,” Cary chuckled, gripping the desk. He pictured his ancient small self versus his larger-than-life size now.

Lauren grinned. “You’ve really grown up, Cary!”

“I like to eat!” Cary said with a wide, contented grin. “It’s the Italian in me! My mom knows how to cook!” Lauren laughed at that. Then, his smile disappeared. “Lauren, are the Phillips family here?”

Lauren leaned forward and spoke in a hushed voice. “I’m afraid it’s been a sad night for them.”

“Why?”

Her voice took on a whisper. “The little boy passed away just over two hours ago.”

Cary heard the words and shook his head. The disgust rising within him surfaced on his face. He squeezed his eyes tight and breathed in deeply.

“Are you all right, Cary?” she asked, concerned.

Concentration setting wrinkles in his brow, he pushed off from the counter without looking at Lauren or saying a word and headed down the hall.

“But I’m not sure you’re allow—”

Beaming a smile, Cary whirled around displaying more versatility than his big frame suggested. “Be right back, Lauren.”

Even before he reached Room 103, he heard the soft crying from inside. He stood in the doorway considering the darkened room. With their backs to him, Mr. and Mrs. Phillips rested on their knees with

their elbows on the bed's left side, their hands grasping Samuel's small hand and arm, seemingly deflated. The brothers were present too, the two elder brothers seated on surrounding chairs behind their parents, their faces hidden in folded arms. Joshua sat on the floor facing the far-right corner, away from the rooms' occupants. He rocked back and forth while holding onto his knees, his face drooped against his chest, no noise coming from him.

Seeing this mourning and brokenness, Cary stepped backward. *What am I doing here at such a difficult time? What can I offer these people?*

He turned and retraced his steps down the hallway until a Voice sounded. Cary stopped. It'd not come from anyone around him. His name had echoed within him. Then he heard words rise within him: *Bless him.*

"Bless him?" Cary whispered. "What do You—"

A nurse passing by slowed and eyed Cary, a suspicious look creasing her brow.

Cary waved and flashed a quick smile to appease and reassure the nurse. She continued moving down the hall.

Speak My life into Samuel.

The Word echoed within him and intensified. Without arguing, Cary turned and went back to the room. He stepped inside and without hesitating, approached the bed. He knew he mustn't think too much about this directive. He just needed to *do* what he'd been told.

"The doctor said we could have time with him," the woman he recognized as Joshua's mom stopped crying long enough to say through brimming tears. "Please, don't take him yet—"

Cary realized she thought him to be hospital staff. He smiled. "I've come not to take, but to give."

Joshua whirled around and stood to his feet. "Cary?"

Cary cast Joshua a weak smile before turning back to the boy. He reached for Sammy's hand, heavy and cold, and held it between his big hands. "I bless you, Samuel. It's time to wake up."

"Who *are* you?" the man with the copper beard asked, a challenge in his voice. Joshua's dad, Cary presumed.

Cary gave him a reassuring look. "I am a friend." He turned his attention back to the lifeless boy. "I speak God's life into you, Samuel. Come on, get up!" Then he whispered, "In the Name of Jesus..."

"But he's not here with us anymore," Mrs. Phillips said, a pleading in her voice. "He's gone now."

As Cary held Samuel's hand, a jolt ran through it, like electricity. The hand clutched Cary's with unyielding strength. Then came gulps of air as Samuel's chest rose and fell. His eyes popped open and fixed on Cary who hovered over him. The boy's gray-white pallor took on warm splashes of color.

Cary stared at Samuel, almost afraid at that which was happening. The boy who had been dead, now breathed and looked about him. Cary wiped away the layer of sweat that coated his own brow. He grinned toward the boy. "It's about time!"

With a groggy look, Samuel smiled up at Cary. Then the boy swiveled his head to his parents. "Mom? Dad?"

They reached for him and clutched onto his arm and hand. "Yes, honey?" Mrs. Phillips said as tears streamed down her and her husband's cheeks.

"I'm so hungry!" he said.

Cary watched as Samuel's parents laughed, the joy flooding their faces. The elder brothers looked on, confusion mixed with astonishment on their faces. His cheeks wet, Joshua tilted his face toward the ceiling, his eyes squeezed shut, and his lips moving silently.

Cary left the room, went a few paces to head home when he felt a hand grab his arm. "Cary?"

He gave Joshua a sidelong glance even as he felt his cheeks push upward forming a broad smile. "He told me to come!"

"Thank you so much!" Joshua threw occasional glances over his shoulder at Samuel. "Thank you!"

Mr. Phillips came out of the room. "What did you do?" he asked Cary, a slight tremor in his voice.

Cary just grinned. "I did what I was told, which is usually good for all around. Give glory and thanks to the Lord." Then he spun on his heels and walked toward the exit. "See you guys soon!" he shouted behind him with a wave.

Joshua approached and wrapped his arms around his father, noting his stunned look. His father raked his beard downward with his fingers while staring down the hall where Cary had gone. Incredible relief displayed on his face. And something else that defied words was also apparent: an awe at the visitation of God's goodness.

Inwardly, Joshua gave unceasing thanks and praise to the One even as he watched Cary make his way toward the hospital exit—the young man who had at one time been his greatest enemy.

As Cary passed the nurse's station, he glanced at Lauren. "I think they need you in there."

"What?" A troubled look of concern flashed across her face. "What's happened?" She stood up from her chair.

"He's not dead. He's asking for food—*hospital food* which is a miracle in itself!" He laughed.

"What, Cary?" she asked again. "But the doctor—"

"Go see for yourself, Lauren," Cary said, a wide smile spreading across his face.

Appearing troubled, almost distraught, the nurse hurried toward room 103. Another nurse walking toward the station intersected with her. She shouted, "Let's go! You're with me!"

Walking farther, he came to the waiting room. To his right, Allistair, Sergio, Jennifer, and Bradley sat in the foyer, praying.

Another nudge moved within Cary's heart. He approached them despite the puzzled looks on their faces at his charge.

"Hi Cary," Allistair said.

Cary only returned a quick nod to him even as he pushed past, headed toward Bradley in his wheelchair. He stood behind him resting the weight of his hands on his shoulders, a startled look flashing across Bradley's face.

Cary prayed a blessing over him and every area of his life. Saying "Amen," he shot Brad a wink as he walked off. Reaching the hospital exit, Cary stopped and faced the group. "Samuel just awakened," he said, casting them a smile.

"But we were told Sammy's gone..." Sergio said.

Cary chuckled. "See for yourselves."

At that moment, cheers erupted from down the hall.

They looked at each other as confusion and sorrow fell away, replaced by tears of joy. They leaped up and rejoiced, giving thanks and praise to the One.

Allister, Sergio, and Jennifer stopped and turned to Bradley, their mouths wide open.

Bradley looked back at them, surprise on his face. "What?" Then he looked down realizing he was no longer confined to his chair. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he collapsed to his knees. He threw up his hands in worship even as the others surrounded and hugged Bradley.

Cary shook his head in wonder. "You really know how to clean up the messes in this world." He moved toward the sliding doors, which opened for him.

Forty-Seven | The Outshining/Gathering Darkness

The day after Sammy's resurrection, Joshua called for the Bible Club to meet at the local park. All in the town knew by now the mysterious circumstances surrounding Samuel's circumstances.

"The Lord is moving," Joshua said, grinning ear to ear. "So, let's make sure we move *with* Him!" Jennifer and Bradley, without his wheelchair, stood within the mass of young people, many from the Bible Club.

"Hey, man!"

Joshua heard the familiar voice. He pivoted to see Sergio standing in front of him, and Allistair behind him. His friend pulled him into a passionate embrace.

"I'm sorry about what happened between us," Sergio said as they separated.

"It's all right," Joshua replied. "Even Paul and Barnabas didn't agree on everything."

"Yes. But I want to tell you I'm *truly* sorry. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't even know the Lord today."

"It's good you're back, Sergio. Hope you'll always be around to check my blind spots."

"You bet!" he replied. "And you, mine."

Allistair embraced Joshua with a broad smile. "We're overjoyed about the Lord's amazing work in Sammy!"

"Yeah, it is amazing, Allistair! How have you been? Any change with your parents?" Joshua asked.

Allistair's eyes radiated. "Yes, they're on their way. Maybe it's because when they ask me to do things, lots of things, and I just do them without complaining. They're also asking more questions about my faith. I think they now believe it's something real in me."

Joshua nodded, pleased. "That's great. Keep praying. Keep a servant's heart. God will do the rest."

"You called us here?" Allistair asked with excitement. He ran his hand through his hair that curved upward at the front like a surfer's wave. "What's the plan?"

Something large rushing up behind him. He went to turn when thick arms wrapped around him from behind, squeezing and lifting him off the ground. "Joshua!" came a booming, excited voice.

"Cary?" Joshua shouted, recognizing his voice.

"Yeah, I felt the Lord lead me to come to the park today," Cary said.

Joshua laughed. "You got my text?"

Cary chuckled. "Yeah. What's up?"

The sun's golden light and warmth blanketed all the land in an unexpected Indian summer. The deep blue sky was wide open as if in anticipation of this day. Although winter was encroaching, today at least, it was held back. All over the park, people played sports—Frisbee, volleyball, badminton, and basketball. At the side of the park, people dined at tables in the shade of colorful umbrellas outside a restaurant.

"There's a simple plan," Joshua said. "We go out two by two. We ask people if they have any pain in their bodies or sickness or disease afflicting them. Then we act as His ambassadors and lay our hands on people commanding their healing in the name of Jesus."

"What if they're not healed?" asked one of the newer members of the Bible Club, a dark-haired boy. He seemed overly nervous and not comfortable in his own skin.

Joshua appreciated the question. "What's your name?"

The boy replied with an anxious look. "Stuart."

Joshua grinned, hoping to make him feel at ease. "Stuart, we can't control what is uncertain. God may heal—and we seek healing to mark people's hearts. But what is certain is that He loves. We can

control and share that! No matter what else you do today, communicate His love any way possible. If you do that, you will be successful, whether healing comes or not.”

Stuart managed a smile at that.

“If no healing comes, then tell them you’ll continue to pray for them,” Joshua said. “Then bless them. Let them know He’s always *for* them, not against them. The goal for today, and every day, is to love on people above all else.”

Stuart nodded. “Who will be my partner?”

“Cary?” Joshua said, suggestion in his voice.

Cary stepped over behind Stuart and placed his big paws on the boy’s shoulders. The stark difference between their sizes was apparent to all—Cary the height and width of a gentle giant, and Stuart just barely wider than a telephone pole.

“We’ll be a great team,” Cary said, beaming. Stuart looked up over his shoulder and managed a weak, uncertain smile.

Several hours later, the team regathered under the shade of a big oak tree that sat near the park’s entrance. All wore smiles, all were worn and tired and thirsty, yet this mattered little compared to the joy that overflowed within them.

“Hello?” A frail woman with long, straight white hair and a pleasant smile approached the group. “We’ve been quite impressed by all of you today. We’ve been watching while picnicking over there,” she said, pointing to another large oak tree. “My husband was reluctant to receive prayer earlier when two of you came over to us. But I’m wondering, please, if you’d still pray for him? He’s in constant pain.”

Joshua stood up and invited the lady to sit down on a single bench next to the tree. She obliged.

“What’s the matter with him?” Joshua asked.

“He’s been experiencing back pain for the past year,” she said. “It’s honestly felt like five years. He struggles to sleep at night. We used to do a brisk walk around our neighborhood after our evening meals. Now, he can’t even sit on the front porch without great discomfort.”

“What’s your name?” Joshua asked.

“Michelle Donovan. My husband’s Melvin.”

“Cary? Shall we go see Melvin?”

Cary reached out to Michelle and she took hold of his arm.

When they reached Melvin, Joshua greeted him. “Hi, we hear you’re in constant back pain?”

The man nodded. “The only time I’m not in pain is when I’m resting on my back,” he said gruffly, his head propped up by a small pillow. A wicker picnic basket, white plates, wine glasses, along with cheese, crackers, and fruit cocktail sat atop a checkered blanket. “I don’t think anything can be done. But my wife insisted we ask.”

Joshua nodded. “I know that something *can* be done,” he said before both he and Cary bent down. “Can we rest our hands on you?”

“Yes.”

They placed their hands on the man’s side near his kidneys. They prayed for less than five seconds commanding all pain to go in Jesus’ Name.

Joshua rose and stepped back, Cary doing likewise. “Please test it, Mr. Donovan.”

The older man shifted slightly. "Sorry," he said, kindness and surrender in his voice. "Thank you for trying!" Pain coated the man's face giving him a bloodless pallor.

"We'll pray again, Mr. Donovan," Joshua said without seeking permission. He and Cary bent low again and released a prayer burst and commanded all the pain to go. Again, Joshua said, "Test it!"

Melvin's face changed. "What?" He twisted his upper body, his face growing astounded by the second. "I don't feel *anything* there now!"

Cary reached for Melvin to help him stand up.

"Oh, I think I don't need your help," he chuckled, stunned. He stood without any assistance.

"What's going on?" Melvin asked, his face somber, the color vanishing from it. "The pains have been part of my existence for the past year—nonstop!"

Joshua answered. "We're just followers of Jesus doing what He did and what He continues to do through His people."

Melvin nodded. "But I don't believe in God," he said.

"He must believe in you," Cary said with a smile.

As the rest of the group came and gathered around, Joshua turned to them. "It's still early. Is everyone open to blanketing the city center?"

They exchanged glances then looked back to Joshua, wide grins on every face.

Joshua reflected a grin back at them. "Let's go bless people and let them know He loves them, that He's thinking of them!" He laughed with joy. "And remember that if you pray for healing, to also share Christ. Give them the opportunity to know Him just like you know Him."

The couple approached Joshua, inexpressible joy beaming from their faces. "We don't know what to say," Melvin said.

"Just know that He is very much alive. And, He loves you."

Michelle spoke to her husband. "Can't we join them? This is fascinating."

Melvin was hesitant at first, but then nodded in agreement even as he walked about testing his back, a huge smile plastered on his face.

The Lord moved through the young people during the rest of the day until the sun tilted toward the edge of the world. The chill of a wind moved across the city.

Finding their way to a restaurant, the group ordered burgers and celebrated the day. After all had eaten their fill and talked till they had no more stories to tell, they trickled out until only Cary, Joshua, and the elderly couple remained.

"We want to follow Him, too," Melvin said, Michelle nodded. Tears brimmed her eyes.

Joshua led them in a prayer of surrender to the Lord. Afterward, joy on their faces, they asked Joshua what their next step should be.

"Meet me or Cary at New Horizons Fellowship at 11 a.m. this Sunday on Main Street. We'll introduce you to an awesome church that will help you in your new journey."

They nodded and gave Joshua and Cary hugs before heading out. The introduction of the Lord into their lives had been dramatic. Joshua could tell they'd never be the same again.

Joshua stepped out of the restaurant into the crisp night air, a faint fog clinging to all he could see. Cary said he'd head to his friend's house which wasn't far. Giving each other high-fives, the two separated, Cary meandering down the street—the white street lamps bathing the road intermittently along the way, the coal, darkness pressing in along the sides. He could tell Cary was exhausted and wanted only to go to bed.

He ran his hand along the wooden railings lining the gravel path as he followed it the short distance from the restaurant to the clearing. Three heavy iron-and-wood benches sat facing the road. A well-mulched garden of perennials, bushes, and small trees surrounded the clearing. An overhead lamp bathed the area in yellow light.

Sitting down, Joshua let out an exaggerated sigh that he hadn't texted his dad or Kris to come pick him up earlier. Sending off a message to his dad, he expected it'd take thirty minutes for either of them to reach him—if they left the house now. He pulled his coat closer to his body to ward off the cold air.

As he put his phone into his pocket, he sensed someone standing behind him. He thought Cary had returned. Turning, he locked eyes with a familiar figure leaning against a section of the wooden railing.

"Joshua Phillips," the man said as he moved away from the railing toward Joshua.

"Yes, that's me." Joshua tried to remain calm despite the fear now gripping his insides.

"I'm Frank," he said. "You've heard about me, right?"

Joshua nodded. "Lydia told me about you."

"What did she say about me? I'm curious."

"Are you going to leave her alone?" Joshua worked to keep his voice even and calm. He stood up from the bench and turned toward Frank. Squaring shoulders and keeping his chin up, he fixed his eyes on the man.

"Hmm." Frank stepped closer until he was standing in front of him. "You've been a big thorn in my side for quite some time, Junior."

"It's not me who you need to worry about," he said feeling his fear merge into courage.

"Who, then? Tell me, please, so I can deal with him," Frank said with a calculated sneer.

"God," Joshua replied.

This made Frank chuckle. "But. I. Don't. Believe. In. God."

"That's interesting. He loves to go after the ones who think they're beyond His reach," Joshua said, confidence in his voice. As he spoke, an image of the large, hardened man curled up in a fetal position flashed in his mind. He recognized that it had come from the Holy Spirit. "Oh no," Joshua said, saddened.

"What?"

"I just saw something from the Lord. In the future of His choosing, He will break you like a man breaks a wild horse. But it will happen by your own hand, not His."

"Is that right?" he sneered. "If God does exist, He wouldn't want me—or anything to do with me!"

"He's always been a Friend to the sinner. He would change and renew you from the inside out, if you let Him."

Frank looked away. "Naah," he said as if to seal his position.

Joshua wondered if his impression might be for this moment. "Would you let me pray for you?"

"You're joking, right?" Frank stepped away, eyeing Joshua. "God is for weak people."

"Jesus says to you, 'Come to Me, and I'll give you rest.' Every one of us—no matter who—needs the rest only He gives. Only He can take away our emptiness and bring true cleansing." Joshua stepped closer to Frank. "Just for a minute—let me pray for you," he asked, a dare in his voice.

The dark ones had maneuvered the man, his emptiness a bottomless pit, to this place to confront the Lightbearer, augmenting his hatred for the young man with evil thoughts and murderous impulses.

The contingent of ministering ones stood by waiting to intervene at the command of the One—the smothering vacuum of darkness around the Lightbearer appearing overwhelming. They wished to hedge him in which would offer a substantial defense against the dark ones. However, no word came from the Lord of hosts.

But the Lord did intervene in another way. The Spirit's piercing light bathed Joshua from above enraging the dark ones, sending them into rabid spasms of self-harm, screams, and murderous intent. Joshua would not think himself alone tonight.

Then, the darkness noticed movement coming from another direction that struck fear into them.

"Him? Again?" they hissed.

Frank turned and offered his hand with the expensive gold watch and gold rings on his fingers. "Read my palm and tell me my future," he laughed, mocking.

Joshua looked up at the man with the sleeked-back black hair, the matching goatee, and dark-complexioned face. The man wore an expensive suit with a white dress shirt, opened at the top revealing several gold necklaces. His brown, crocodile-shoes glimmered from the outdoor lighting. Every item on this man enlarged his image.

Joshua looked at the hand extended toward him, but because of the man's mocking, declined to pray. "I'd give my life for Lydia, Frank."

"Would you?" he asked, allowing his hand to fall and slap his thigh. "Are you sure she's worth it?"

"Yes, she is worth it."

"You don't really know her," he said, taking out a cigarette, lighting it, and sucking on it, the burning orange-red intensifying.

"I know she's worn masks since I met her. But with time, she's let them slip away. And, I still love her."

"She's played you for a fool," he said. "But maybe it's because you're just naïve. You do believe, after all, in spaghetti monsters in the sky."

"I know all about Lydia. I still love her."

Frank shook his head. "Love. It can blind us to what's real. And in the way of necessary business. Your love for her...isn't it a conflict with your faith?" Frank asked as he bent over and leaned against a wooden railing, looking out at the still dark road. He puffed on his cigarette before throwing it to the ground and stomping it out.

Just then, three people exited the restaurant, talking and laughing. They hovered at the double doorway as the third worked to secure the door.

A tremor of alarm swept through Joshua. Frank had turned away from the light, allowing only the back of his black leather jacket to be seen.

In seconds, Joshua found the contact he needed on his phone, and fired off a text: "Come back! Or I'm dead!"

Then the group walked off as a group toward the parking lot.

"Josh," Frank said when the three had gotten far enough away. He gave Joshua a sidelong look. "A relationship with Lydia is forbidden since she doesn't believe in your God. Am I right?"

Joshua couldn't deny the conflict surrounding his relationship with Lydia, and, as a result, with God. Perhaps he'd taken a big misstep in being with her. Some part of him knew he'd gone against Scripture, yet he had always hoped that he could win her to Christ.

"Am I right?" he asked again, his voice stern, his eyes fixed on him.

"Yes," Joshua said. "It has been a conflict. And I've asked God to forgive me for my mistakes."

"Would you like me to let her live?"

Joshua considered and decided the question was not an exaggeration. This man had power. "Yes."

"Then promise me this moment that you'll end your relationship with her, and never speak to her again."

"So you can go on to use her, and ruin her life by destroying her life?"

"So she gets to live beyond this week?" He stood upright and pulled down on his leather jacket before stepping in front of Joshua and staring down at him. "Or I'll give the word and she'll be buried alive."

Joshua stared up into Frank's eyes while praying in the Spirit. "I want her to live. But true life is found in Jesus."

Frank lifted his eyes skyward, impatience showing. "So, are you going to pray for me or what?" He extended one hand toward Joshua.

Joshua's heart hammered against his rib cage. "Would you close your eyes as I pray?"

"No thanks," he replied. "I've kept my eyes open all my life till now. Not going to change that just for a prayer."

"Okay." Joshua closed his eyes and grasped Frank's hand. "Father, I lift Frank to you. I pray You'd allow Your Presence and Your love to come upon him. Let him sense Your reality. Fill any emptiness in him with Your love. I pray You'd—"

A rush from behind. Grabbed and slung to the bark-covered ground all in one motion, Joshua looked up to see Cary's mass standing in front of him, blocking Frank. He breathed heavily. "Cary?"

Then he saw it: In Frank's hand, a knife. His face was darkened by the overhead streetlight behind him.

"Get going, Joshua!" Cary said, his eyes fixed on Frank.

"I won't leave you—"

"I-I said get going!" Cary yelled. Joshua had never before heard a waver in Cary's voice.

Frank lunged toward Cary who dodged the blade. Taking advantage of Frank's overextension, Cary landed a punch across Frank's face. Simultaneously, he clutched onto the hand holding the knife and fought to get it away from him.

Feeling useless, Joshua prayed watching the fight. He couldn't leave Cary alone. He reached for his phone to call 911. *Gone! But where?* Scanning the grounds, his eye caught the glint of his phone on the other side of Frank and Cary.

Frank suddenly grunted in pain as his knife thudded against the ground. Cary kicked it away, just as he yelped in pain.

What? Joshua's eyes widened. Frank held his fist pressed against Cary's left side. *A second knife?*

Cary collapsed to his knees. A dark stain spread outward on his t-shirt. Frank loomed over him.

"Cary!" Joshua's scream tore at his throat as a rock slammed into his churning stomach.

The high beams of an approaching car shone through the foliage of the surrounding plants, casting the scene in stripes of light and shadow. Frank looked toward the light with a concerned look. He faced Cary before reaching down and pulling the knife from Cary's side. He grabbed the second knife on the ground without a look toward Joshua, then bolted toward the restaurant's parking lot. As he went, he shouted over his shoulder, "Find you later, Freak!" Seconds later, the black BMW roared out of the parking lot, its tires squealing as it sped off.

Crying, Joshua kneeled at Cary's side and pressed his hand against the wound—wet and warm to the touch. The streetlight's yellow light flickered and shifted across Cary, the overhead tree limbs trembling from the passing wind. Cary tried to speak.

"Don't talk," Joshua said, fighting to keep panic from overriding him for Cary's sake.

"I forgive...that guy," he said through reddened teeth.

A car engine idled from the road on the other side of the bushes. *Has Frank returned?*

"Joshua?" The voice carried over from the road.

Dad! Hope shot into Joshua's heart. *"Dad! I need help!"*

Within seconds, his father kneeled beside Cary across from Joshua. "What happened?"

"Frank Gelb tried to attack me. Cary stopped him."

"Oh no," Mr. Phillips said as he took off his jacket and t-shirt. He balled up the t-shirt and pressed it against the wound. Blood coated all of Cary's left side.

Joshua scrambled to grab his phone and dialed 911. The operator answered and Joshua gave all the information he could. The operator promised to remain on the line until help arrived. Joshua rested a hand on Cary's shoulder. "Help's on the way. Hang in there!"

Cary tried to rise. Joshua's father maneuvered himself so Cary's head rested against his thigh. A gurgling sound escaped from Cary's throat. "Easy, big guy."

"Joshua. *Please,*" Cary pleaded.

"What is it, Cary?"

"Bring my mother to Him. Help her to...really know Jesus."

Joshua nodded, the phone still at his ear. "But better it be you who tells her."

Cary managed a weakened smile. "By the way, I did...what the Lord told me...to do."

"You got my text, Cary?"

With significant effort, Cary grinned from ear to ear. "Yeah."

"I didn't know what to do. Thanks for coming back."

A coughing fit took hold of Cary, blood splattered onto his chest. His eyes slipped shut. "I feel sleepy now."

"No!" Dennis said with grave concern. "Keep talking to us. Don't go to sleep, Cary!"

"It's okay, Mr. Phillips," Cary said, his voice fading.

Joshua dropped his phone and rested his hands on Cary's shoulder. He prayed for him through his tears.

Cary sensed his own demise as faces came before him. He thought of Jesus and the way His love had chased him like a swarm, eventually capturing him. He thought of his mom. He prayed for her, and for his missing father—only the faint memories of the man in black leather his only connection. He thought of his old gang, and the friends, like family to him, who he'd led away from that life. He thought of Sammy's resurrection—and how he'd cried as he walked home at the goodness of God.

He strained to breathe causing his body to convulse with bone-shattering force. Despite the shouts of Joshua and Mr. Phillips to not give up, Cary, exhausted and weak, expelled his final breath from his lungs. His eyes fixed on an overhead lamp even as he struggled, until the light of yellow-gold grew and intensified all around him, filling his vision.

The angels watched, not allowed to interfere. The Holy Spirit flooded Cary's being so that peace anchored him despite the difficult trauma.

The dark ones gathered thinking a feast before them—until his very pores streamed with a piercing light. The barrage of darkness scampered away in fright.

The angels awaited his awakening on their side. When he sat up, his appearance gleamed as the sun. The angels swept him up into the heights of Glory.

On His Throne, the One looked from His habitation.

Then, He stood. He watched from afar, His eye never leaving the figure approaching.

Over a long distance, Cary Adessi came, though the length of time none could fathom.

Receiving His Lightbearer, He embraced him, His eyes pleased and overjoyed at his arrival.

Evil *had* struck—but from the death of the seed would come the flourishing of life that could only come through ultimate sacrifice.

Forty-Eight | The Funeral

Ten Days Later

Trying to ward off the frigid cold, Joshua stood on the trampled snow along with several students from the Bible Club on one side of the casket, and, on the opposite side, several from the Jaded Hearts. Joshua's family, too, stood there along with Chaplain Davis from the hospital. A lady in her upper forties, Cary's mother wore a black dress with matching hat, a netting-veil over much of her pale-white face, pressed-together pink lips displaying no visible emotion.

From the moment Joshua had seen her, he'd been drawn to her—to offer comfort, to reach out, to help any way possible. But no opening had allowed such yet. She looked so alone.

The previous night, an early, heavy snow had blanketed the grounds and piled high atop the tombstones, benches, trees, and shrubs. The sky reflected the ground—its expanse merging into a collective white mass. A wind's chill passed low-to-the-ground between the tombstones and trees causing everyone to clutch their coats, drawing them tighter to keep some semblance of warmth.

Everyone's faces were fixed on the shiny brown casket which sat atop gold railings, set over the deep hole with its pristine-edged dark brown walls. Joshua hated that the casket sat so isolated from everyone. It shouted finality. It grieved Joshua that this had been the outcome, such as it was, for his friend. And there lodged in his heart something that had not moved since Cary's death. The weight of regret, and many unanswered questions. If this could happen to Cary who had been used by the Holy Spirit to raise Sammy from death, what did that mean for his own life? Had Cary been forsaken? The question had wedged in his mind since the night of the attack.

Even as he heard the priest speaking, Joshua's heart wrestled with anger and sadness at how things had turned out. He also felt guilt that he'd not been able to do more for Cary in the midst of the attack.

After the priest's closing remarks, Joshua stood by as Miss Adessi, a strict Roman Catholic, watched the casket was lowered into the earth. Joshua approached Cary's mother and, with utmost respect, spoke into her ear. She gave a single nod, her eyes expressionless.

Joshua greeted the small gathering. He pushed away the blond strands that hung over his eyes. "I'm Joshua Phillips. I just want to say a few words about Cary who had become a close friend to me recently. The first time I met Cary, he was my enemy. But through that, I discovered how what we sometimes see about a person is the result of years or decades of heartbreak, and a heart starved of love. But when God's love breaks in, everything changes. I witnessed this change. And many others here witnessed it. My little brother," he pointed to Samuel, "is here today—and I am here today," he swallowed back the lump in his throat, "because Cary was changed after he encountered the Risen Lord." Tears streaming down his cheeks, Joshua leaned over and dropped a white rose onto the casket below.

As if in protest, the howl of the wind whisked across the grounds kicking up a brushing of loose snow over everyone, causing all to turn away. All, that is, except Miss Adessi.

It was then that little Samuel stepped over to Joshua and pressed his body into him. Joshua pulled him close. His brother had been returned to him because of Cary, but now his big friend was gone.

Joshua approached Miss Adessi as she stood over the lowered casket, most of the gathering having headed away from the burial plot. He'd learned Miss Adessi had no other family. Her standing there alone in the cold made Joshua sad.

"Hi," Joshua said.

She gave only a subtle nod, her eyes fixed on the lowered casket. Her lined, pale face, drawn-downward with sorrow, was framed by short black, curly hair. Joshua could see hints of beauty from her earlier years.

"I'm really sor—"

"I had just started to know my son—after being strangers for so long," she said, her voice softer than Joshua had imagined it'd be. "First, he was in that awful gang. Then, I thought he'd joined a cult," she said, allowing the quip of a laugh. "But no cult could've changed my son from a creature of violence to a man of peace like what I witnessed."

Joshua nodded. "I'm angry that he was taken from you."

She lifted her eyes and looked at Joshua. "I'd been so alone until Cary reappeared—a brand new person and even a smile always on his face. I hadn't seen that since he was a young boy! And then the hugs he gave me every time he came for a visit..."

Joshua nodded without saying a word. He could feel her heartbreak, which augmented his own.

She fixed her eyes on the casket again. "And now, I'll grow old without him. No more cooking for him. No more hugs."

"Miss Adessi," Joshua said. "You don't have any family you can call?"

"I just have Jerry, and David, and occasionally, John."

"Really? They're relatives or close friends?"

She gave a brief chuckle. "Jerry Springer, David Hasselhoff, and John Wayne."

Who's John Wayne?

Joshua steeled himself for his next question. He treaded carefully as he needed her to agree to his next request. "Can I come visit you on Sunday afternoons—with my little brother, Sammy?"

Her face, this point grim with compressed lips, brightened. "Yes," she said.

"May I have your telephone number?" He pulled out his phone and added her details. After this, he reached and gave her an extra-long hug.

As Joshua walked up the incline to his family's car, Kris's car parked behind, his mom stepped out and said, "Go ask Miss Adessi if she'd have lunch with us?" Joshua nodded, a huge grin working its way out onto his face.

Running back to her, he conversed with her. Seconds later, Joshua walked with Miss Adessi, her arm wrapped in his as they shuffled through the snow toward the limo.

Joshua heard a voice call his name from behind. He looked over his shoulder to see one of the gang members standing near a copse of trees off to the side. After walking Miss Adessi across the slush-covered road to the car, Joshua spun around and ran back.

His dad stepped out of the car. "Where are you going, Josh?"

"Be right back," he yelled over his shoulder.

Approaching the copse of trees, Joshua recognized B.L., one of the gang members Cary had brought to the Bible Club once. The black teenager offered an open hand toward him.

Joshua shook his hand. "Sorry for your loss."

"Thanks," B.L. said. "Your loss, too. I know Cary really liked you." There was a pause, the guy scanning the grounds, a subtle uneasiness in his face.

"What's up?" Joshua asked.

"Yo, they want your head," he said simply. "The word came to us yesterday. Just giving you warning... Be careful."

Joshua nodded. "I saw what Frank did. But don't worry. My parents insisted on protection till they bring in Frank." He pointed to a police car positioned behind his family's and Kris's cars.

B.L. nodded. "Just watch yourself. Even the po-po can't be everywhere."

"The police?" Joshua queried. "Yeah, I know. Thanks for the heads up, B.L.!"

The gang member grinned. "And you got the Big Boss upstairs watching over you, too. *This*, I have *no* doubt!"

"Exactly," Joshua said. He reached and B.L.'s hand and pulled him close. After taking a step back, Joshua spoke. "He's got no favorites. If you want Him, He'll come into your life like He has my life and Cary's."

"Naaah, that's just not me," he said. "Maybe someday when I'm old and gray."

"Just remember tomorrow isn't promised," he said, casting a glance toward the casket hole where three men wearing winter attire were now shoveling dirt. "Even he, as big and strong as he was, couldn't stop it when his time was up."

B.L. nodded, a sober look in his eyes. "Yeah, that part...is scary! I'll keep that in mind!"

"See ya, B.L!" Joshua shuffled through the snow before pivoting to the gang member. "What does B.L. stand for, anyway?"

"Broderick Lando," he answered with a laugh.

"I like your name, bro," Joshua said, smiling. "You should definitely use it!"

When Joshua returned to the car and sat in the rear of three rows of seats, his dad fixed his gaze on him. "Who was that, son?"

"One of the gang members said I've been targeted by the gang."

"Who is he?" Kris asked, sitting in the middle row seat next to Bruce, motioned to get out of the car as if to go after him.

"No, Kris. He's a friend, like Cary was."

Bruce scanned the treeline. "Dad, shouldn't we get the police to question him?"

"Listen, relax everyone," Joshua said. "He just risked everything to tell me what he knows. And besides, I have protection." He pointed toward the police car behind them and heavenward at the same time.

"It's not that simple, Joshua," his mom retorted.

"Don't worry, Mom!"

"I do worry!"

"Joshua," Miss Adessi's low, raspy voice came from beside his father and mother. "You *should* be very careful...and not take unnecessary risks. Your mother is correct!"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. "I will be careful."

As nighttime came, Joshua's parents dropped off Miss Adessi at her apartment. Joshua accompanied the grieving mother to her front door inside. Unlocking and pushing the door open, she turned and offered a weak smile. "Thank you for everything, young man," she said, a tremor in her voice. The sadness Joshua saw in her eyes flooded his heart. He reached and hugged her.

Miss Adessi hid her face against his shoulder and broke down, her thin body shaking. She had not cried till now.

Forty-Nine | Desperation

News of Cary Adessi's murder, with the apparent target Joshua, had come as an abrupt shock to Lydia. Since her own run-in with the gang at the park, Lydia's injuries had healed for the most part—but her house arrest remained in place. Concern about Frank and what he might do next filled Lydia with anxiety. Over the past weeks, she'd noticed people strolling by, their gang affiliation obvious—their eyes always locked on the house.

Her cellphone vibrated and Frank's name showed on the screen. She needed to remain resolute despite the pressures to give in. In her mind, she was already out and would never return.

"What do you want?" she asked, impatience in her tone.

"Mr. Tony. I see you haven't learned anything since our last get-together."

"Stop calling me that. And I shouldn't be talking to a wanted man."

"Worried about the news about me?" he said, a triumphant flare in his voice.

"You tried to kill Joshua!" Heat filled her chest, throat, and face at the thought.

"He was a troublemaker who disrupted my flow. Changed you, too! You know how I feel about change."

"You killed Cary, Frank!" Lydia said. "I think your flow is disrupted!"

Frank's voice bristled. "This game isn't over! And I warn you, if you say or do anything I don't like, what happened to you in the park will be just a foretaste. And people close to you will get hurt, too."

"I don't work for you anymore!" Disgust lined her words.

"If I go down, you can be sure others will go down with me. Trust *that*!"

She was about to reply when the phone call was ended by Frank. She'd never heard such desperation in Frank's voice. Lydia wondered what he'd do next.

Until days ago, she'd taken on a defensive stance legally regarding her role in the network and gang. But Cary's death and Joshua's danger had swayed her allegiance. Up to this point, her concern had been to prevent a long juvenile-prison sentence.

One thing was certain: she could not return to her previous role knowing what Frank had done. She took in a deep breath before dialing her attorney.

"Mrs. Petersen here."

"Hello, Lydia Claremont here."

"Yes, how can I help you?"

"I'm ready to talk, to tell everything I know."

The following Sunday, Joshua and Sammy took casseroles to Miss Adessi. Joshua's parents had been wary about their son's plan. Only the willingness of the police officer watching over Joshua to accompany the boys, convinced them to allow him and Samuel to go and be a comfort to Cary's mother.

Officer Jamal, a black officer with a thick mustache and a shaved head, drove the boys to the apartment.

"Give me your phone," the officer said with a grin as they were about to get out of the car. Joshua handed it to him. The officer entered a number and dialed it before ending the call. "Call me if you need me! I'll be waiting here for you guys."

Joshua smiled as he swung open the front door. "I will." Then he glanced to the rear seat. "Ready, Sammy?"

Sammy wrapped his fingers on the steel mesh and pulled at it with a half-crazed look. "If you don't get me outta here, I'm gonna kill someone," he mocked through clenched teeth, until the grimace gave way to laughter.

Joshua gave a fixed, amused stare before rolling his eyes. "You wouldn't be a very good criminal, Sammy!"

Officer Jamal's white teeth showed in laughter. "Boys, ring me when you're ready to go, okay?"

"Yes, sir," Joshua said.

They stepped to the front entrance to the apartment complex. Ringing Miss Adessi at #3, the heavy door unlocked. Pulling the door open, Joshua stepped inside, Sammy following. The foyer was a dull cement block, cheered up only by a community pinboard, a list of regulations, and a lengthy wall of mailboxes. Cement-gray stairs went up to the next level at the foyer's center.

Joshua and Sammy followed the hallway on their right to apartment #3. Joshua knocked. The door opened and Miss Adessi stood there, thin, frail, but a big smile on her wide, cherry-colored lips. Her short fingernails matched her lips, dabbed with a fading cherry color.

"Joshua? And Sammy, too! Please come in, boys," she said, her voice filled with delight.

They stepped into an unlit foyer, a stifling heat engulfing them. The wispy odors of cigarette smoke, ashtray, and bleach lingered in the air. In front of them hung many coats. A shoe rack with dozens of shoes, boots, and slippers sat beneath. There were two doorways, one to the left which led to a lengthy, sunlit living room, and the other to the right which led to a darkened dining area and kitchen.

She noticed the casserole dishes, the aroma of cooked dishes rising. "Oh my. You shouldn't have."

"It's all right, Miss Adessi," Joshua said, beaming. "We wanted to be a blessing to you today."

"Well, just coming over is a blessing enough. Next time, let me cook something scrumptious for you both, okay?"

Joshua smiled as he nodded. She took the two dishes, both warm to the touch, into the kitchen.

"Have a seat, boys. Make yourselves at home," she called, her voice raspy but upbeat.

They stepped into the living room and sat down on an old, high-back red couch. Piercing, warm sunlight streamed through two large windows to their left. A small television played, two women sitting on a stage with an ugly, much older, man seated between them. *The Jerry Springer Show* showed at the bottom right corner. It looked like there would be a physical altercation at any time.

In front of the window was a burgundy recliner chair that looked worn from years of use. Upon a side table rested a transparent-glass, square ashtray with two twisted cigarette butts. On the walls above the television sat a large clock, large landscape paintings, and, near the ceiling, a brass crucifix by itself.

Joshua glanced at Sammy to his left who looked content, his small frame swallowed up by the high back couch, his blond strands resting across his forehead. His eyes swept the room in wonder.

Miss Adessi came into the living room and took a seat in her recliner to Sammy's left. She grabbed her remote control and shut off the television. "Garbage. Nothing good on anymore!"

"Thank you for having us, Miss Adessi," Joshua said.

Miss Adessi gave a pleased look. With her bony arm and fingers, she yanked on the wooden lever which heaved her feet upward, the sudden action causing Sammy to jump out of his skin.

Miss Adessi saw what had happened. "Oh, sorry, darling," she said, extending a comforting hand toward him. All three of them laughed together at Sammy's alarmed reaction.

"It's okay," Sammy replied, red-faced, shaking off his embarrassment.

Since getting into the police car to come here, Joshua had been praying and asking the Lord for openings so he might share Christ with Miss Adessi when the time was right. He swallowed a lump in his throat and spoke up. "Miss Adessi, my family and I are sorry for your loss."

She gave a single nod, pushed on the wooden lever which brought her back upright. Motionless, she fixed her eyes toward the outside, the ground still snow-covered. Joshua could see wispy swirls of clouds drifting across the deep blue sky. He noticed a glint of moisture in the corners of her eyes. "Thank you," she said, her body stiffening. "It's been so hard," she admitted, her throat restricted. "Christmas is nearing. I'd planned to cook the biggest dinner for Cary. I'd even thought of putting up a tree with his help." She looked down and stared at her hands.

Sammy leaped up and stepped beside Miss Adessi. He reached an arm across her shoulders. That act caused her to turn to the boy, her look all-too fragile as he leaned forward to embrace her. Even after the hug, Sammy remained standing with one hand atop her shoulder in a guarded manner.

"My son," she said, "had just come back to me after years." She paused and swallowed before giving a brief laugh. "Mind you, our first week's reunion wasn't what you might think. Even after his big change, we struggled to see eye to eye on anything. We argued nonstop, especially when I suspected he'd gone from being in a street gang to joining some Jim Jones cult." She withdrew a cigarette from a pack, before remembering her guests and slipping it back into the pack.

"Who's Jim Jones?" Sammy asked.

Miss Adessi looked at Sammy, her lips pressed together, the corners of her mouth upturning. "He was a bad man who used religion to control people and hurt them."

"God can take away all your regrets, Miss Adessi," Joshua said.

"I don't think that's possible even for Him," she said politely, both of her eyebrows raising. "Do you know why? Because I deserve my regrets. Our home life was hardly a supportive environment while Cary grew up. During my early adult years, I didn't have any meaningful relationships save for Cary's father." At the mention of Cary's father, she clammed up. She took in a deep breath. "Anyway, Cary's childhood wasn't an easy one thanks to me."

Joshua listened, remembering the vision that he'd seen when he'd touched Cary while being attacked by him seemingly so long before.

"Regrets." Her lips became a straight line before turning downward. "They can haunt you—the lost opportunities, the wrongs committed, the pains self-inflicted." She waved the thought away as if a pesky mosquito. "Anyway, never mind that!"

"Miss Adessi," said Joshua. "You mentioned a big change in Cary. I just want to say the reason he went through that was because he discovered the Truth."

"Go on," she replied, respectful, but with a hint of skepticism in her voice.

"The Truth of God's love and forgiveness," he said. "And how he burned for relationship with Cary. And he desires the same with you—with all of us."

Miss Adessi nodded. "I can't see Him wanting me, though. Besides, I'm not sure I believe in anything anymore."

"Why?" Joshua asked.

"It takes too much effort," she said glibly. "Oh, I go through the motions of my religion. But it stopped entering my heart long ago."

Joshua eyed her, saddened by her response. "But why?"

"I've always believed in Him. But look what that's done for me. My son's funeral. My family all gone. My cat got ran over last summer, can you believe that?"

Slowly moving back to his seat on the couch, Sammy kept his eyes fixed on Miss Adessi.

Joshua prayed within himself. There was an honest sadness here. And a jaded heart. But sadness and the veneer of a hard heart, he knew, could fog reality—and block one from experiencing His joy and love. "May I ask when was the last time you felt loved by anyone, Miss Adessi?"

She glanced at Joshua; then stared at her open hands. "Cary. I could feel it for the first time when he returned to me—the way he'd hug me. And truth be told, I felt something during the funeral from your family. But deep down, I knew you'd all disappear from my life, too, in time."

Anger heated Joshua's chest. Not toward Miss Adessi, but toward the world and the church. Why did so many have to live apart from love, apart from community, apart from belonging?

"Miss Adessi, I'm not going anywhere."

"Neither am I," Sammy said, his concerned eyes fixed on her.

She took in a deep breath and flung a skeptical glance toward them. "We'll see," she said giving a weak smile. "But maybe, just maybe, I can keep you coming with my cooking. Shall we eat? Your casseroles should be heated through by now."

Sitting at the table after eating their fill, plus homemade cheesecake with fresh strawberries that Miss Adessi had prepared for dessert, she turned to Samuel. "I heard some amazing stories about you. They even reported it on the news. They called it unexplainable."

Sammy grinned and glanced at his big brother before replying. "Yes. Cary came and prayed for me."

"Forgive me for asking, but do you remember anything," she said, pausing, "after you died?"

"Not really," he said, searching his memory. "I can't remember anything about it."

"Would be nice to know if..." and her words trailed off, her gaze turning downward, her eyes filling with a heavy sadness.

Joshua spoke. "You'd like to know if Cary is safe? And if you'll see him again?"

She looked up at him, a pleading in her watering eyes. "Please tell me my son is happy. He seems so far away from me right now."

Joshua reached for Miss Adessi's hand and held it. "I can assure you. He is with the Lord in a place words cannot describe."

She leaned forward. "But how do you know, Joshua?"

"My brother," Joshua said looking at Samuel. "He was dead for hours until Cary's touch through the Holy Spirit brought him back. God's hand was all over that situation—even though I thought Sammy was gone. God moved Cary to visit us in the hospital that night," he said, a burning sensation filling his

insides as he shared. He smiled and his eyes lifted to her eyes. "Cary is with the Lord. You will see him again!"

Miss Adessi sat back in her chair, throwing her head back. Her forehead crinkled in concentration.

"Would it be okay if I pray for you?" Joshua asked.

Miss Adessi gave a single nod. Joshua and Sammy stood up beside her.

Joshua prayed, giving the chance for his words to seed in her heart. "I lift Miss Adessi, Father. I pray You'd fill this place with Your Presence, Your love, and Your peace...and that You'd fill Miss Adessi's heart with all of these things. May she have Your hope... that she can live an incredible life for You the rest of her days. Jerry, David, and John can all go their separate ways!" he said, which made her chuckle.

Samuel's small but determined voice prayed next. "We love Miss Adessi. Thank You for her being in our lives. Please help her tonight and every day to be at peace, like my big brother said. And take care of Cary until we each see him again."

Joshua, sensing the prayer at an end, said, "Amen!"

When Joshua looked up, Miss Adessi's cheeks showed a trail of tears. He bent over and wrapped his arms around her, as did Sammy.

Her voice wavering, she said while being hugged, "When I see you both, so young, yet so full of love and God's words, I can't help but be drawn to Him."

Joshua and Sammy grinned at that.

"How do I do it? What do I need to do to know Him?" she asked.

After the spiritual rebirth of Miss Adessi, joy and relief tangible upon her face, she'd had Sammy watch cartoons on the television while she talked with Joshua at the dining table. She revealed to Joshua something terrible about her past, tied to the present, that shocked him. It became a black pool of despair within him.

Seeking the One's strength and comfort, Joshua prayed God would somehow reverse that which had been intended for evil for His own glory. And bring something good and redemptive despite it all.

When the apartment belonging to Miss Adessi grew white hot with the holiness of His Presence, the dark ones turned on each other like vicious dogs. From a far-off distance, they watched with wonder, questioning how everything could've gone so wrong—from the raising of the boy to the maturing of the Lightbearer. Even the death of the second Lightbearer had resulted in many of those individuals who had been trapped in darkness now questioning the direction of their lives. And now the lady, long-soaked in darkness, had become saturated with the One's light.

It had been too long since they'd last feasted and consumed the nourishment of a life.

Then they saw, to their chagrin, even the little boy, once dead, now burned with an unearthly brightness.

But, plans were set in motion. The darkness moved to oppose and suffocate the light.

Fifty-One | Retributions and Revelations

Saying their goodbyes, Joshua rejoiced at the work of God in Miss Adessi. Sammy in tow, they took several steps toward the exit when Joshua realized they weren't alone. The foyer of the apartment, at first quiet, filled with movement and dark shadows. Joshua found himself, and Sammy, pressed against the wall. Before them stood five towering teens wearing denim blue jackets.

Jaded Hearts, here?

"Don't say a single word," the leader warned. He loomed over him, tall, black, sporting a half-foot afro atop his head. "'Coz if anyone opens their doors, including that little lady, they *will* get hurt! Am I clear?"

Joshua gave a subtle nod. Despite the threat against him and his brother, Joshua felt at peace. He just needed to trust the One.

"Give me your phone now," the leader said to Joshua.

When Joshua resisted for a second, the older teen punched him in the chest, thumping him against the wall. Joshua's chest exploded with pain. Glancing at Sammy, he saw alarm on his little brother's face.

"Your phone *now!*" the gang member demanded, his long hand held out toward Joshua. Then he turned to Samuel. "Don't you dare cry—or else!" He held up a fist in warning.

"Leave my little—" another strike to Joshua's chest ended his protest. He handed his phone to the gang member. "My brother's just a kid. Can you let my brother go back in with the lady?"

"No way, bro! He comes with us!"

The pain easing in his chest, Joshua looked at Sammy. "Don't worry. Everything will be all right." Sammy looked up at him with a neutral expression.

The teen stepped closer to Joshua, his breath fluttering across his forehead. "Don't say another word unless spoken to. Got it?"

Joshua nodded.

Seconds later, the brothers were ushered out the back of the apartment complex into a parking lot surrounded by tall, brick walls and a line of small garages. They passed through a break in the wall at the lot's corner and disappeared into the night.

Then Joshua's phone rang.

When it came to Joshua, Lydia had calmed down. She'd decided not to make any more movements toward him until she sensed if he still desired her. But it was also true that she questioned her own desires—if she truly wanted a relationship with him. Maybe the whole situation had been grossly unrealistic from the start. And she didn't want to be the cause of him being in turmoil or tormented.

With her mother and sister visiting relatives in a small town a few hours away, Lydia reveled in her freedom. She could play her music as loud as she wanted, roam the house without being queried, and eat anything at any time from the kitchen. It was just after eight o'clock at night, and no one to complain about her music or how loud it was. Although cabin fever had seeped into her brain the past weeks being under house arrest, she considered the alternative: she could be stuck at Radford Juvenile again with their disciplined routines, no privacy, and slop for food.

She sensed, though, huge consequences looming over her for her involvement in the drug network and gang. In just one week, she'd face an arraignment hearing regarding the citation leveled against her by the state.

Chocolate! That's what I need! The thought of it lifted her from her deep thoughts. She bounced up from her bed and headed downstairs.

Halfway down her stairs, she froze. Was that a voice, faint, like a whisper, below? She looked up behind her and down below into the living room, the only illumination, a yellow light bathing the far corner opposite her, nearest the lengthy, draped window. The rest of the downstairs was darkened and still.

Who's in the house with me?

She pulled out her cellphone and in silent mode, texted Joshua's number. It seemed strange, almost bizarre, that she should reach out to him. The message went out. Deep down, though, she wondered how sending a text to him would help her. Then she dialed 911 without calling; she'd hit DIAL if needed.

She eased her way down the stairs, keeping her back to the wall. Reaching the bottom, she watched and waited to see if perhaps her mind had just imagined the voice. She hoped so. Yet despite attempts to tame her fear, the image of Frank's face lingered before her. *Is he now after me?* The memory of Cary's face, now deceased, also appeared as if a warning.

She took several steps into the living room between the sofa and the TV, searching the room. As she approached the kitchen, the sudden rush of movement behind her caused her heart to leap. She shrieked as ghoulish faces appeared—the arms reaching, grabbing, holding her despite her attempts to run and escape. Trying to identify her assailants, all three of them young men, she saw casually dressed college students—two of them pressing their fingers into her arms. Then, a tall, red-headed girl, her hair tied behind her head, stepped in front of Lydia. She wore a devilish sneer that pushed out her freckled cheeks.

"You didn't learn a thing in the park, did you?"

"Get out of my house! The police are on their way!"

Red didn't blink. "Get her phone!"

One of the boys reached and grabbed the phone still in her hand.

"Give it here!" Red demanded.

The boy tossed it to her. Looking at the screen, she saw 911 ready to be dialed. "Looks like you failed. No one's coming," she said with a curt look. Next, she checked the phone's text history. "Ah, a text message to someone to come save you?"

"Let me go!" Lydia screamed through seething teeth, trying to break free of the iron grips on either side.

"What's your boyfriend's name?"

"He's not my boyfriend!"

"Joshua? Isn't he that Jesus freak?"

"He's not a freak."

"By now," Red said with a sneer, fixing her eyes on Lydia, "he might just *be* with Jesus."

Lydia closed her eyes. She had no way of knowing if the claims were true or bluff.

The girl tossed the phone back to Lydia. "Go on, call him."

Lydia ignored her command until the two hands clutching onto her arms pinched her. She'd have bruising the next day, if she made it to the next day. "Okay! I will!"

After Lydia dialed Joshua's number, Red snatched the phone back, and put the call on speaker. Two seconds later, a voice answered.

"We got him."

Not Joshua's voice? Who, then?

"And we got his little brother here, too."

Lydia's heart sank, her insides queasy. Frank had planned this not just for her, but for Joshua too.

"We'll be there soon," Red said. "Don't do anything till we get there."

"If you say a word, or try to run, or even look at me wrong, I will make it so smiling is a challenge for you. Got me?" Red said, seeming to relish the warning. Red had the most intense eyes Lydia had ever seen. "On top of that," she continued, "we won't hesitate to hurt your boyfriend, or his little brother."

Lydia nodded. "Got it!"

The Hearts had dressed preppy-casual so as not to arouse suspicion with the Claremont's neighbors. They walked at a brisk pace to a car parked a few blocks away. Then, they drove twenty minutes to an abandoned warehouse on the city's outskirts.

Shoved inside, Joshua saw the place saturated with darkness, only a harsh yellow light, about ten feet above the floor, shone on the far side. A cluster of several persons stood at the light's boundary. The cold, stale air reeked of musky dust, old oil, and leaking sewage.

The door slammed behind them echoing throughout the place. With the five youths surrounding her, Lydia was shoved toward the light. Within her heart, she wondered if this was it—her final moments. Still, she found herself reaching out to Joshua's God, seeking for a rescue.

"Where's Frank?" she asked behind her. "Like usual, he sends others to do his dirty work."

"Keep walking. Enough talk!" Red shouted, her teeth clenched.

Lydia recognized Joshua, and in his arms a timid Sammy, surrounded by five of the Hearts. Joshua's eyes doubled in size at seeing her approach. Without saying a word, she gave a subtle nod to him, her eyes drifting down to Sammy's distressed face. She wanted to convey hope, that all would be all right. At this point, though, she wondered if she'd be lying.

Joshua prayed with all intensity. On their lengthy walk here, he'd whispered to Sammy to keep praying. He'd also tried to reassure him as much as possible. "This is an adventure with God," Joshua had whispered into his ear. "Don't worry; He won't abandon us."

"How do you know?" Sammy asked looking up at his big brother.

"Because you're here, right?" Joshua answered under his breath.

At that, Sammy's face brightened remembering his own recent event. "Yeaaaah, that's true!"

"He wouldn't raise you up from death just to let the enemy win, would He?"

At that, one of the gang had given them a hardened stare and shouted at them to shut up.

Deep down, Joshua knew this was the sort of scenario God would use to reveal Himself and show Himself strong. The question remained how.

In the past weeks since Cary's death at Frank's hands, Joshua had, like at the beginning of the summer, shut himself away from everything. And like before, his family looked on in wonder, and some concern. They feared the trauma of witnessing Cary's murder had done irreparable harm to their son.

To the contrary, however, Joshua had been emboldened. He knew the fight was intensifying just as he'd always known it would. He was now determined to be ready for what would come. Joshua had considered when one is pushed to a knife's edge, it requires a knife's edge of sensitivity to the Holy Spirit to know what to do, and when. Even the slightest movement the wrong direction could spell doom—or worse, the loss of persons dear to him.

So, each evening after school, he'd come before the Lord to seek His face. Only one meal each day, breakfast, had fueled his body, but daily feeding on the unseen spiritual manna from Above fed his spirit and kept him strong.

When the Club had learned about his seeking, they, too, had joined him, to his delight. A small army of young people, all seeking His face, prayed for their city, for themselves, and for those trapped in darkness around them.

Then, Joshua's church, learning of these things, also joined in corporate seeking. And on the second week, Joshua's family, in their own way, and after seeing God bring Sammy back to life, also sought the Lord. Something incredible was happening—and not just to Joshua alone. It was as the Lord wanted it: All of His people moving in concert—looking beyond the everyday routines of life to something much greater.

Unbeknownst to anyone, there was another who had shut himself away, in his own unique way. He talked with the One daily, praying for those around him. He sensed a strong need to do this.

Then, remarkably, unexpectedly, his name sounded audibly all around him. At first, he remained silent, frozen by fear. But then came a rush of overwhelming peace within him.

"I'm here," he replied, wonder and simple trust in his voice.

Like puppets on strings, the empty ones were driven to accomplish their schemes by the dark ones. So many to control, few resisting, it filled the demonic faces with glee. What could change their advantage? Soon, the Lightbearer and the raised boy would be crushed—and the stories surrounding them would fade with time.

And then they saw it.

From the distance, the Light of the One approaching from on high, His fullness landing with such force upon a new Lightbearer that all the darkness was temporarily ejected from the vicinity. This Lightbearer burned with a golden light, and no dark thing could withstand the reflection of His Light that came from him.

The phone rang, Dennis answered it. "Hello?"

"This is Officer Jamal!" Urgency layered in the officer's voice, Dennis swallowed a lump in his throat. "I accompanied your sons to the Adessi residence. However, when I went to check on them a few minutes ago, Miss Adessi informed me they'd left her apartment an hour ago."

"What?" Dennis asked, raking his hand through his gold-blond hair. He paced back and forth.

"They didn't skip out on me and come back home by any chance, did they?"

"No, we've not heard from them at all." Dennis shouted over his shoulder to the kitchen. "Joan? Boys?"

They came into the living room. "Josh and Sammy are missing."

"What?" Joan asked, the flash of fright appearing in her eyes.

Bruce and Kris looked at each other, the latter speaking up. "We'll go along the route to Miss Adessi's to see if we see them walking home."

Dennis and Joan nodded.

"Joan, give Joshua a ring." He turned his attention to the officer. "We're ringing his phone now."

"Okay," the officer said.

Joan dialed Joshua. A few seconds later, "Oh no; straight to voicemail." She waited a few seconds. "Joshua? Please call me the minute you get this? Love you."

"No answer," Dennis said to Officer Jamal, his voice a monotone as his mind raced.

"I'm sending a police car to pick you up. We'll start a search of the city. Don't worry. We'll find them."

While sitting with her family at Denny's Restaurant, awaiting dessert, Dottie Claremont's phone rang.

"Hello, Mrs. Claremont?"

"Yes, speaking."

"We've just received notification that your daughter left the premises a short time ago which is a violation of her house arrest court order."

"I left her by herself at the house."

"You aren't present at the property?"

"No, my youngest daughter and I are away this weekend. We were set to return tomorrow morning."

"We will put out an APB to pick her up using the GPS on her ankle monitor, Miss Claremont."

"I understand. We'll head back now. It's a three-hour drive. Please ask the police to call me with any updates."

"Yes, I will request they call you."

"Thank you," she said. Ending the call, she glanced over at Stacy, a worried expression on her face. "Let's go home. And pray for Lydia on the way!"

Fifty-Two | Light and Darkness

Unhurried footsteps were heard. Then came the tall frame of Frank Gelb, moving into the light from a darkened corner. Joshua considered he'd been there since before everyone had arrived.

He sauntered toward the group as if on a walk in the park. The Hearts gave their unspoken respect to him. Looking him over, Joshua noted he looked not so held together like he'd seen him in the past. Dark circles beneath Frank's eyes, a beard had grown, and his hair was disheveled.

"I thought it'd be good to have a reunion," Frank said, casting a glance at Lydia. Then he swiveled to Joshua. "You like reunions like I do, Freak?"

Joshua said nothing. But the familiar weight of the Spirit pressed down upon him—granting him a strange calm despite the reappearance of Cary's murderer. There was a sense within Joshua that his every movement, his every word was now under Another's influence. All he had to do was trust and do as directed.

The flash of the knife's blade in Frank's hand, however, caused Joshua's heart to race, his calm shattered. With care not to attract any attention, he eased Sammy behind him. Every few seconds, he'd give a reassuring touch or squeeze to his little brother's arm.

Frank stepped to Joshua, the knife held in front of him. He stopped a few feet from him and in a leisurely manner, used the knife edge to remove dirt from a fingernail.

"You've caused me a lot of problems," he said without looking at Joshua.

Sammy's hands clutched onto Joshua, tugging at him as if to make a run for it. Careful not to be seen, Joshua patted him on his arm to reassure him.

"Frank," Lydia said. "I'll do the work you ask. No more resistance from me. I'll say what you want me to say to the police or courts, whoever. Just don't hurt them, please!"

Frank sneered. "It's a little late for please. No can do! This boy's a witness."

"And, we'll all be witnesses if you do anything to them." Lydia turned her words toward the gang. "Will he do the same to you, if he does this to a boy like Joshua and his little brother?"

Frank whirled around and thrust the knife blade in the air with each syllable in her direction. "Shut! Up!"

"You guys," she continued addressing the gang. "I am Mr. Tony. And look what he's doing to me! None of you are safe because you're worthless to him. Just pawns in his grubby hands."

"For the last time, shut it!" At that, he faced down the gang members' stares until they looked away.

"This thug!" Lydia said. "He's using all of you!"

Frank rushed forward with the knife pointed at Lydia.

A child's voice rang out, echoing into the darkened corners of the warehouse—from behind him.
Sammy?

"The Lord's hand is against you," Sammy shouted. Before Joshua could stop him, his brother ran forward several steps like a charging bull. Sammy directed his palm toward Frank. "You are blind, and will remain blind until God says!"

Joshua wrapped his arms around his little brother and pulled him back, the little boy's eyes and both hands directed at Frank.

Frank turned at the outburst, the knife held in his right hand. He looked at the boy with a mocking laugh. His face contorted and turned red until his eyes bulged. "I. Have. Had. Just about enough of you snot-nosed kids getting in my way!" Waving the knife, he dashed toward him and Sammy. Without

warning, however, Frank stopped in his tracks. Frank yelled out, his neck muscles bulging. “*Who* shut off the light? Turn them back on! *Now!*”

Red looked to the others before answering him, her voice flat. “The lights aren’t off, Frank.”

The Hearts backed off from Sammy and Joshua, looking them up and down, stunned fright on their faces.

“What’s going on?” Frank screamed with panic as his knife clanked to the floor. “Tell me!”

The gang stood there, their hardened faces now softened by confusion, some with fear.

Joshua approached Frank, kicked the knife away, then stepped up to him. “Frank.” His voice remained calm.

“Is that you, Jesus freak?” Frank asked, his hands reaching until they clutched onto Joshua’s shoulders.

“Remember when I prayed for you outside the restaurant?”

“What’s happened to my sight? You did this, didn’t you? You really are some kinda freak,” said Frank, veins bulging along his muscled neck. It was the first time Joshua had seen fear etched on his face.

“I had nothing to do with this. But my little brother has spent a lot of time with the Lord since being raised back to life. I suspect blindness is a good tool God uses on occasion. It worked on Paul and another guy whose name I can’t recall. Now it’s your turn.”

“Good? How can this be good?” Frank turned his unseeing eyes toward the gang. “Hearts! Kill all three of them! *Now!*”

Red took a step backwards, as did the rest of the group. “This is all too whack for me,” she confessed, the others nodding.

Joshua turned back to Frank. “Outside the restaurant. Do you remember I prayed for you?”

“What about it?” he asked, exasperation in his voice.

“When I touched you, the Lord let me see glimpses of your life.”

“Fix my eyes *now!*” Frank said, grabbing Joshua by the throat and pressing into his windpipe. Hearing Sammy yell out for him, Joshua extended his arm and hand toward his brother motioning for him to stay where he was.

“You dated...a lady years ago, Miss Adessi,” Joshua said through his restricted throat.

“Yeah, so what? What’s so special about her?”

Joshua struggled to get the words out. “You had a son with her—one you soon forgot about.”

“So?”

Joshua tried to pry Frank’s pressing fingers from his throat. “His name...was *Cary Adessi*.”

Frank released Joshua all at once, who sucked in big gulps of air.

Joshua continued between his coughs. “When you tried to kill me, Cary intervened and fought to save me. You knifed your own son, Frank!”

Frank stiffened as the words rooted in him. His face turned a bloodless pallor.

Joshua stepped nearer. He spoke, his voice gentle and full of compassion. “You killed your son.”

Frank stumbled backwards before collapsing to his knees. He stared at the floor without seeing, a stunned look on his face.

Joshua turned to the gang who stood watching, their eyes doubled in size. “You guys can sense the Lord here. There’s an emptiness in all of us. Religion won’t do. A gang or drugs won’t do. Only His love can fill us. Only He can rescue us,” Joshua said. He stepped to the tall black teenager who had struck his chest earlier. “The enemy has always lied to you! What’s your name?”

“Lucas,” he said, his face downcast.

Lucas eased down onto his knees. "I still remember Cary—before Christ, and after Christ," he said. "It was so radical. I want what he had."

Joshua rested a hand on his shoulder. "He had a Person." He scanned the others' faces. "You've accepted lies about life, about what's real, about Christianity. Listen, Christ went to war to win you guys from darkness. He died taking our places, but came back to life the third day, all to secure your souls for Himself!"

Samuel drew near to Lucas who had closed his eyes. He laid his hands on him and began praying silently.

The others, seeing all of this, also went to their knees.

All, that is, except for Red who stood by watching the spectacle.

A tap on Lydia's shoulder. She turned to see Red. "I'm sorry," Red said, her face downturned, her expression softened. Confusion clouded her eyes.

"Me too," Lydia said. "We've all done things we wish we hadn't."

Lydia offered a hand to Red. She took hold of it as Lydia led her toward the group of kneeling gang members. When they reached the front, they both fell forward onto their knees on the concrete floor.

Lydia, too, had witnessed the power of God overwhelm Frank and remove his sight. But she also sensed a powerful presence here. And, she was tired of running and fighting and playing games. She just wanted to stop resisting and surrender.

Joshua continued to pray, with Sammy's help, for each of the gang—even until he came to Lydia. He looked down at her, affection burning in his heart for her.

"Hello, Joshua," she said. Her lips curved upward.

"Hello, Lydia." He reflected her smile. "I want you to know I've missed you so much."

"You'd still have me?" Lydia asked.

"Yes, but first, I think you have unfinished business with my Dad," he said, pointing at the ceiling. "God wants you first and foremost."

"I know that now. I want Him too," she said with a respectful nod.

Joshua knelt beside her and encouraged her to pray from her heart to the Lord. She vocalized her prayer, the tears coating her cheeks. Moments later, she looked at him, a new joy, gratefulness, and relief revealed on her face. "Now I understand," she said.

"What?" Joshua asked with a pleased look.

"I really feel His Presence *inside* me," she said in awe, her eyes enlarging as she shared. "Something's happened."

"Amen, and there's always much more of Him," Joshua said as he helped her to her feet.

"I like that," she said, giving him a light jab. "It's incredible—all the bad inside me...as if it's been removed!"

"Yep, that's one of His trademarks!" His upper lip curled in mirth at what she was experiencing.

Joshua felt an arm slung around him. Samuel stepped between them and wrapped his other arm around Lydia. His handsome face beamed. "God adventures," he said with a knowing nod to both.

Joshua chuckled and offered a fist which Sammy bumped with his own.

"Sammy, I can't believe you made Frank blind," Lydia said.

"It wasn't me," Sammy said. "I only did what the Lord impressed me to do."

"It was still cool," Lydia replied.

Joshua spoke up. "He'll use all if they let Him." He reached and hugged Lydia.

"No one move!" A police officer approached from the darkened entrance, his gun pulled.

At the challenge and warning of the police officer's voice, Frank sat up and, in a panic, climbed to his feet. Joshua watched, thinking him about to break into a run—to where, he didn't know. He really was a stubborn man, even blind. Praying neither Frank nor he would get shot, Joshua drew near to Frank and placed his hand on his arm.

"Stop running from God," Joshua said, calm in his voice. "It's time for you to stop."

Frank, as if exhausted, crumbled to the ground. Heaving sobs shook his body. The vision Joshua had seen outside the restaurant regarding Frank flashed in his mind. Joshua felt sad knowing the reason for Frank's brokenness.

"What's going on here?" the officer asked. Another officer followed close behind. "I'm looking for Lydia Claremont who's violated her home arrest protocols."

Joshua faced him from thirty feet away. "She was forced to come here by the gang and her life was threatened. But, as you can see," he said gesturing to the gang who remained praying, hands uplifted, "God brought everyone here for *His* purposes." Then, he pointed to Frank. "And there's Frank Gelb, someone you're very much interested in."

"What is your name, son?" the officer asked.

"Joshua Phillips."

"And is that your little brother?" he asked pointing to Sammy.

Joshua nodded.

The officer spoke into his shoulder mic. "Ten-thirty-three. I've located Lydia Claremont, and wanted man, Frank Gelb. And, regarding the missing boys' alert: cancel that, they're here safe and sound!"

Within minutes, Joshua watched as more police arrived, his father and mother with them. They both ran and wrapped their arms around their two youngest sons.

"Oh, thank God you're both safe," his mom said, tears wetting her cheeks. "I don't know what I'd do if something happened to either of you."

"We were always safe, Mom," Sammy said. "God adventures." He looked at Joshua and winked.

"Let's get you boys home," his Dad said. "No more adventures for you two for a while."

Joshua glanced over at Lydia who was being cuffed. "I'll be right back, Dad."

The police officer gave him a hardened stare as he approached. "Is she in trouble?" Joshua asked. "Like my brother and me, she was kidnapped and brought here against her will."

The officer gave a neutral look as he began to move her toward the warehouse exit. "Don't worry," he said. "It'll all be worked out."

Lydia beamed at Joshua. "No matter what happens to me now," Lydia said, "I'm free!"

"I'll be praying for you, Lydia," Joshua said as she was led away.

"When you can, get me a Bible, okay?"

"I will!" Joshua said, just as a voice boomed toward him.

"Hello boys!" Officer Jamal approached. "You and your little bro gave me a real scare!" A visible relief was on his face.

"Sorry about that," Joshua said, offering a hand which the officer shook.

"It's okay! As long as you're safe. Don't know how, but you're safe."

Sammy shot Joshua a knowing look.

"Officer Jamal, about Lydia," Joshua said. "She was forced to come here against her will by the gang."

"Don't worry; I'll make sure it's all sorted."

Joshua's father called him with a motioning hand. "Let's get you boys home."

The darkness limped to the empty, roaming places—glad to have escaped. The Lightbearer, along with dual cruise missiles of the Club's and church's prayers, had scoured the area, creating chaos in the dark realms. To their chagrin, the Light had decimated the dark strongholds, the shadows receding as the Light expanded and filled the void.

They moved off, focusing their attentions on easier targets, the entirety of Sterling City having become difficult to navigate without running into heavenly strongholds that were quick to inflict pain.

The Lightbearers' names, Joshua Phillips and Samuel Phillips, identified for the strength of their faith in the One, had become known within the dark realms. Plans were set in motion to diminish them, and to block any further successes accomplished by the two brothers.

Fifty-Three | Inner Wars

Frank Gelb's arrest resulted in a flurry of court appearances by Joshua, as a witness to Cary's murder. Lydia's cooperation, along with almost a dozen testimonies from the Jaded Hearts, solidified the State's case against Frank regarding his drug network that had permeated the city from the middle schools up to city colleges.

On the third day following his arrest, Frank's eyesight returned, as if a light switch had been turned on. Doctors, puzzled why it happened in the first place, said his eyes *should* be working. In the end, the doctor passed it off as stress or some other unknown factor.

Even after seven months in prison, Frank Gelb continued to relive the moment his sight had been taken from him. One moment he'd been seeing, and the next, his world drenched in darkness when that ten-year-old boy spoke words against him. It astonished him that something like this could happen to him.

Frank stood at a precipice. A tight squeeze gripped his heart, his breathing shallow, his nerves frayed—all from the wrestling he'd undergone the past weeks and months regarding what his response should be to Christ.

In a state of exhaustion upon his arrest, Frank had surrendered and cooperated with the authorities regarding his past crimes from day one. He wanted the whole media circus surrounding him to be over with and hoped the court would grant him some leniency. He confessed to his part in the drug network, the murder of his son, Cary Adessi, the attempted murder of Joshua Phillips, and other crimes. Frank knew it'd be a long time before he saw the outside of prison again.

Day after day, he sat hunched over on his sagging, thin mattress staring at his hands, the same hands that had unknowingly brought about his son's death. The lights to his cell out, a yellow light filtered through the small square opening at head level on the green, steel door. Echoes of deep snores escaped from surrounding cells broke the silence.

Alba Adessi. Frank pictured her face and thought of her often. The first woman he'd had a serious relationship with, despite its on-again, off-again nature. He'd not seen her in thirteen years. Frank could not fathom what he'd done until he heard Joshua's words, words that cut like a knife—that Joshua's friend and defender, Cary Adessi, had been his forgotten offspring.

Living with those thoughts never far from him, he spent twenty-two hours a day in his cell, the boredom regurgitating all his actions and his memories before him. With great reluctance, and only to get his mind off his tormenting memories, he read the Bible. Then, three months into his sentence, Frank began to receive one-page letters from Joshua Phillips. They came twice a week. To Frank's surprise, there wasn't any indication Joshua hated him, or that he wanted him to suffer. There was only a simple forgiveness, which seemed alien to Frank.

Soon after, but remaining skeptical, Frank attended his first chapel service. The short messages, lively music, and getting out of his mundane cell all offered him a diversion. He'd been amazed at the strong sense of community and genuine friendship that flourished there.

Each day, week after week, month after month, Frank would let out an exaggerated sigh as his heart tightened because of the inner war taking place. He continued reading the Bible, kept on going to the chapel services, and even came to call a few of the guys there friends.

He stared at his drab prison walls, tormented and, equally, compelled to surrender his life to God.

Almost one year after the death of Cary, Miss Alba Adessi, having come to terms with Frank's murder of her son, came for an unexpected visit. With Joshua's pastor's help since she wasn't family to Frank, she sat in front of him within the large visitors' room, her mouth set in a neutral line.

"I'm surprised to see you here," Frank said, his expression showing appreciation. The man's frame had enlarged, his face fuller, his eyes softer, his raven hair combed back but relaxed.

"I came, because the Lord led me to come see you," Alba said.

Frank nodded.

Alba continued. "Joshua, Sammy, and I have never stopped praying for you."

"After what I did to all of you? Why?"

"Jesus told us to."

"Oh." Frank looked on sheepishly until he shared what was weighing on his heart. "I know words can never do it justice, but regarding your son—"

"*Our* son," she corrected.

Frank's lips pressed together to form a thin line. "Yes, our son." He leaned forward. "Everything I did to you years ago..." He hesitated.

"Go on," Alba said.

The look on his face shot from neutral to predatory smile in half a second. "I did what I did, because I am who I am. How can I be sorry for who I am? For *what* I am?"

She felt her heart constrict. "Regardless of what you do, *I* needed to come today to tell you I've forgiven you. And my action today hasn't been without challenges. But I know Cary would want the best for me, and for you to know my feelings. Forgiveness is the way, Mr. Gelb."

He cupped his face in his hands. "Do you feel *better* now?" His voice held a mocking quality.

She couldn't believe his response. She stared at him without blinking. "Yes, I do!"

Without asking permission, Miss Adessi prayed aloud for Frank, even as a rumble of fury arose from him.

"Shut up!" he screamed and stood to his feet.

But the Spirit's love flooded her heart as compassion arose like flood waters within her for Frank. She continued even as he walked away, her voice elevated. People at other tables looked up, but she didn't care. "I pray You'd penetrate his hard heart—as You always do with the stubborn. May Frank find You! Amen!" She'd done what she was responsible to do.

The darkness shrieked at her coming. They brought forth their strongest warriors, those who could fortify despite the onslaught of her light-filled words. The efforts of the One to turn him over the past year had failed. The dark ones had worked to sow continued confusion, to rack him with torment, and to get him to give up ever clinging to the One. His sins were, after all, just too great.

Although the One would never stop drawing, never give up on redeeming him, the darkness would continue to congregate within him, a collective, black mass inhabiting and drawing from him endless resources of life.

This one was theirs, and nothing would be allowed to trespass and steal their prize.

Joshua sat facing Lydia. Mrs. Claremont had left moments ago to give the two of them privacy for the last five minutes of their visit. They sat in a large room, tens of dozens of youth offenders visiting with family. Two months had passed, and this was Joshua's first visit to see Lydia at the state capital's juvenile facility.

"Glad you came, Joshua," Lydia said, pleased. She pushed a long strand of her black hair away from her face.

"I miss you," he said, his heart swelling as he looked over her beauty. "I can't believe I'm not allowed to even hold your hand here."

"As long as you hold my heart, Josh," Lydia said. "And I appreciate your letters and care packages."

"That's my pleasure," he said with a grin.

Lydia reached forward and took his hands. "I'm still a rule breaker." She gave him a smug look.

"No touching," a female guard's voice boomed from a raised observation platform nearby.

They let go, but not before Joshua squeezed and tried to memorize the softness and fullness of his girl's hand in his. His heart ached that he couldn't embrace her.

"I love you, Lydia Claremont, more than words can express."

The hint of a blush colored her cheeks, the hint of pain in her face. "I love you, too," she whispered. She swallowed a lump in her throat and looked away. "Just a year to go, maybe sooner with good behavior."

Joshua nodded and flashed a smile at that. "And you're leading a group in the chaplain's service?"

"Yes, just a small Bible study. I've got so much time here that I can devour His Word as much as I want! I can't believe how closed my eyes were before."

"We were all once blind."

"How's Sammy doing? And your family?"

"Everyone's well. Sammy, too. Really, I can say things are going great for all of us." He paused. "I have you, and the Lord has you, which means everything to me!"

"I can't imagine my life without Him now."

Joshua prayed for Lydia. After, she prayed for him. They both sensed the Holy Spirit's Presence between them—His life and light filling them both, uniting and connecting their hearts.

"Visiting time will finish in one minute," the guard said to the room. "Say your goodbyes."

Joshua reached out and gave her hand a squeeze before standing and kissing her cheek, hoping the guard wouldn't say anything. "See you next week, my love," he said, smiling to her.

Just before she was about to head off, he reached and held her.

She whispered into his ear, "Till next week." She waved at him with a smile as she walked off.

Joshua, left to himself, prayed to the One. "Thank You for Your goodness—for revealing to each of us Your wonders and Your love. May we always be attentive to Your Voice above all others."

He walked with the others toward the exit. The Spirit rested upon him with a substantial weight as he sensed himself being prepared for grand adventures which would impact the world for Him.

Epilogue One | The Five

The blazing hill of the Four had become many hilltops spread over Sterling City—their lights spreading upward and outward, permeating every dry and empty place, thing, and person. Communities became extended families, meals shared with one another became a regular occurrence. People opened their curtains or shades, looked out for each other. Churches overflowed, the eyes of the cities' people looking to the One which enabled them to look past people's faults and failures. Many of those within the Jaded Hearts, impacted by the events at the warehouse, became warriors for God. They returned to their schools, colleges and became voices pointing people to the One. On rare occasions in the public schools, the Spirit of God would saturate the classrooms until the students wept, prayed, and encouraged each other—sometimes the teaching lesson being pushed to the next day or next week. Classes became landing places for His Spirit. And the revival spread to the outskirts of the state and beyond.

The city's former darkness had become a spiritual-nuclear explosion that radiated its piercing light and bellowing, gale-force winds in all directions. The effects of darkness were minimized in that region—and any attempts to return were rebuffed by the fiery ones who stood guard empowered by the fuel of the Four—and the many others who had joined them.

"Dorothy, how are you?" asked Shelly as a broad smile spread across her deep-lined, pleasant face. Dorothy's friend of decades displayed a shyness with equal measures of radiant warmth.

"I'm well, thank you!" said Dorothy, unable to keep from smiling. She stepped into the foyer, always looking forward to these times at Shelly's home. "And you, Shelly?"

"Couldn't be better! The King is on His throne, and He continues to set captives free!"

"Amen," Dorothy said. "Indeed, He is moving!"

"Hello, Dorothy," shouted a voice from the next room.

Dorothy followed Shelly into the living room. She saw Francis leaning over an open Book on the footstool in front of her. "Good day, Francis! Happy 75th to you!"

Francis stood up and embraced Dorothy. "Thank you, my dear!"

Dorothy lifted a shiny, ruby red, gift bag to her friend. "Just something I thought you might like!"

"You shouldn't have!"

Dorothy rested her hand on her shoulder. "I hope your day is wonderful!"

Myrtle's familiar voice sounded from the kitchen adjoined to the living room. "Dorothy, would you like some tea or coffee?"

Dorothy grinned, pleased. "Yes Myrtle! Thank you. Coffee would be delightful—you know how I take it. It's bone-chilling cold outside!" She scrunched up her face, glancing at Shelly and Francis. "Not very nice at all!" They nodded.

"You look so excited this morning," Shelly said with a wide smile.

Dorothy gave an emphatic nod. "Yes, very! I can't wait for our prayer time to start. I've got so much I want to lift to Him with you all."

Myrtle clapped her hands twice as she stepped into the living room. "Yes! Who said the Lord can't use four old ladies to do great things?"

"Who here's old?" Shelly joshed, looking around at the others. They all burst out laughing.

The doorbell's electronic chirp sounded.

"That must be Ms. Alba Adessi! I'll let her in," Shelly said.

Seconds later, a middle-aged, well-dressed woman stepped into the living room, a burgundy Bible in her hands.

"Alba!" Dorothy walked to her and gave her a hug. "So glad you could make it!" Myrtle and Francis hovered close by also waiting to greet her.

Miss Adessi flashed a smile. "I'm glad to be here! Thank you so much for the invitation!"

"Amen," Dorothy said. "The Lord led us to invite you. Four becomes five on a journey to pray for our world."

Miss Adessi nodded, grateful. "And for next week, I invite you all to my home. I'd be delighted to cook lunch!" An excited gleam shone in her eyes.

As she said this, a familiar weight landed on Dorothy's shoulders. "I think it's time. The Lord's Spirit is moving. Let's move with Him, shall we?"

Epilogue Two | Changing of Trajectories

It was through insignificant people that the sweeping change became a tidal wave of change the world over. It hadn't come through so-called great and powerful ministries or churches. It had begun in everyday people—the simple people of the earth and the happiest people on earth—those who had said with an all-consuming desire to the Master, “I will follow You with all my heart, mind, and strength.” And to those ones, after sacrifice and dedication, had come the Holy Spirit landing upon them with such intensity of love and purpose that all the works of Jesus appeared through their lives, their words, and their hands.

It happened in the huge metropolitan cities of the world, on farms where the golden wheat trembled in the wind under thunder-rumbling skies, and in the sterile-smelling waiting rooms of doctors' offices. It was the stranger walking across the park. It was the man ordering a well-done steak, who looked up with a natural, supernatural look in his eye, spoke life and genuine love to his waitress or waiter. It happened in governors' mansions and at the top floors of immaculate, glamorous penthouses—the cleaners, the chefs, the nannies and the mothers—all who opened themselves up to being used by Him to bring a change of trajectories to those put in their paths.

Destinies were rearranged and redirected—all because the One Who had loved them and given Himself for them had stepped into their lives through regular, every day, grass-roots people. The One in them would bring change to the world—no matter how old, no matter what the background, no matter what the challenges or the struggles.

All it took was total surrender—like Joshua Phillips's surrender. And Cary's, and Miss Adessi's. And Lydia's. Surrender was something all could step into daily. And surrender always resulted in great outpourings of His power, love, and redemption to others.

The Holy Spirit moved over the earth like a searching eagle—His all-seeing eyes scanning for those ready for Him to come upon them and remain. He delighted in the possibilities of a people saying “Yes!” without reservation, without fear, and without consideration for their own wellbeing—just as the Master had always intended. Then the doors were flung open and the power flowed without restraint from His people to unlimited reaches of lost and suffering people—indeed, His mission from before the foundation of the world.

And the Lord spoke, the columns of the heavenly temple shaking. “Who will go for Us? Who will speak My Word and demonstrate My love? Who will allow Me to flow through them, a mighty River, to bring life to everything it touches? Who will step out and live a life surrendered to Me?”

Look for Book Two of the Lightbearer Series:
“The Jesus Boys: Ruins & Hives”
Coming soon!

Author's Post Script:

Dear Readers,

I want to thank you for reading my novel, "The Jesus Boy." What if a person, even a young person, said "Yes!" to the Lord, without reservation or compromise? The premise intrigued me, thus my exploration through the life of Joshua Phillips.

I believe the Risen Lord does indeed continue to do the impossible through His people—those who walk in their authority in Christ as empowered by the Holy Spirit. In the end, I hope the novel has made you reflect, explore, and grow in your own relationship with the One. If it convicts or challenges you, I encourage you to journal what the Lord may be showing you. And pray about it until it becomes active in your life.

I attempted to keep the intimate scenes realistic and allowed Joshua to experience both the heights of his spiritual intimacy and, equally, intimacy of a worldly sort, while maintaining great care in how I described such scenes. I hope I've kept the story above reproach, but also one that readers will identify with.

I also dealt with the reality of sickness and how such can be a genuine test of our heart's underpinnings—if indeed we are as secure in Him as we believe. Impurities are burned away during the firing process. And few things do this more than facing a deadly disease—especially when it involves a young family member. Sickness reveals the core of our trust in Him, when praying for a sick person and they don't get healed, or when we are the ones under siege by sickness or disease.

And the last thing I incorporated into the story was a glimpse into the Otherworld interlocked with ours. I've always wanted to tell such a story—and in future novels, Lord allowing, I hope to explore more of this interaction relating to regular people empowered by an all-powerful, intimately-connected Holy Spirit. The adventures of the Jesus boy will continue, Lord willing.

If you've liked "The Jesus Boy," may I ask for reviews on Goodreads, BookBub, Amazon, or wherever you buy your books? And please share the book on your socials. Please give a copy to a friend or family member, especially someone exploring faith in Christ. I want people to be challenged, and your influence is invaluable.

It's always great to hear readers' thoughts, responses, and queries. I look forward to hearing from you.

I am, in the LORD, yours,

Sean Elliot Russell
2 Corinthians 13:14

Books Published by Sean Elliot Russell

(Fiction)

Shiloh's Rising: The Day after the Second Coming

Many stories have been told that lead up to the Second Coming. This is the adventure that begins at His Return and takes us on a journey to the edge of Eternity itself. This novel will thrust the reader into a world unseen by most—a world in which the Great King, Jesus/Yeshua, returns and establishes His rule and reign from His Holy City, Jerusalem. This is the epic adventure of four people who enter that new world:

- Avidan Ish-Shalom with his daughter Rebecca, native to a war-ravaged Israel, grapple with news of the Messiah's identity;

- Taavi, the young prince of the Suranan tribe in the southeastern region of Africa, witnesses the coming of the King with suspicion and wonder;

- Amai Azuma, who thinks his life at an end, planning his own demise, when the King arrives. His wife and daughter ravaged by evil, Azuma sets himself on a path to get revenge for their murders when he learns the killer, Mitchio Ito, is alive and well;

- Jaxon Talbot, a teen left to fend for himself after the deaths of his parents in western Canada discovers a single desire: to go and find the King he witnessed appear to him.

These persons find themselves in a perfect world, but endure scars from an imperfect world. Will the goodness of Yeshua, the Jerusalem King, be enough to resolve the people's conflicts before the end of the age comes? Will they experience His salvation or be lost forever when the dark ones appear to deceive and destroy once again?

Reviewers have shared their love for the novel. One wrote it's a "great read" and brought them closer to the Lord. Yet another reviewer said the book "captures the true heart of God." One wrote, "have yet to see anything like it! I really liked to see things written from Jesus' point of view."

Should the Oaks Fall: Short Stories to Enliven the Heart

A compilation of eleven stories which will enliven the heart needing rejuvenation—especially to the one who's missed feeling something good on the inside of late. Most of the stories are of everyday people who are on a search for one thing or another. They may be, indeed, reflections of you & me. These stories will uplift your heart as well as amuse and entertain you.

One reviewer who gave 5 out of 5 stars has written regarding this short story collection that the stories were "very uplifting and made my heart smile."

(Non-fiction/Devotional)

The Journey Home: Papa-God is Waiting for You

This book is directed toward those who are aloof or have no relationship with Papa-God for whatever reason. Written in a style that may not quite feel like a traditional devotional, I seek to draw the reader to journey with me to explore the character and heart and Person of God as revealed through the Old Testament Tabernacle and its various furnishings. Through this exploration, we participate in a journey of sorts as we make our way toward the One Who alone can fill our emptiness and give us the identity and value we've always sought after. This book will encourage you—and challenge you!—to face the things that trouble and keep you aloof from God. By the end of the book, we'll find our way Home to Papa-God who actively waits, arms extended, for each of us to draw near to Him.

30 Selah Moments with the Holy Spirit: God on the Move: Acts Ch 1-12 Vol 1

Is there a more fascinating book in the Bible than the *Book of Acts*? This devotional, what I call a DCI (Devotional, Commentary, & Interactive Study), will challenge you as you journey through *Acts* which really is a blueprint for the Church of the Risen Lord for our modern times.

Questions we wrestle with: Has God changed? Has His power diminished? Was the supernatural Spirit of God only upon First Century believers? I surmise that if you or I, not knowing anything about the Lord, lived on an island and a Bible appeared on our shores, we would, without filters of denomination or tradition, come to the *Book of Acts* and cry out for the same power that fell upon the early Church.

Studying the first twelve chapters, I delve into the verses and offer insights, background information, and reflections to consider and journal. I believe this devotional can have a lasting impact on your walk with the Lord. Will you take the journey with me?

Coming Soon

The Day Jesus Moved Next Door

A neighborhood is shocked and experiences dramatic change when the King of Heaven lands in a house next door. Sterling City will never be the same again!

This novel will be released soon! Go to www.seanelliotrussell.com to get updates about this character-driven, fantastical novel that will entertain, uplift, and challenge you as you walk in Jesus.