

A large, leafless tree stands in the foreground, its branches heavily laden with black shoes. The shoes are scattered across the tree, some hanging from thin twigs and others from thicker branches. The tree is set against a clear blue sky. In the background, a paved road stretches into the distance, lined with other bare trees and a few parked cars. The overall scene is a mix of natural and man-made elements, creating a surreal and somewhat somber atmosphere.

by Jerry D. Ousley

The Shoe Tree

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Forward

This book is dedicated to all those who have encountered a spiritual struggle during their Christian experience. Frankly this most likely includes each and every believer on the face of this planet that has ever lived, is still living or is yet to be living. We all face our own spiritual battles. This book is a modern allegory of those battles we all face each and every day. So, in a way, this book is dedicated to you.

The hope and prayer of this author is that God will use it to strengthen you, encourage you, and give you hope for the coming days ahead. Know that you can win your own spiritual battle but only by depending on the Lord, Jesus Christ, spending much time in prayer, and facing those demons that haunt you during your journey, not only spiritual, but also physical.

God has given us all the weapons we need to win and defeat the enemy in this war over the soul. But we must be willing to pick them up and use them.

It is also important to address the subject of suicide. This book deals with the temptations of the devil to influence his victims into taking their lives. This is not to suggest that all suicide will result in the eternal loss of the soul. Who knows what prayers issue forth from the lips of those who have tragically taken their lives? I cannot stand as their judge for I am not made a judge. Only God is their judge.

This book takes the position that there are some who are influenced to give up their salvation and end their lives causing eternal damnation to their souls. But it does not mean that this is true in each and every case. We leave that to the Lord. Frankly, most who give up on salvation have never truly experienced it in the Lord. They may have attended services somewhere, may have prayed occasionally, or perhaps repeated a prayer, but never really made that salvation commitment. When we genuinely come to Christ we seldom give up on such a glorious experience.

Chapter 1

The stillness of the pre-dawn can make secret thoughts blossom in the mind like the moon flower when those silvery beams of twilight touch its petals. Alongside the night lonely highway, a passerby, unless specifically looking for someone, most likely would have missed the silhouette of a man standing in a field scattered with the skeletal-like remnants of a wood that had long since been logged out. He silently gazed up into an old maple tree. If one looked closely, they might have seen strange shapes hanging from the branches although it appeared that the man was looking beyond them.

In a fleeting moment the glare of the headlights of a casually passing car revealed the pained face of sheer terror laced with rage reflected from the face of the man. He was a young man, even though the folds of the skin on his cheeks from clenched teeth spread his mouth wide and made him look much older. His clothes hung loosely from his body as if he had traveled long and labored for days. A sweat dampened his forehead and a few drops trickled past his eyes, down his cheeks and hung momentarily before dripping from his chin.

His unbroken gaze was focused to the top of the tree where the upper limbs appeared to sway against a gentle breeze. But there was no wind and the rustling of the branches sounded more like something was moving about. The average eye may have seen a brief shadow but would have most likely dismissed it as a trick of night vision because it quickly fled into the darkness.

Silhouetted shapes gently danced in a slow twist in the lower parts of the tree. Not one person could explain how they came to be hanging there, nor would they. Many opinions had been formed to define this somewhat humorous phenomenon but no witness had been discovered to bring substance to a single one. At sunset, when the last trickles of light dimly pierced the dusky sky and shadows became things they were not, they would look more like strangely shaped fruit concealing their true identity. But in the brightly lit sky of the day, they could be plainly seen even from a distance. In their own way they were pleasant to the eye and almost seemed like a product of nature.

If one could roll back time, they would see the maple tree with its "unnatural fruit" standing along Highway 31. At one time the highway had been a major bustling and heavily traveled thoroughfare. But now it was used mostly by occasional local traffic. Interstate 65 which had replaced the major highway was within sight just down the road leaving those old enough to remember when, reminiscing of days gone by. The maple tree once had stood with many other trees making up the wood that graced the side of the highway.

The sparsely populated town of Crothersville was about half a mile north, being another little town in Southern Indiana that had once thrived with promise of success but now seemed to be just a name on a green sign unnoticed by travelers hurrying down the interstate just a mile away. Nearly a hundred and fifty years before it had been a busy railroad town originally dubbed Haysville. A man by the name of Crothers promised to bring a depot to the town if they'd rename it after him – hence Crothersville. Highway 31 went right through the middle of town and had been an oasis for weary travelers offering service stations for auto repairs, maintenance and refueling, not to mention those much-needed restroom breaks. A bite to eat at one of the local restaurants and maybe some quick shopping was in order before hitting the road once again. But the Interstate had changed all of that. With the depot long gone the railroad saw an occasional train noisily clanking through as if trying to be inconspicuous so it could slip by before anyone noticed. The most excitement the railroad had in Crothersville for many long years was a derailment that happened sometime back. Otherwise, the noise of rattling trains was nothing more than a nuisance.

The tree, without its unnatural product, really wasn't much to look at. In fact, it was scrawny in the opinion of most and would be swallowed up as a part of the wood. But to a young boy it was a very curious sight and one could spend a lot of time daydreaming about how this thing came into being.

To a particular young man known as Joshua it was a gold mine of imagination. The tree held him in an eerie awe whenever he saw it. Even though it scared him his curiosity overpowered his fright. He had a special spot just a short way into the wood where he was concealed from passers-by and he

would just lean back with a long blade of grass between his lips as if solving the problems of the world. He spent a lot of time looking up at all those pairs of shoes dangling from the branches. During the fall and spring of school months he would find every excuse possible to go into the woods that began at the boundary of their backyard and extended all the way to the highway. His parents wouldn't let him go directly to the tree of course fearing what might happen to an energetic boy playing beside a busy road. His excuses ranged from saying that the wood was a peaceful place to do his homework to reminding his mother that spending time in nature was much better than sitting in front of a TV set. It generally worked. But secretly he had a beaten path that began from his backyard and led all the way to the tree. It would have taken a half hour to walk down the street, then to the highway and down to where the tree was, but as the crow flies, he could cut across the woods and in a matter of minutes, arrive at his "special place."

Crothersville was one of those towns humorously persecuted as a "poke and plum town" – Poke your head out the window and you're plum out of town. It boasted the population of a whopping 1800 people. In spite of "hick" humor, as a farming community most of the inhabitants of Crothersville were proud of their small burg acknowledging how lucky they were to not have the problems of larger communities.

Older kids living there seemed bored with their lives but when you're only ten and you're filled with imagination you don't have time to be bored. Joshua heard many of the teenagers commenting about how there was nothing to do after school. That sounded strange to him because he always had a full plate of events. There were dogs to play with, frogs to catch, ball games to win and an endless list of chores to do at home. He found himself getting up early even during the summer just to make the days longer.

Joshua loved going to the local restaurant with his dad. It seemed to be the place where all the men gathered on a quiet Saturday morning. It was fun listening to the stories they would tell. Sometimes it was hard to separate the fact from the fiction but the stories captured his imagination and he couldn't wait to hear the next one. Some would leave you reeling with laughter while others were kind of scary and made him glad that his dad was there even though he would have been ashamed to let others know that he was scared.

Mr. Stanberry, who owned a farm about a mile from town, told one of Joshua's favorites. It was his favorite because it had to do with the shoe tree. Mr. Stanberry swore that he saw some kind of critter around that tree one night. He had been in town late and was driving his old red pickup truck home when he saw movement under the tree. "Now I ain't sayin' it was and I ain't sayin' it weren't but what it looked like was a long-haired man of a thing with horns on

top o' his head. It had some kinda bag draggin' behind it and ever so often it'd reach in an' pull out a pair o' shoes and give `em a toss-up into that tree. If'n they caught hold a branch it'd jump up and down laughin' like a squallin' cat. But if'n they fell back to the ground it'd give a growl that'd curdle yor blood an' then would pick up the pair o' shoes an' throw `em up agin. I pullt over an' watched that critter fer nearly half an hour tryin' to figure out what it was when all a sudden it spotted me. It took a long look right at me with them glowin' reddish-yeller eyes, then it did somethin' that makes me jittery even now; it got a evil grin acrost it's face and pointed a long crooked finger at me then started howlin' like a coyote in the dark, and I don't care to tell you fellers that I got skiddish real quick. I didn't wait `round to see what it'd do next but jumped back into my truck and smoked the tires all the way home!"

Joshua felt a chill run up his spin and could feel the small hairs standing up a little as he lay under the tree and thought about that story. He knew that it couldn't be true but it made him wonder "what if . . ."

As we have already established, no one really knew how all those shoes came to be in the tree. There were rumors telling of strangers passing through the town making mysterious journeys into the blackness of night resulting in yet another pair of shoes hanging from a branch of the tree the next morning. Others passed it off as pranks by bored teenagers who sat somewhere in hiding laughing at spectators who had nothing better to do than gawk at a pair of shoes hanging from a tree. If this had been the case no one was ever successful in catching the youths in the act even though a couple of boys had been caught once dragging a dead opossum across the road with a fishing line.

Mr. Toppe had been fooled by that one. He had gone into town that morning to get some feed for his livestock and had spotted it on the road. He didn't think much about it until on his way home when the critter had shifted from the middle of the road to the side of the road. An hour later he took his wife back into town and the varmint had disappeared altogether. But on their return trip home it was back in the middle of the road. That was all his curiosity could take and he pulled over to the side, got out of the truck and immediately saw the fishing line that had been invisible while driving. With a hard yank on the line, he pulled both of those boys out of the woods causing them to land flat on their stomachs on the gravel beside the highway. That was the end of that.

Still another rumor had it that people who were fortunate enough to find another occupation besides working at the local shoe factory marked the occasion by throwing their old shoes into the tree. This explanation could never hold water however because of the variety of shoes to be seen in the old maple tree. Had they all been some kind of work shoe then maybe this would have

been the case but the shoes ranged from worn out sneakers to what was once beautiful dress shoes – both women’s and men’s!

Joshua dismissed all of these explanations. Instead, he imagined stories of adventure, romance, and danger when he looked at the shoes. There were all sorts of shoes – almost any kind you could imagine - hanging from the limbs of the maple tree. Certainly, there were enough to fill the imagination of a young boy. The stories were endless and if you did run out you could always pick a pair you’d fantasized about before and start a whole new story.

There was an abundance of sneakers of all name brands some rugged and ragged while others seemed almost new. There were white tennis shoes, black canvas shoes, others with more colors than a rainbow. There were work boots, high heels cleverly strung together and men’s dress shoes. One pair that was probably Joshua’s favorite was a beautifully carved pair of cowboy boots that had been well weather-worn. But you could tell that they had been a fine pair of boots at one time. The stories filled his mind as he lay in his “secret place.”

He had tried sharing these stories once with his older brother but was only met with an onslaught of laughter. His brother was one of those teenagers who thought Crothersville was the most boring place on the face of the earth. He told Joshua, “You are full of fantasy brother! What makes you think that anything exciting would ever happen in a place like Crothersville?”

It made Joshua turn red in the face and he just wanted to get away. But then what his brother had said also made sense. It did seem very unlikely that anyone not from around here would ever want to come to Crothersville. Still, he couldn’t help but hold on to his imagination. What else did he have? Besides his ideas sounded as good, if not better than all the others he had heard.

Winter is an unpredictable time in Southern Indiana. There were some years when it hardly seemed like winter at all, others that made Alaska sound like a vacation resort. It could be frigid one day and near record highs the next or at least it seemed that way. This particular year the winter had been fairly mild. Joshua shared a secret kept by most students in the Crothersville School system – They all felt like a snow day was long past in coming. In fact, they hadn’t had one large snow the whole winter as of yet. But that was all about to change. It was a Wednesday afternoon just before Christmas. The weatherman had predicted one to three inches which was no big deal then. You could still walk to school in three inches of snow. All the kids, including Joshua shrugged it off as nothing and longed for Christmas vacation.

But as the morning wore on it was plain that there was more than three inches of snow on the ground and it was peppering down like a colossal overturned box of Epsom Salt. It was about that time that the principle's voice came over the loudspeaker, "Kids it looks like this snow is going to amount to a little more than the predicted three inches. For that reason, the superintendent has decided to cancel school for the rest of the day. If you live close enough to walk home and you have a parent or guardian waiting there for you, then you can consider yourself dismissed. If not, the buses will be here soon."

That's all they needed to turn a Wednesday into a weekend! Those living in town were out of their seats and heading towards the door not even hearing the teacher telling them that they needed to wait for their assignments - No assignments accepted today because this had officially become a snow day.

Who was to know just how bad it was going to get (or good if you were a kid in school). All totaling, fifteen inches of snow fell that afternoon and into the night. School was cancelled for the rest of the week and would resume after Christmas vacation. Needless to say, there were a lot of happy children that year.

Joshua got home, ate lunch and bounded out into the snow like a jack rabbit. He had plans. He told his mother that he'd be outside for a while and headed straight for the woods – he was going to the shoe tree. He had never seen it in such a snow and he knew that it would be beautiful to behold, what with those shoes covered with the damp, powdery substance, sparkling with ice and icicles hanging from the toes and heels, making them to glisten like something straight from a fairytale.

But when he arrived, he stopped dead in his tracks. "How could this be?" he thought to himself. He didn't stay long at the shoe tree that day for even though the temperature was well below freezing and all the other trees around had their limbs packed in ice and snow, the shoe tree didn't have a flake on it. Instead, water dripped from the toes of the soggy shoes into the snow below leaving holes that looked as if someone had taken a straw and poked all around under the tree.

That was the first time Joshua was really afraid to be at the tree. He saw nothing else, but he never could figure out how this could have happened. He didn't stay long that day. He couldn't tell if it was the cold or the strange phenomenon of what he had witnessed, but a shiver ran from the base of his neck all the way to the end of his spine and his thoughts compelled him to just get back home.

It snowed seven more times that winter making it one of the most miserable Crothersville had experienced in some time. The kids got a few more snow days out of it, but what was so upsetting was that it seemed the sky stayed gray forever. They didn't get any more fifteen-inch snows, however plowed parking lots were plagued with miniature mountains of dirty, ugly snow remnants well into the spring. Like typical Southern Indiana weather, the temperature would be tolerable one day and bitter the next. On the tolerable days it seemed the ground was just one big mud puddle.

When spring did finally arrive, it was announced by a very welcomed partially cloudy day. That meant that part of the day also had periods of sunshine. People cracked jokes by saying, "What's that bright ball doing up in the sky?" and talking about how they had almost forgotten what sunshine felt like. But Joshua, for one, was glad and rejoiced to see the sun again. It meant that the end of this long gray winter was now in sight. Soon there would be bright days, warm air and dry ground. He thought about the shoe tree and remembered the eerie feeling he had experienced the last time he was there. He wondered if he would ever go there again.

But this spring would present an entirely new set of problems for Joshua and his family. It happened one Sunday.

Joshua liked going to church. They went to the Presbyterian Church located on Howard Street. It was the oldest church in town and looked very majestic with its tall spire. Of course, he didn't listen to the minister as much as he should have; he found it hard to understand what he was talking about half the time but it didn't mean he couldn't like other things about going to church. He did like Sunday school. They usually made some kind of craft and it was a lot of fun, even when the teacher talked, because he brought things into perspective at least for a boy Joshua's age. He really liked the stories that came from the Bible when you boiled all the "thee's" and "thou's" out of them.

What Joshua liked the most about church was being with his friends. On rare occasions his parents would let him sit with them. They'd claim the back seat so that they didn't disturb anyone. But that didn't always work. It especially didn't work the first Sunday of spring of that particular year. It happened like this: Joshua was sitting with his two best friends, Billy Thormeyer and Hank Rider. They had been "cooped up" all winter like a flock of pigeons in a cage, longing to flap their wings and soar in the sky. They really didn't mean to cause trouble. It would have taken an idiot to not know the hot water they would be in for the stunt they pulled, but somehow it just happened. They were sitting there very quietly whispering about what they had done, or more accurately, not done, all winter and what they were planning to do this summer, when Billy reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of bubblegum. Of

course, they all wanted a piece and Billy didn't mind sharing. They were even discreet about blowing bubbles in church. They knew that if they started blowing those things and popping them, they'd all be escorted behind the church and what took place back there in the old outhouse was not a thing to brag about. As stated, they weren't idiots.

But then Billy Thormeyer said, "Hey guys, do you want to see the wad I've been savin' all winter?" Of course, they did. Not knowing just how big this wad was they almost gasped out loud when Billy reached in his pocket and pulled out what looked like a baseball. He had wrapped white paper around this ball of bubblegum and kept it for some weird reason. It was huge. The boys admired this "wad" for a few minutes when Hank exercised his right to come up with an idea. "Do you guys know what you can do with that stuff?" Billy began with, "What?" That was all the conversation needed because Hank said, "Watch," and that's when they crossed the line that divided passing time to mischief.

As he pulled a small slingshot out of his pocket Hank said, "Let me see a piece of that wad." Billy pinched off a small piece and Hank loaded it into his slingshot. He held it between his legs pointing straight up, put the piece of the wad in the pouch, pulled down on the rubber band and silently let it go. The piece of the bubblegum wad went straight to the ceiling and promptly stuck. With a twinkle in their eyes the boys looked at each other, smiled and winked. Billy said, "Let me give'r a try." Hank discreetly handed Billy the slingshot and he pinched off another piece of his wad and did the same thing Hank had done. Now there were two pieces of that bubblegum wad stuck to the ceiling.

The boys began taking turns to see just how many pieces of Billy's bubblegum wad they could stick to the ceiling before the minister finished his sermon. It was Billy's turn and by now the wad was getting smaller and smaller. The closer they got to the core of that wad the harder it got and the piece Billy pinched off was pretty dry. He loaded the slingshot and let it go straight up just like they had done many times now, but this time something new happened. The piece of the wad didn't stick like all the others had but instead decided to ricochet off the ceiling. This wasn't good at all. Now had it simply gone backwards it probably would have struck the back wall and fell to the floor - But nothing doing with this particular piece of the wad. Instead, it ricocheted towards the front of the room. The boys watched in horror as it seemed to go into slow motion. The minister had reached a point in his sermon where he was about to make his final point. With his finger pointing in the air and his mouth wide open he was about to say, "So we must do likewise," but because of the flying piece of wad, which at that precise moment found the minister's open mouth and zipped right in, his words came out, "So we must, awwwg! What the . . ."

Trying to cover up, the boys immediately jerked themselves into attention as the people of the congregation turned around to see what they were doing on that back pew. They might have even pulled it off if it hadn't been for Billy's dad looking up when he wiped his forehead with his handkerchief after the service and wondered why the ceiling at the back of the room suddenly had strange looking pink spots on it.

The summer was nearly over before those three were allowed to sit by themselves on the back row again. Still, when Joshua's dad issued his punishment after they got home from that Sunday's adventure, he did it while laboring hard to keep a smile from breaking out on his face.

But this wasn't the problem referred to earlier. A situation arose that summer that took Joshua completely by surprise. Joshua was up in his room working on a story about the shoe tree. He often wrote his stories down in a journal. He really didn't know why, it just seemed like the thing to do. He was trying to describe a particular pair of shoes he remembered but just couldn't get it straight in his mind. So, he decided it was finally time to pay a visit to the tree.

He hadn't been there since that wintery day when he had witnessed the melting snow in below freezing temperatures. That had freaked him out so much that he hadn't been back since. He told his mother that he was going to take a walk in the woods, grabbed his notebook and headed to his path. Since he hadn't really used it all summer it had all but grown up and he had to look carefully to make sure he was on the right track. After a couple of turns things began looking more familiar and he was almost to the tree when he heard a noise that made his skin crawl. The swarming sound was so real he thought he had stumbled into a nest of bees and found himself brushing his arms and legs that stuck out from his shorts like bare tree branches from his knees down. Nothing was there. He was familiar with most of the birds and other wildlife in the woods because he had made so many trips before. Then he heard a cry that would have made the blood of a Sumo Wrestler curdle. His first instinct was to run but his feet seemed frozen in their tracks.

It was growing close to dusk as the sun began to fall lower and lower into the western sky, but it wasn't dark yet. After hearing the cry his first response was to abort his trip to the tree but his curiosity demanded to see what had made that mournful sound. He headed toward the tree but with cautious steps trying not to crack any branches. He was almost to the tree when he saw some movement that made him hunker down behind a bush. He saw a dark shape half bent over almost hiding in the undergrowth as if waiting for something. Every so often it would look straight up and let out a howl that reminded Josh of a wounded coyote he had seen on a TV special once.

He had a lump in his throat that felt like it was as big as a grapefruit and his head told him it was definitely time to go home but his feet seemed to insist on getting a bit closer for a better look. He eased through the weeds and bushes, now on all fours until he got within twenty feet or so from whatever it was. He could see it better and in shock – almost horror – realized that it looked amazingly a lot like the creature Mr. Stanberry had described. This was no longer an adventure but an excursion into terror.

He was just about to turn to run when the thing stopped and looked straight at him. It took two steps toward him and Joshua knew that his brief life was about to get shorter, when it stopped, pointed a black boney finger with freakishly long fingernails in his direction and said, "You!"

He jumped to his feet to run and almost tripped over something. Looking down he saw one of the largest blacksnakes he'd ever seen in his life. Now he had never been afraid of a blacksnake. He had always been taught that blacksnakes were useful to farmers because they'd keep rats and mice out of their barns and out of their corn. He had even picked up one or two while out in the woods just to feel their dry smooth skin slide through his fingers. But this blacksnake coiled up ready to strike with his tongue licking in and out and then it opened its mouth and said "you!"

That was the last straw. Joshua made ninety back down the over-grown trail until he got home. He panted all the way in the house, ran upstairs and locked his door behind him. All he could hear was "You!"

Chapter 2

Tom Stanberry owned a farm just about a mile from Crothersville. It wasn't a terribly large farm, but it had been in his family for three generations now and it had proven to be a good livelihood for them during those years. While he didn't have millions of dollars stashed away, there was enough money to live comfortably. He himself had stopped farming nearly three years ago, and he was now leasing his land to other farmers. His savings and lease payments had made it possible to retire.

Tom had never been married. He had always justified his bachelor status by saying that he hadn't encountered a woman who met his fancy. The downside to this was that he had no children to pass the farm on to. Consequently, his will specified that after his death his estate was to be auctioned and the proceeds donated to various charities. One of those benefactors was to be the church he had begun attending. The people there were more like family to him than any of his long-lost cousins who could very possibly wind up fighting and bickering over what he left behind.

The farmers leasing his land would be eager to snatch the property up for themselves, but not for the farmhouse, the barn or the other out-buildings. He hadn't really done a very good job of keeping them up over the years, and the buildings weren't all that much to brag about. The land, however, was prime ground in the county and would bring a good price, or so he reasoned.

He could have done a better job, he supposed, of keeping up the house and barn but they were always good enough for him and so he had decided to save his money rather than spend it on finer things, new trucks and so forth. Nope, his old red pickup, Betsy, he had named it, was good enough for him. He kept her in top mechanical condition though the years had taken a toll on her body. She was showing her age now with scuffed up fenders, a few dents that had been the result of minor accidents over time, and a faded red paint job. But she could still scat down the road faster than most of those new-fangled trucks. She didn't have a lot of fancy contraptions, the air conditioning had quit years ago, and it couldn't tell him where to turn, but he figured that if he didn't already know where to turn then he didn't need to be there anyway. Betsy had a good radio, the heater kept him warm in the winter, and in the summer, he'd rather have the windows down. So, he was satisfied.

With his truck, Betsy, his shotgun, Ol' Two By, his fishing pole, Lucky, and his dog, Rocko, he felt like he had more than most men. As he thought about it, he figured that people must have believed him to be a bit eccentric by giving names to inanimate objects, except for Rocko, but these items brought him a lot of pleasure and giving them a name made them more personable – sort of life like. He had caught many a fish on his rod Lucky, had spent many hours hunting in the woods with Ol' Two By and Betsy had taken him so many miles that she had gone past the hundred-thousand-mile mark twice then sort of quit counting.

In his younger days he had been a bad drinker. He supposed that it was because of loneliness what with being an only child and never getting married. He didn't really know why he had never married. As the years passed, he grew accustomed to his freedoms, being able to just come and go as he pleased and somehow marrying a woman just seemed a bit inconvenient to him. He had heard other men complain about how their wives were demanding, insisted on knowing just where they were at any given time of the day, and well, he just didn't want that. He could go where he wanted when he wanted, and eat what he wanted anytime he wanted and never heard a word of complaint from anyone, and he liked it that way.

As mentioned, in his younger days he had developed a drinking habit. Mostly he kept to himself and didn't raise a ruckus with anyone. He had done his share of drunk driving but had sense enough to limit his travels while intoxicated to just getting himself home. Thinking about it now, he realized that even that had been taking a big chance of hurting someone else, but he was thankful that it had never happened. Tom Stanberry was happy enough. Overall, he figured that he had lived a pretty good life.

But there was one night that had haunted him over the years. He had learned to tell a good story from his experience as a way of dealing with it. Sometimes it seemed that it had never really happened, but all he had to do was start thinking about it and the reality of the incident came back to him in vivid color.

He had been out on the town that Saturday night, if you could call it that. A small place like Crothersville didn't offer much in the way of riotous living. Still, he had begun his evening with a casual supper with the boys down at the diner. It was the unofficial meeting place of the local "men's club," though the "club" didn't have a name and wasn't a well-run organization. It consisted merely of the local men getting together for a good meal and some laughs.

Afterwards he had decided, as he usually did on a Saturday night, to stop in at the local tavern; Pee-Wee's, it was called then. Once there he'd normally drink himself to the verge of not being able to remember anything the next morning and then he would stop. He knew that he had to get home and so he had managed to establish his limit, though it was a liberal one. Over the years he had come to know just how much he could drink and still find his way home without weaving and bobbing on the road – too much.

The local police knew Tom well and also knew that he had no intentions of hurting anyone, harming anyone's property or breaking the law; he just wanted to get home, and so they had learned to turn their heads the other way when he'd pass by. This was his weekly habit.

But it was different that night. Tom was on his way home about eleven o'clock. He normally didn't stay out much longer on a Saturday night because after that seemed to be the time when most drinkers got into trouble. By then he had drunk his limit anyway. He normally took Highway 31 down to the Interstate to the convenient store to grab his favorite Saturday night snack – A bag of popcorn and a steamy hot cup of coffee, and then turn down the old gravel road that led to the outskirts of the east part of town. From there he'd go on home.

As he neared the Interstate, he saw something move under the old shoe tree that stood along the highway. He was drunk but not so much that he wasn't curious as to what was going on, so he pulled over about fifty feet from the tree on the opposite side of the road. He watched for a moment without seeing anything and was about to start the truck and drive on when a figure appeared from the woods behind the old tree.

He had never seen anything like this in his entire life! It was a critter like none he had read about or witnessed. At first, he thought it was some kind of

ape that might have escaped from a zoo, but the closest one was in Louisville Kentucky forty miles south. He then reasoned that it might have jumped from a truck passing by on the Interstate. Who knew what was being hauled in all those big rigs as they sped down the highway?

As he watched the creature, he realized that the thing acted like a man or at least something with more intelligence than an animal. It was hairy all over, with hands that looked like old bones. It stood nearly eight feet tall, but the scariest part of it was the eyes. They glowed in the dark like reddish-yellow flames flickering in the night.

It carried a bag and he was so intrigued with it that he climbed out of his pickup to get a better look. As he stood near the front end of the truck he was awed as the critter reached into the bag and pulled out a pair of shoes, then gave them a toss, up into the tree. They caught over a branch and it laughed a sound that seemed to make the blood curdle in his veins.

In a moment it reached into the bag again retrieving yet another pair of shoes. This time when it threw them up, they missed the branch and fell back to the ground. The creature screamed like a wild cat in the night. Tom had heard a few of these wild cats in his day so he knew exactly what they sounded like and when he heard this thing it made him to wonder if the wild cats he had listened to before were really other critters like this one. After the scream it jumped up and down with its arms extended upward but bent at the elbow and it reminded him of a kid he'd seen taking a temper tantrum in the IGA a week or so before. He would have laughed and shook his head like he did that day, thinking, "What a spoiled brat," if he hadn't been looking at something that could probably rip him to pieces if it spotted him.

As he was thinking about this the critter stopped dead in its tracks like it had sensed a presence. Then it slowly turned those fiery, reddish-yellow eyes in his direction, pointed that bony finger at him and began to laugh that blood curdling laugh. He didn't need a second invitation and he wasn't so drunk that he knew that he was in big trouble and so in an instant he turned and nearly dived into the truck, "Come on Betsy; don't let me down now honey," he said as he turned the key in the ignition. True to her faithfulness over the years she started with the first hit. Tom slammed her into gear throwing gravel as he turned the vehicle around right in the middle of the road and headed for home. The critter began to run after him and it got close enough that it put its bony finger against the side of his truck making a shrill screech like someone raking their fingernails down a chalk board.

The next morning it all seemed like a dream, and he had nearly convinced himself that he had gotten drunker than he thought until he went outside and took a look at the long scratch down the side of Betsy.

Some of his buddies at the diner had tried to get him to come to church for several years now. He had always given some excuse like, "a leopard can't change his spots," or something else clever like that. He had never given it a second thought until that morning. He looked down at his watch ... 9:30 AM. He still had time to make it so he put on his best overalls and a white button up shirt and hopped into Betsy.

A lot of eyebrows were raised when he stepped inside that first Sunday morning. It seemed everyone breathed a sigh of relief when they realized the roof really wasn't going to cave in. From then on Tom never missed. He didn't quite understand what they meant about being saved, but he quit drinking immediately and that had been that.

He thought long and hard about the experience this particular day. It seemed like a lifetime ago. He learned to tell the story in a fashion that sounded like a yarn to those in the diner and he couldn't help but notice that when the young boys would come with their fathers, they were fascinated by his story. Even though he drove by the old shoe tree several times after that between the hours of eleven o'clock and midnight, he never saw the creature again.

That is, until today. It had started off like any other normal Saturday. He had made his morning excursion into town to eat with the boys at the diner. One of them even coaxed him into telling his yarn about the critter in the night. Even though he feigned embarrassment, inside he was always honored when they'd ask him to tell his story. He had gotten pretty good at it too, emphasizing words every now and again so as to get just the right effect.

Tom went on about his business just as he had always done; he even felt so good that he thought he'd give Betsy a bath at the car wash. He tried to wash her a couple of times a year, "whether she needed it or not" he mused. She did. He visited with a few buddies and it's surprising how quickly time goes by when you spend an hour or so here and there.

It was nearly supper time and Rocko, his German shepherd, was probably wondering where his evening supply of dog food was, so he hopped in Betsy and headed home. Just as he had figured, Rocko was on the porch and rose up to greet him as he arrived. Tom fed the dog, did a few chores and had settled down to his own cooking. He was dining on the gourmet meal of warmed up fried chicken and a boiled potato when he heard something coming from the barn, and Rocko was pitching a fit.

Stepping out on the porch he noticed that the side door, which he normally kept padlocked, was slightly cracked open. "Must be some of those Riley boys again," he thought. He had caught them a month before trying to steal gas from an old tank he had at one time kept full to run his farm equipment. Going back inside he grabbed Ol' Two By which was always on a rack near the front door, and pulled his work boots up on his feet without tying the strings.

He made his way to the barn thinking that he'd never shoot anyone but figured that just the sight of Ol' Two By would be enough to scare the boys off. As he got to the door, he heard a loud clanging that sounded like whoever it was in there was throwing his stuff all over the place. It made him a bit angry and he jerked the door open, shotgun in hand, and said, "Alright now boys, you've had yore fun ... what the ..." and he couldn't say another word. Standing right in front of him in his full eight feet of pure ugly was the critter he had seen so many years before.

As it looked down at him it seemed that an inferno was behind those horrifying eyes. The laugh that he'd never forgotten over the years came bursting from the mouth of that thing and Tom felt as helpless as a little girl surrounded by bullies. He was so frightened that he forgot all about Ol' Two By in his hands and so he never squeezed off a round.

The creature stuck that bony finger right up against his chest and it felt like a razor-sharp knife was about to pierce his heart when it said, "It's your time Tom Stanberry! I've come for you! It won't be long! I have my soul for tonight but your day is coming soon . . . your day is coming soon Tom Stanberry!" Tom just knew this was the end for him. Funny, in all his days he would have never figured on going out of this world being murdered by the creature he'd told his stories about.

All it would have had to do was to go ahead and shove that razor of a finger into his heart and it would have been all over for him. Instead, the critter laughed again, pushed Tom to the side, causing him to fall to the ground, landing on his buttocks. His finger had still been on the trigger of Ol' Two By and the jolt of hitting the ground made him squeeze, with the barrel of the gun now pointing straight upward. The buckshot plastered holes in the tin roof above and he remembered that as he gazed through the new holes in his barn, he got a glimpse of the red sky as the sun was setting.

The creature ran out the door and down his lane towards the road. Tom just sat there on the ground as he watched the critter fade into nothing just short of the road.

Tom would be sixty-three his next birthday. But at that moment he felt helpless as a child. His heart was racing and he felt dizzy, clammy and cold. He sat there for what was only maybe fifteen minutes but it felt like half the night. Finally, he managed to pull himself together. He found Ol' Two By lying beside him where he had dropped her after she had gone off. He picked up his shotgun and stood to his trembling, shaky feet. Stepping out of the barn he saw the padlock lying on the ground and locked the door back up.

The sun had gone down now and it was dark. Tom made his way back to the house, got the keys to Betsy and told Rocko, "Watch things boy, I'll be back soon." He drove the truck into town silently thinking, rehashing and going over the events that had just taken place. A death sentence had been placed on his life and he knew that he didn't have long.

Even though it had been years since he had taken a drink, he instinctively pulled up to the package store, went in and purchased a fifth of Jack Daniels. Without even a "thank you" he paid the cashier, went straight out to his truck, the bottle wrapped in a brown paper sack, climbed in and went directly home.

He didn't sleep that night, but spent most of it on the porch in the dark, sipping his Jack Daniels, Ol' Two By across his lap, and Rocko lying beside his rocker. Every so often Rocko would give out a sigh as if he knew something was desperately wrong.

Though Tom finished the bottle, he never really felt drunk. He sat there on the porch until the sun began to peep over the eastern horizon. Then he stood to his feet, leaned the empty bottle against the wall, went inside and fell on his couch where he slept for several hours until he was awakened by a knock at the door.

Chapter 3

Josh didn't sleep well that night. He had never dreamed about snakes for as far back as he could remember but that night, he woke up several times in a cold sweat and all he could see was that big blacksnake hissing "You!" At one point he woke up feeling like something very large was laying on him. He was almost afraid to look so he managed to just open one eye in a tiny slit and then he closed it very quickly because he was sure that he saw those yellow-red eyes glaring down at him.

His mother had taught him to say his prayers at night and he always did. He had enjoyed the times that his mother would kneel down beside of him when he was much younger and help him with his prayers. His dad even got in on it with them a few times. He remembered once when both his mother and father were praying with him and he sneaked a peek to see if they had their eyes closed. When he did, he caught his dad peeking back at him and they smiled before quickly closing their eyes again.

But this time it was much more serious. After he had caught a glimpse of those weird eyes, if he really did see them, the weight bearing down on him increased. He wanted to let a prayer escape his lips more than he ever had before, but it seemed the weight was chocking the very words out of him. All he could manage to do was to think. He thought "Jesus." He began to say the name over and over in his mind until it finally came from his lips in a whisper, then louder and louder until he shouted "JESUS!" After that the weight seemed

to slide down and over the foot of the bed. He carefully opened one eye again and whether he really had seen those yellow-red eyes or not, they were no longer there.

He managed to get a few winks of sleep that night and got up the next morning dragging from the protection of the covers as he got ready for Sunday school. All he could think about was what he had witnessed – or thought he had witnessed the day before. Now it seemed so far away that maybe he had just been hallucinating. Perhaps it was all a dream and hadn't really happened at all, but he couldn't shake it out of his mind.

He had to talk to someone about it. He was sure that his parents would attribute it to an over-active imagination. His brother was definitely out. He'd make him the laughing stock of the entire town in a matter of half a day or less. He wasn't sure who he could trust, and then it hit him – Mr. Stanberry! Of course! If anyone would understand he would. He had just told his story again the other day down at the diner.

Josh made up his mind right then and there that as soon as service was over, he would find a way to excuse himself and find Mr. Stanberry. He was feeling much better about the whole thing until Mr. Stanberry didn't show up for service that Sunday. Some of the men in the church had been working on him for a while to get him to attend their church. Mr. Stanberry was a good guy but he had been bad to drink. It had been several years now since they had finally convinced him to start coming, even though he never made a full commitment. But he stopped drinking at least and was faithful to be present nearly every time the doors were open. It was very unusual for him to not be there.

After church Josh went home with his family for the normal large Sunday spread. It seemed half the congregation came to his house for dinner. Josh thought about how he could get a chance to excuse himself and ride his bike to the Stanberry farm. He figured that if he expressed genuine concern maybe his parents would let him go. He really was concerned. After all he had seen the same creature that Mr. Stanberry had and maybe his absence from service that day had something to do with it.

It took some finagling but somehow, he managed to convince his parents that checking on Mr. Stanberry was the right thing to do. "I'd go with you son but I can't leave all this company," his dad said. He was relieved because he really wanted to go alone. With his father there he would never get a chance to talk to Mr. Stanberry about what they had mutually witnessed. He thought about the whole scenario again as he rode his bike out of town. The sun felt good as it warmed his skin. He had to strain really hard to spot even the tiniest hint of a cloud in the sky. It would have been a perfect day to do almost

anything besides what he was headed to do. He almost wished now that he had taken his fishing pole. He was dreading this conversation. It sure would have been a lot easier to just turn towards the river instead of going on to Mr. Stanberry's. But he hadn't and that was probably for the best. He needed to talk to someone; he just had to get this off his chest.

He could see Mr. Stanberry's silo now, looming above the trees and his imagination began to think about a city with tall buildings. As the farm came into view, he could see the barn and out buildings and the simple fence surrounding an empty field. It was a neat but quaint farm; nothing really special about a red barn and a few red and white outbuildings. The house was plain but clean. If Mr. Stanberry was making a fortune in the farming business, he sure wasn't spending it on fancy buildings and the like. He probably drove the oldest pickup truck in Jackson County. But Josh had heard his dad say that Mr. Stanberry could buy anything he wanted to buy. He just held on to a penny so tightly that it looked like a train had run over it before he'd let it go.

His black and gray German shepherd was lying in the front yard as he rode up and it raised its head and growled a little and let out a mumbled "ruff." Then it stood on all fours and began barking loudly. Joshua knew that its bark indicated that the dog wasn't in attack mode but still he proceeded with caution. As he approached the walk way leading to the porch, he looked away from the dog to the door which was opening. Mr. Stanberry stepped out with a shotgun in hand. Josh was scarred at first; he'd never seen Mr. Stanberry carrying a gun. "Joshua, it's you! Easy Rocko," he spoke to the dog. But even though he recognized Joshua right off he didn't lower the shotgun.

"Hi Mr. Stanberry," Joshua started slowly, "You okay?"

"Yeah, just a bit shaky's all," replied Mr. Stanberry as he finally let the barrel of his gun point to the porch, never leaving his hand. "What brings you out here on a nice warm Sunday afternoon?"

"Oh, I noticed you weren't at church this morning and I thought something might be wrong. It's been a long time since I've been to church and you haven't."

With a slight forced chuckle Mr. Stanberry looked down at the board floor of the porch for a moment as he said, "That's one for the record books ain't it? Guess I just sorta over slept." Joshua could tell that he was trying to make a joke about it, but from the way the man answered him he also knew that there was more to it than just sleeping in on a Sunday morning.

"Mr. Stanberry," Josh began, but was interrupted by the man who said, "Call me Tom, Josh. Nobody's around so ya don't have to be so formal with me." Josh found it hard to do that so he continued, "Sir to be honest with you I just thought you might understand. See I saw something yesterday, something that sounded a whole lot like the story you told the other day."

"Aww now Josh, you know me; I'm always tellin' a tale 'specially when I get around a group of the boys in town. It just sorta comes natural, ya know?"

"But," Josh swallowed hard, "Tom . . . you said that one day you had seen a creature throwing shoes up in that shoe tree over on Highway 31."

"Son ya can't believe ever'thing an old man tells now. Why how could I resist tellin' a spooky old tale like that."

Joshua could tell that the man was very nervous and being extremely cautious with his words. Usually, they flowed out of Mr. Stanberry like water gushing from a pump after a few good hard strokes. But now his words seemed forced and broken. "So, ya say you think you saw somethin' like that?"

The boy swallowed hard again as he looked Tom Stanberry square in the eye, "Tom, I went out to the shoe tree yesterday afternoon. I hadn't been there for awhile and just thought I'd go ..." Joshua went on to tell the man about the incident that past winter when everything else was frozen up and the shoe tree seemed to be melting. He told Tom Stanberry that he hadn't returned to the tree until the day before, "That's when I saw it. It was just like what you had described in the diner that day; sort of like a man – real tall – covered in black hair and it was making weird sounds. Then it looked me right in the eye and said 'You!' I know this is going to sound like something from the 'Twilight Zone' but when I turned to run, I stumbled over the biggest blacksnake I'd ever seen. The thing coiled up like it was going to strike me then opened its mouth and said the same thing 'You!' I stumbled out of there real quick and ran all the way home. Then that night there was something – a very heavy weight – seemed like somebody – laid down right on top of me in the bed. Sir it never left until I could manage to say the name 'Jesus.' I'm scared Tom and I just don't know what to do. I haven't told anyone else about this because I thought maybe you'd understand since you'd seen it too."

"Awwww now look boy," Tom Stanberry stammered.

"Sir – you've got to believe me!" interrupted Joshua. Mr. Stanberry stopped, looked down at the porch like a grade school kid kicking at a pebble, and then turned his eyes to Joshua. "Okay son, yeah, I did see it. I know I made a tall tale out of it but to tell ya the truth it scared the silly right outa me."

For the first time the man seemed to be letting his guard down. He sat on a chair and motioned for Josh to sit with him. He leaned the shotgun up in a corner but made sure it was well within reach as he quickly scanned the landscape around them. Joshua noticed an empty Jack Daniels bottle against the wall.

"Son," he began, "what I'm about ta tell ya is to be just between me and you. If'n the fellas in town heard this they'd laugh me right outa the diner. Truth is I saw that critter again just last night." Joshua's mouth dropped open. No wonder Mr. Stanberry seemed on edge. "I was just mindin' my own business here in the house when I heard old Rocko start cuttin' a shine. He only does that when someone's around. I thought maybe those Riley boys were up to no good and were messin' around my barn. I opened the door and twernt nobody in sight. Rocko was lookin' straight towards the barn and I couldn't get him to stop barkin' so I started lookin' at the barn too. Well, and son this is no tall tale, 'bout that time I heard a ruckus out there. It was just before dark and it sounded like someone or somethin' was tearin' up jack in the barn. Well, I went straight out there to see what was goin' on with old Rocko right behind me.

"When we got there, I could see that the walk door was partially open so I just grabbed the door knob and give it a jerked. Josh I've seen a lot of things in my day but when I opened the door an' seen that thing a standin' right there in front of me, well sir I don't mind tellin' ya that it was 'bout the scardest I've ever been. That thing looked me right in the eye then looked straight up and gave a howl that'd curl the quills on a porcupine! Then it pointed that long bony finger right at me and said 'your turn is coming soon!' It pushed me outa the way knockin' me straight to the ground and took off like a race horse. Ol' Rocko here took out after it but it seemed like it just vanished in mid-air.

"Well sir, I came straight back to the house with ol' 'Two By' here," he pointed at his shotgun, "and ta be honest right then's the first time I've set'er down since. I've been afraid to leave the house. When you showed up, I was afraid that thing had come back fer me."

"Mr. ... Tom, what do you think it meant by what it said?"

"Josh, I don't rightly know but son I also don't rightly think I want ta find out either. I'd advise ya to stay fairly close to home too son and listen now, don't ya be goin' back out ta that old tree, ya hear me?"

"Don't worry, I don't think I could anyway" replied Joshua. "Sir, what are you going to do?"

"Wish I knew son; I wish I knew. I thought about callin' chief Dooley down at the police station but I really think he'd just have a good laugh about it and have it spread all over town before the next time I got there."

"There has to be someone we can tell. Surely someone else has seen this thing too. It doesn't seem to be hiding from anyone."

"I don't know son but I do know this: Before I started goin' to church, I was real bad to drink. I've got to tell ya that even though I haven't had a drink in a long time I'm hankerin' for a big swig of whiskey right now." He didn't lie but he didn't actually tell the truth either.

Joshua thought about that statement as he eyed the empty Jack Daniels bottle. He looked down at the floor of the porch. He'd never heard a grown man talk like that before. He knew that Tom Stanberry was trying to be strong but he also knew that the man was just as scared as he was. As he listened to his words, he couldn't help noticing that he was wearing on old pair of work boots. Since taking an interest in the shoe tree it seemed he had made a habit of looking at other people's shoes. Those Tom wore were scratched up pretty bad. They were a pair of steel-toed shoes. He could tell because the leather had worn off part way and the rusty metal toes were sticking through. "Don't do it sir; we'll think of something; just don't do anything drastic. Let's think about it for awhile and see what we can come up with."

"I guess so, Joshua, but ya watch yore back now son, hear me?"

"Yeah, I do. And ... Tom ... you watch your back too."

"Don'tcha worry about me son. Me an' ol' Rocko here we can take care o' ourselves. You just be careful."

"You've got it. I guess I'd better go before Dad gets too worried about me."

"You take care son."

Joshua thought about the whole thing all the way home. Even though the sun was high and the sky was blue he found himself watching the bushes fully expecting that creature or another blacksnake to pop out at any moment as he peddled down the country road. At one point he did see a blacksnake on the road, but when it saw him coming it quickly slithered back into the tall grass. The hair on his neck never laid down the entire trip home and he was glad and relieved when his driveway came into view. He was scared and he knew that Tom Stanberry was too. He stayed close to home that day but he couldn't help

but worry about his new friend. He'd known Mr. Stanberry all his life but now he was Tom. It wasn't just a man-boy relationship anymore. They had shared an experience and had a secret that no one else knew about and probably wouldn't understand or believe. It just didn't seem right that old Tom Stanberry had to live in fear like that, especially out there in the country all alone except for Rocko. Joshua never dreamed that he had a legitimate right to be worried about Tom Stanberry.

Chapter 4

What a beautiful day! The warm breeze gently kissed against Joshua's face as he rode his bike without a care in the world. A cloudless blue sky provided a spectacularly clear view as he went carefree down the road. But what was that awful buzzing sound; the alarm clock? What time was it anyway?

Joshua had intended on being up early to meet with Billy and Hank. They had planned an all-day fishing excursion. Josh loved those fishing trips with his buddies. They'd laugh, joke and have a great time casting their lines, laughing, talking, joking and sometimes even catching some fish. There were times when they didn't catch any fish but that was okay too because the fun of the trip was just being with each other.

They had each convinced their mothers to fix them a lunch which they put in a small mutual cooler along with a few soft drinks. This was going to be a great day!

But Josh had overslept. He had set his alarm clock however he must have hit the snooze one time too many, because it was only half an hour before his friends were expecting him. They always made a point to meet at the firehouse. With its large parking lot and close proximity to town it was a good mutual place for all of them. They would then ride their bikes either to the river or to Bill Black's pond about a mile and a half out of town. Today they were going to the pond because Mr. Black had given the boys permission on Sunday after

church. They had listened to the weather forecast and had consulted the Farmer's Almanac to make sure it was supposed to be a good fishing day. Of course, it wouldn't have mattered anyway because the fun was in the journey. They would have gone just the same. But according to the Almanac, Thursday was the best day. That had settled the matter.

Josh couldn't believe that he had overslept; but once you have you can't get the time back so the only thing to do was to get ready as quickly as possible, hope the guys would wait for him and give them an explanation when he got there. He thanked his mother for the lunch, grabbed his gear and out the door he went. Riding as fast as he could and even though he had over-slept, he was feeling proud of himself for all the time he'd made up. It looked as if he was only going to wind up being about five minutes late.

"Here he comes now," he heard Hank shout.

"It's about time buddy," Billy gave him the "evil eye" as he rode up.

"Sorry guys. Somehow, I overslept."

"Overslept?" questioned Hank, "How could you oversleep on a day like this?"

"Tell me about it," Josh responded. He couldn't believe it himself. He could understand if he had been scheduled for a dentist appointment or it had been a school day or something like that; but a fishing trip? "I don't know what happened; I set the alarm and everything. Oh well, I'm here now so let's get going guys."

As they began their trip the usual chatter, puns and jokes followed. Then Billy asked, "Hey have you heard about Mr. Stanberry?"

Joshua's face grew serious as he looked Billy in the eyes not knowing what to expect next. The worst of thoughts and possibilities filled his head as he asked, "No. What have you heard?"

"My dad said that one of the other men in town saw him coming out of the package store with a sack. He and some of the other men think he may have started drinking again."

Josh swallowed hard as he remembered the empty Jack Daniels bottle on Mr. Stanberry's porch just the Sunday before. He knew that his new friend was having a hard time after seeing that creature in his barn. He had prayed that he

wouldn't give in to temptation but it seemed that his prayer had been in vain. "I hate to hear that," he said.

"Well, that's not all of it. No one in town has seen him since. That was on Monday," came back Hank.

Now Josh was really worried. Tom dearly loved coming to town and shooting the breeze with the men at the diner. As they continued their trip to the pond, he feigned humor with the other two boys. He was trying very hard to keep his thoughts to himself. He had promised Tom Stanberry that he wouldn't say anything. He knew deep down inside that his friend was in trouble and somehow, he had to get to him but he wasn't sure how, not without raising attention.

They got to the pond and began picking out their spots yelling to each other as they set themselves up. They knew that all the noise they were making would only succeed in scaring the fish away but again, this was more about having a good time than catching fish. Soon they did settle down, cast their lines in the water and began to get serious about actually doing some fishing.

It wasn't long before Hank called out, "Hey fellows; I caught one!" Josh looked his way and saw him pulling out a medium sized bluegill. It really wasn't a bad catch for the first one of the day. Maybe they'd get enough to clean and have fish for supper.

He watched as Hank removed the fish from his hook, put it on the stringer and re-baited hoping to haul in another one. He looked further down the bank and saw that Billy was getting bites but just none good enough to hook into. "Probably smaller bluegills playing with his line," Josh thought. He knew that was what it usually meant when the line was being "played with." These smaller bluegills were nibbling on the bait but not serious enough to take a big bite.

His thoughts turned again to Tom Stanberry and he remembered how scared he was when he had told him about seeing that creature in his barn. What had it meant when he told Tom, "Your turn is coming soon?" It didn't sound very promising, that was for sure. As he dwelt on the situation he glanced down at his own line. He saw a few circular ripples going out from where it disappeared in the water, which indicated that something was interested in the bait on the end of his hook. "Probably more of those small bluegills," he thought. But as he watched, the ripples were getting bigger. His line began moving from side to side. This was no bluegill. He stood to his feet in preparation of hooking a good-sized fish. Setting his mouth and firmly planting his feet he waited for the fight to commence when the fish, currently

toying with his bait, grabbed a mouth full and tried to swim away as he attempted to reel it in.

But then something unexpected happened. As he gazed down at his line, he saw a black shadow taking form. "What the thunder is that?" he thought. Could it be the fish? He'd never seen anything like this before. But then, the sun was shining more spectacularly on the water than most days. Perhaps this was normal and because he had never caught a fish in this light he just hadn't noticed. Normally his mind was more on the catch than what the fish looked like down in the water anyway.

The dark shadow began to wind around his line. This was definitely no ordinary fish. What was going on here? It curled farther and farther up until it was just below the surface of the water. Then suddenly a head poked up. Josh froze in his tracks – it was the blacksnake. It looked around as if making sure that the other boys were far enough away so as not to see or hear what was going to happen next, then, it looked Joshua dead in the eye. It hissed, "You-u-u! We told him that his turn was coming ssssoon."

Without hesitation Joshua dropped his fishing pole and ran without the first look back over his shoulder. At this point he didn't care what became of it because he wasn't sure when he'd ever go fishing again. But there was one thing he was sure about; suddenly he had a fear of snakes like never before.

Hank and Billy eyed their buddy running toward them on the bank. They were about to ask him what his hurry was when he said, "Sorry guys; something's come up." That was an understatement. "I just remembered about it and I've got to go!" With that he jumped on his bike and began racing back to the road leaving his two buddies looking at each other with their eyes about to pop out of their heads.

It was only about a mile from here to Tom Stanberry's place. He was as scared as a rabbit being chased by two old mangy hounds but he had to see if Tom was okay.

As he rode up, he could see the barn door standing open. A sick feeling rose from his stomach as he viewed a figure hanging from one of the rafters in the barn. He could see blood dripping from the body. He stopped momentarily and leaned over to one side as his own body retched and the contents of his stomach spilled onto the ground.

When he looked up, he caught a glimpse of a shadow moving in the barn and then the creature he had seen out by the shoe tree emerged pointing a long bony finger at him. "You-u-u-u-u," it said. He lost no time spinning out of there.

Once again fear welled up inside of him like he had never known. Not looking back for fear of what he might see he peddled all the way home, tears streaming down his cheeks. Since he didn't look back there was no way of knowing for sure, but it certainly felt like that creature was right behind him. The hairs on the back of his neck once again stood with an itchy prickle.

Now in his yard, he let his bike drop to the ground running to the porch. That was something he never did. He had taken pride in himself for keeping his bike in good condition and always took the time to lean it against the kickstand.

His brother was in the yard and yelled, "Hey bro, where's the fire?" Josh ignored his remark and ran straight into the house. His mother was in the kitchen and she took one look at Joshua, his face streaked now with dust from the road as the tears had bled down his face, "What happened?" she asked, then continued, "Are you hurt?"

"Mom," came the forced words from his mouth. He could barely speak because it felt like he was going to burst into tears again, "Mom, we've got to do something! It's Mr. Stanberry; something's happened; something's wrong."

"Okay, son, slow down. What's wrong with Tom Stanberry? I thought you were going fishing; what were you doing out at his place?"

"I rode by there on the way home and I saw ... I saw ..." his voice began to falter, "It was in his barn! Mom, something's wrong – We've got to do something!"

About that time his father walked through the door, just getting home from work. His mother looked at her husband in a helpless, confused way. Josh's dad knew that something wasn't right. He looked down at Josh, "What's wrong, son?"

"Dad, you've got to go out to Mr. Stanberry's. I think ... I think ... he's dead!" Josh's father looked dumb-stricken for a split second then turned to go back out to his truck. "Dad, I'm going with you!"

"Not this time, son." Then speaking to his wife as he picked up the pace to his truck, "Stay here and I'll let you know what I find soon."

The funeral had been as dreary as the day – overcast - chilly. No one spoke a word as Josh sat quietly in the back seat of the car. They were on their way home from the graveside service of Tom Stanberry. Josh kept thinking

about what he had heard at the funeral. He had been standing with his father and he overheard them talking about Tom. "Strangest thing I ever heard of," spoke Bill Black.

"I never figured Tom would commit suicide like that. I knew he was having problems from the rumor of him visiting the package store the other day. I meant to get out and see him too, but with work and all, just never got around to it," returned Joshua's father.

"Know what you mean. Still, it's the strangest thing how he went to the barn with his shoes off. I never heard of such a thing," came back Bill Black.

Josh's ears perked up when he heard that statement. He hadn't known that tidbit of information. Why would Tom have gone to the barn without his shoes?

These words haunted him as they drove. Tom Stanberry had been buried in the cemetery in the town just south of Crothersville; another small burg called Austin. So, they were driving north on Highway 31. They would have to pass right by the shoe tree. As they got closer Josh shuddered as he saw it coming up in the distance; then something caught his eye. He turned around in the seat looking out the rear window to make sure of what he saw. When he did, plain as day he saw an old pair of work boots swinging in the breeze. Funny, there hadn't been much of a breeze that day. Then he noticed that none of the other shoes were swinging; only this pair of work boots. He remembered the boots that Tom Stanberry had worn that Sunday afternoon he had gone to visit him. Scratched and scarred; rusty steel toes showing through - They were the same boots.

Chapter 5

Some believe it to be a far away planet located in the vast reaches of outer space. Others believe it to be another dimension – a third dimension if you will – aside from time and space. But whether it is in the remote corners of outer space or whether it exists, all but invisible to the eye of those in our own dimension, or whether both are wrong, still it does exist and is a place of wondrous beauty unimaginable to our own human minds.

Sometime in the many eons past, a creature was formed in Heaven by the name of Lucifer. He had been made by the great God, Jehovah, along with all the other angelic beings, and was by far the most beautiful and intelligent of Jehovah's creation. He was placed over all the others and was second only to Jehovah.

Everything is in harmony and blissful in that most wonderful of places. Each day is full of an abundance of things to do but it is never considered to be work because each of Jehovah's marvelous creations desire and long to fulfill the purpose for which they were created.

There are vast gardens full of trees of all sorts and many of which humans, who came much later, have never heard of. Vegetation thrives in these gardens and most are so large that it takes weeks to walk through them.

Wildlife can also be found. Most of the creatures resemble very closely those that would one day be found on the planet Earth with the exception that, even though they are not domesticated animals by any means, neither are they vicious and harmful. The creatures that humans would one day come to fear are as playful as tiny kittens. A journey through one of those gardens is a very rewarding experience and is considered to be a privilege.

Night never comes there because the sun never sets. In fact, if one were to peruse the cloudless, blue sky for a sun they would never find one because Jehovah gives off such a radiant light that none other is needed. All of His creatures eat of the fruit of the place only for pleasure and not one has ever experienced nor could define hunger. None of them have ever been tired and sleepy. There is no need of sleep there, though were one to want to lay down for a blissful nap it would not be denied him.

There never was nor ever shall be a place so rich, prosperous, or beautiful as Heaven. But even there trouble found itself. A time came when Lucifer began to be lifted up in his pride. He knew that he was the most intelligent and beautiful creature under Jehovah. It entered his mind that he was just as intelligent and beautiful as Jehovah. The only thing he didn't have was the throne of Jehovah. He had been placed over all the angelic beings to be found in Heaven. They all did his bidding while Jehovah occupied the throne.

So, Lucifer began to plot as to just how he was going to overthrow Jehovah and have His throne as well. He began simply by dropping casual statements to the generals and archangels who commanded the armies of Heaven under him. He would place little doubts about Jehovah in their minds, nothing serious but simple comments like, "I might do this differently than Jehovah, but He's the boss so we'll do it His way," or "It would be better if we did this like so, but Jehovah is the King so we'll let Him have His way." These small comments placed doubt in the minds of the leadership of Heaven and trickled down, as Lucifer knew they would do, to all the Heavenly population.

One day, after Lucifer felt he had enough doubt instilled in their hearts, he suggested that he would rule much wiser and with much more freedom than Jehovah ever would, and so those who had begun to doubt listened to his lies and were convinced of loyalty to Lucifer. When he felt he had enough to do the wicked work that had come into his heart, he organized his followers and set a day to storm the throne room and put Jehovah out of power.

That day came and with pomp and pride as Lucifer and his followers boldly walked into the great throne room of Jehovah and demanded that He step down from His place. "I am the new ruler of Heaven," boasted Lucifer, "and you will now take your place as my underling or be exiled!"

Jehovah looked at Lucifer and with kindness but also sadness in His eyes simply said, "I had hoped it would never come to this Lucifer, oh son of the morning," and that being said simply pointed His finger at the party assembled there. They were immediately forced back through the door by some unseen and unexplainable force and the doors slammed in their faces.

But that would not be the end of it. What followed was many days of argument between the angels who followed Lucifer and those who chose to remain loyal to Jehovah. Those days would be interpreted in many years, even perhaps centuries by our own time for Heaven is not limited to twenty-four-hour days. Each of the days of Heaven is at least as long as one thousand years on Earth.

Among the angelic beings occupying Heaven was two who had served Jehovah together as companions, partners and friends. They were inseparable. Where you would see one the other was certain to be close by. Their names were Jerimeil and Dicronifer. It was their jobs to walk the gardens of Jehovah and make sure all was in order. Of course, their occupation required them to be absent from the great city of God for many days at a time and when all this trouble began, they were seeing to their duties in the gardens and knew nothing about it.

Upon their return they found the city in a tremendous uproar. Many of the angelic beings felt Lucifer was right while most remained loyal to Jehovah. Jerimeil and Dicronifer listened to all the arguments and defenses presented from both sides.

Afterwards, when they were alone, they began to process all the information that had been told to them. "I can see the point of those who revolt," began Dicronifer, "after all, Lucifer does do all the work while it seems Jehovah merely sits on His throne."

"Ah my brother," defended Jerimeil, "but Jehovah has always been, and has always ruled. Is not the kingdom safe and secure? Until now all has been in peace and harmony and we have been well provided for. I think Lucifer may be overstepping his bounds."

"But," continued Dicronifer, "Lucifer has promised even more prosperity to the kingdom. He says that once he is ruler in place of Jehovah that all the angels will have more free time away from their responsibilities. Wouldn't it be grand to be able to spend weeks just resting from our labor?"

Jerimeil looked at Dicronifer, very puzzled by his statement, "But brother, haven't we so enjoyed our duties? Don't we love the trips through the gardens? Remember that for most it is a privilege to go through them, while we are allowed to do it regularly. I'm not so sure that I am willing to give that up. It isn't a duty at all but it is like we are always at our leisure."

"Don't you see though brother? We are gone from the city for so long we miss what is going on. We had no idea that these events were taking place while we were in the gardens. Had we been given more leisure time we would have been up to date. I'm not so sure that it wouldn't be a good thing."

And so Jerimeil and Dicronifer, for the first time in their existence, disagreed and it seemed a wedge was driven between them. As time progressed, they grew apart more and more. Dicronifer began to attend the meetings of those who were for Lucifer and when he would return home, he had very little to say to Jerimeil.

The day finally came when tempers had been flamed hot by Lucifer. It seemed obvious to Jerimeil. None of the angels had ever experienced anger before this. They all had done their duties without. But now those who sided with Lucifer could say nothing good about the kingdom or their great ruler, Jehovah.

One by one, those who had chosen Lucifer pulled their swords from the sheaths at their sides. Up until that day, even though each of the angelic beings were armed with swords, never had they had to pull them out. The weapons were more for decoration than anything else. It seemed that the rebels would take the kingdom by force.

As they organized themselves and began their march once again to the throne room of Jehovah, it seemed they might actually pull off their scheme. But then the command was given by the great and awesome Jehovah for all the angelic beings to assemble before the throne room. As they did, they found Jehovah Himself, His own sword pulled from its sheath pointing into the air. Their orders were to stand before the throne facing those approaching in rebellion. They were fight, if necessary, against their brothers.

The rebel army was vast and uncountable. Even so, it amounted to only a third of the angelic host. Those in the rebellion were approaching quickly with Lucifer in the lead. Now we must remember that these were creatures that had been given eternal life by Jehovah. So, the war that resulted, while they battled sword to sword, angel to angel, resulted in no loss of life. However, it changed the feelings of these beings forever. They somehow knew that this war would be waged for many, many Heaven length years.

As swords clashed and angels were pushed around Jerimeil suddenly found himself squared off with his own companion, Dicronifer. His face was no longer kind as it had been before. In place of a smile Dicronifer now wore a vicious grimace on his face. "Can you not see how much this has affected you, my brother?" questioned Jerimeil. "Can't you understand how this evil has changed you from a loving and kind being into what I am afraid you are turning in to - a hideous monster?"

"You are jealous brother," charged Dicronifer. "You know that one day soon the armies of Jehovah will be defeated and you will be punished along with all those who have not joined forces with Lucifer. But it is not too late. Turn around and join me as we face off against those who foolishly remain loyal to Jehovah."

"I will not yield to your temptations, Dicronifer," defended Jerimeil, "I will never turn against my God! I will not accept nor will I join in this evil revolution of Lucifer!"

"Then you must be defeated and punished along with all the rest!" cried Dicronifer. "You are no longer my brother Jerimeil! You are my enemy and I will defeat you!" As Dicronifer spoke, with each word he became more and more hateful. As he did his form began to change. His back began to grow a hunch between his shoulders. Hair began to sprout all over his body and his hands turned to what appeared to be old, gray bones. Jerimeil watched, feeling sorry for his old friend, as his eyes turned from a brilliant blue color into a reddish-yellow inferno. It was like looking through a peep-hole into a fiery furnace blazing with fury. His sword changed into a rough, jagged, hideous weapon.

As he looked around, he witnessed that all those, including Lucifer, were also changing into hideous beasts. They stopped for a moment and Lucifer could be heard addressing Jehovah, "Look what you have done to us! Are you so angry with us that you have turned us into ugly monsters?" accused Lucifer.

"It is your own doing. Your anger and sin has changed you from the beautiful creatures I made you, into your present shape. I have done nothing. It is your own creation," claimed Jehovah. "Because of this you must be banished from Heaven. I will allow only you, Lucifer, to visit from time to time, not because of your importance but because I want to know what evil you are plotting. Now GO!" Upon the word "Go" issued from the mouth of the great Jehovah God, the rebellious angels, who had now all turned into hideous looking beasts, were lifted into the air and flung from Heaven. In all, one third of the angels were banished from the Kingdom.

Jerimeil watched as his old friend, Dicronifer was lifted into the air higher and higher, "Goodbye my old friend," he spoke. Dicronifer, no longer a handsome creature, but now a horrible sight on which to gaze, gave his old friend a grimacing look and gnashed his teeth at him, "This isn't over Jerimeil, not by a long shot! We will face off again!" and with that he was lifted so high that he was lost from sight.

Dicronifer was right about it not being over. Down through the ages, from time to time, Jerimeil encountered his old friend, but never again in friendship but only in battle and war. Their encounters seemed to come more and more frequent, especially when Jehovah created a small planet – more of a spec in the vast regions of space, and called it "Earth." He made a new species of creature on this planet that He called "man."

After only a short while Lucifer found that he might get to God by turning man against his Creator and so he tempted man. God would not allow him nor his followers to destroy man but limited them to luring him into sin – and Lucifer became very good at his job. Man finally got himself banished from the garden, a mere replica of those found in Heaven, and he was cursed to hard labor and distaste for what he had to do. This was a curiosity to Jerimeil. Man grew to hate his occupation calling it work, but he never seemed to understand that something must occupy his time.

Lucifer, who became known as the devil and Satan, along with his followers, who became demons, constantly tempted and lured people into doing things that brought shame against God. In some twisted sort of way, they believed that their war against Heaven could be fought and won in this new creation of Jehovah's.

Jerimeil kept track of what Dicronifer did. He had always hoped that he could change the mind of his old friend and somehow convert him back to what he was. But after several eons he finally gave up hope, and realized that it was now impossible to change him. He had become an evil beast with no hope left in his life.

At some point, Dicronifer took up the practice of collecting the shoes of his victims – those he succeeded in tempting to take their lives without accepting the provision Jehovah had given to bring man back into a right standing with Him. Dicronifer would take these shoes and throw them into trees as a representation that he had successfully won their souls for Lucifer.

Something had to be done . . .

Chapter 6

He spoke the word and a formless, dark but massive ball of rock was changed over a six-day period into a beautifully sculptured bright blue planet. Life was spoken one by one into a vast variety of living creatures and it was covered with movement, sound and emotion. Some were invisible to the naked eye while others were extremely large and massive. Some swam under the great seas using gills to extract the oxygen from the water and others soared in the sky on brilliantly designed wings. Some walked proudly across the plains and some were content to graze on the grass day after day. There was no question that the word “amazing” fell short in describing it.

These thoughts and more raced through Dicronifer’s mind as he hid in the shadows of space and witnessed the creative power of Jehovah. Even though he had sworn his loyalty to Lucifer, he could not help but respect the thoughts of Jehovah that miraculously became reality as He skillfully spoke the blueprint of His mind into existence.

But the crowning creation was in a fragile, but intelligent creature called man. His design was magnificent. He was given not only complete mobility along with fingers and hands to grasp but also was granted the gift of a thinking mind. Dicronifer watched as Jehovah breathed the breath of life into man, granting him an eternal soul and setting him above all other living creatures. God had given man the coveted privilege of living forever in one form or another.

Dicronifer had been granted the mission of spying on Jehovah so as to report back to the rebellion. He had been honored with this high and extremely desired job. Only those most trusted by Lucifer would have even been considered. This being said, he also knew that regardless who had been given this privilege, Lucifer would not trust such an important task to be done correctly by anyone other than himself. Though he could not see him, Dicronifer knew that somewhere Lucifer was also watching as Jehovah breathed eternal life into the lungs of man.

Normally when Jehovah created something as significant as this, it was flawless. There was no room for error. This time He must have faltered. How could He have missed this detail? The intriguing thought was that perhaps He didn't think of all the problems He opened Himself to when He granted man a free will. It was a chance no other would have taken. Had any other being been granted the power of creation they would never have taken a chance on their beings having the freedom to rebel against their Creator. He had made this mistake in creating the angels. Was not Dicronifer himself a prime example of that? So why would He do it again? But He did.

It took no great mind to know that Lucifer would almost immediately go to work on man to persuade him to join him and rebel against Jehovah, and he did with fury, cloaked in the severest subtlety. Who can tell how long it really took, for in the spirit world time is meaningless. Time was invented by mankind because, I suppose, he needed to keep track of his mortal life. Curious isn't it, how that a creature with an immortal soul could put so much emphasis on a temporary mortal body?

Though we can't measure it in time, the fact is that Lucifer, cleverly disguised, began to work on the female companion given to man sometime after his creation. Jehovah had placed two very special trees in the lush garden where the man and woman lived. One was called "The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil," and the other "The Tree of Life." The fruit of these trees was unlike that of any of the other fruit trees to be found in the garden because, true to their name, "The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" would give the one partaking of its fruit that knowledge – to know the difference between good and evil. Likewise, eating the fruit of "The Tree of Life" would guarantee eternal life to its consumer. Up until now the man and woman was both innocent. Everything they needed was at their fingertips, so when Jehovah had instructed them to not eat of "The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil," they didn't give it a second thought. However, He had not told them that they couldn't eat from "The Tree of Life." For some reason they hadn't yet.

The simple plan was to entice them to eat of the first tree, then from "The Tree of Life." This would have sealed their fate forever because had his plan

worked, after eating from "The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" they would have obtained this knowledge in direct disobedience to God, thus twisting their minds toward evil. Then eating from "The Tree of Life," they would be doomed to live forever in evil – on the side of Lucifer. It would have been a direct slap in the face to Jehovah and an important conquest for Lucifer.

The woman, Eve, seemed to be weaker and so it made sense to make his play on her. She would do his job for him on the stronger man. It was apparent that as strong as he was, he wanted so to please Eve that he would be enticed by her, where he would have resisted Lucifer.

Though it does not mean that all women are as easily swayed, Eve certainly was. He began to speak to her about the tree, reminding her of God's words, "You shall not eat of it lest you certainly die." Soon Eve was adding that they were not to touch it as well. One thing Dicronifer had learned about Lucifer was that he had all the patience needed to accomplish his goal. He exemplified that with Eve and it paid off.

She soon yielded to his enticements and immediately told Adam. It seemed all too easy that the man took the bite at her first request, but he did. It was as if he had wanted to taste it all along and she provided him the best opportunity. He reasoned that if they were caught, he could simply blame her and he would be okay.

They were not aware of Lucifer's plan. They obtained the coveted knowledge, only on the side of evil. They realized that they were naked and felt shame – the first of many negative feelings to come. Next, they found themselves attempting to hide from their Creator – Jehovah. Before the second half of Lucifer's plan could become reality, God thwarted the plot by casting the pair from the garden. Adam had attempted to put the blame on Eve just as Eve had tried to put all the blame on the serpent. In fact, even though Lucifer had influenced them greatly, the decision to eat had been their own.

Many years later, Jehovah did the unexpected. He put His own spirit into the form of a man – becoming a God-man. He Himself suffered all the pains and temptations that Lucifer, through his demonic force, brought against man and was perfect in His resistance. Then, He allowed Himself to be killed at the very hands of the men He had created. But it didn't stop there. He arose after three days, victorious over death and the grave. He had made the provision of a sinless, innocent sacrifice that would pay for all the sin of His creation. All man had to do was to accept that provision and return in fellowship with God.

So, from that day on the mission of Lucifer and his army was to persuade men not to accept this provision thus staying in their state of sin. If they died in

that state rejecting God's provision, then they were eternally doomed to go on forever in death.

That lesson had been deeply imbedded into Dicronifer. He saw how these people God had made with a free will were so easily influenced by the craftiness of demonic lies and half truths. It was on that day that he discovered what his part in the rebellion would be. It would become his self-assigned task to continue tempting the offspring of this first created pair.

From that day forth Dicronifer began his reign of evil influence. He took more and more joy in deceiving people away from God. He tried many methods to deceive man. They ranged from outright frightful experiences to gentle spoken words in the night. Some succeeded and some failed. But he discovered his "specialty" temptation one night in man's year of 1856. It was in the city of London England where John Banes was undergoing a great struggle with life. He had spent many a day chasing wild women, and drinking himself into a stupor. He thought that he was happy until one day he heard a man speaking about God. The words echoed in his head. He couldn't get them out of his mind.

He found himself outside the building where the man spoke each night. He would listen to the words, feeling the conflict warring inside of him. Some nights he would listen with a bottle in hand drinking to chase away the battle going on, yet listening intently to every spoken syllable.

Finally, he could take no more. One night, while drinking and listening, he threw his bottle to the ground, flung open the doors of the building and walked right down the aisle in front of a staring crowd. Standing before the man he cried, "What must I do to be saved?" The man stopped his message, looked at the crowd and asked them to pray. He spoke to John directly about salvation and John knelt at the crude bench they had called an altar, poured out his heart to God and arose from there sober. However, even though he experienced a miraculous sobriety, and he had wept in despair, he could not persuade himself to commit to the all-powerful God completely. Perhaps he'd do it again tomorrow night after a good soaking drink.

Dicronifer was furious. That very night, back in the humble abode of John Banes, he began his dastardly work. It started with whispers, "You are a worthless fool. How can you think with all the evil you have done, that you can change? Is not the desire for drink still within you? Go ahead. You remember that bottle you put under the cupboard? It's there. All you have to do is go and get it. Go ahead ... why wait any longer?"

John lay in his bed tossing, turning and perspiring trying to fight off the temptation. But he couldn't. Obedient to the suggestions of Dicronifer he got

out of bed and in the darkness felt under the cupboard until he found the bottle he had stashed away. Returning to his bedroom he sat the bottle on the table beside the bed. Still, he battled. He knew something needed to be changed in his life that night. But this suggestion was so strong he could hardly resist. But he did.

Dicronifer whispered some more but it seemed he was getting nowhere. A new tactic was required. He appeared to John. At first John was horrified at his sight. But Dicronifer spoke saying, "Don't be afraid of me, John. I'm here to help you. All those fools you were with tonight know nothing of your problems. They only wanted one more to fill the seats in their building. You are only a number to them, that's all. I'm your friend. I will be honest with you and tell you the truth."

John began to accept Dicronifer's reasoning. At his suggestion he opened the bottle and slowly raised it to his lips taking in a big swallow. "There now," continued Dicronifer "isn't that better?" John had to admit that it did ease the battle that was going on inside of him.

Then Dicronifer changed his tactics again. "John, you know you can never be like those people. This is who you are. You cannot change. But if you aren't happy with who you are there is another way." John listened intently as he took another swallow from the bottle. "You can end all of this right now. The man down at the church did tell you one thing that was true. You were made to live forever. So why are you struggling in this body of flesh? You will go on in the spirit world. If you want this part of your life to be over you can just end it, right now."

John looked up curiously at Dicronifer. He was fearful of death but he was more fearful of life. Dicronifer continued, "Look, here's a rope. All you've got to do is to lace it over that beam up there," he pointed to the ceiling. "Then, John, and I'll help you with this, tie it in a knot around your neck and stand on this chair. Jump off and in a few moments it will all be over."

John slowly stood to his feet, took the rope that Dicronifer was handing to him and followed the demon's instructions. He had a bit of trouble jumping from the chair but Dicronifer "generously" helped him by giving it a kick, but only after asking John if he needed help.

Now hanging limply from the end of the rope one of his night shoes slipped off his foot. Dicronifer eyed this slipper. He remembered how that these stupid humans had called the bottom of the shoe a sole. He thought of that as he thought also of his mission – to convince these frail creatures to give up their souls to Lucifer. Laughing he picked up the shoe, then removed the other one

from John's foot and spoke to himself, "I will take the soles of men as a trophy of their souls I have given to my master, Lucifer!"

Chapter 7

The article was taking shape nicely. This week it was all about the hidden, or sometimes not so hidden, injustice found inside the legal system. Jim Sprague, while doing research on his article, had found some pretty nasty dirt on one local lawyer, a Jason Pritchard who worked for the firm Holloway, Crape and Brown. His investigation had revealed that Mr. Pritchard had, on several occasions, covered up evidence that would have gone against him in his role as defense attorney. He had operated under the old saying "what one didn't know wouldn't hurt him," but it had caused great harm to several innocent people.

One case in particular had caught Jim's attention and he concentrated on it in his article. It involved a homeless man by the name of Jeb Cutshaw. Jeb was a mysterious fellow, keeping to himself mostly. He really hadn't done anything to harm anyone but all the other homeless people had learned to stay away from him. It had been rumored that Jeb was once a highly trained Special Forces officer in military intelligence during much of the cold war shortly after the Vietnam era. He had supposedly been a fairly tough character which added fuel for the other homeless folks in their fear of him.

The truth of the matter was that Jeb had spent most of his time behind a desk shuffling paper. But since his life had fallen apart the rumors about him seemed to serve as a protection from other, possibly dangerous people, so he kept his mouth shut and let them think what they wanted.

Over the years he had developed a drinking habit that caused him to become careless in his work and that led to his dismissal. With life going downhill at a very rapid rate it wasn't long before he found himself unable to pay the rent on his lavish apartment and soon afterwards was living in the streets panhandling for support.

Jason Pritchard had been defending the wife of the murdered owner of a local grocery mart, who had been killed during a robbery. The family lived in an apartment above the store and one night the owner, John Speckle, heard a noise below. He had started downstairs to investigate and half way on the staircase discovered an intruder in the process of cleaning out the cash register. He quickly motioned for his wife to call the police but continued his descent to see if he could do anything to deter the thief. His wife, Betty called 911 and while telling them what was taking place, she heard a scuffle. Fearing the worst and also for her own life she quickly locked their apartment door and stayed on the line with the 911 operator, until the police arrived.

They found the body of John Speckle draped over the counter beside the now empty cash register. His neck had been broken. There had been no signs of forced entry and not one fingerprint or other trace of evidence. This had to be the work of a trained professional who not only had knowledge to cover his tracks but was also skillful in battle tactics indicated by the way Mr. Speckle's neck had been broken.

There were no leads in the case until Jeb suddenly seemed to have an ample supply of cash and with his rumored background, he immediately became the prime suspect. Everything they had was circumstantial at best but Pritchard jumped on it with notoriety seeking a quick close and another victory to mark on his belt. Jeb was homeless; no one would miss him and it was important to put this case to rest as soon as possible. Because of this Pritchard had not only turned all his attention on Jeb but during the process had drummed up some false evidence that led the jury to believe that this hadn't been the first time the homeless man had been involved in a robbery.

Jeb was sentenced to forty years behind bars and considering that he was fifty-two at the time, his sentence most likely meant life in prison. Jim Sprague thought this to be unfair treatment towards anyone; particularly one society wouldn't have given a second thought to.

After reading about the case Jim became suspicious and began his research. This revealed several other cases Pritchard had prosecuted, all involving homeless people and all convicted solely on circumstantial evidence. Jim thought something smelled "fishy" so he went "fishing" and succeeded in making several "catches" where Pritchard had covered up facts and produced

statements and evidences that simply were not true. His article would blow the whistle on this crooked lawyer.

But there were skeletons in Jim's closet too. Even though he had been a very successful syndicated writer, his weekly articles appearing in newspapers all over the country, his own marriage was falling apart. He loved his wife, Jane, very much as well as their two children, Jeffrey and Susan. He adored the home that his work, along with Jane's income, had provided. He supposed that they were spoiled and pampered but he wasn't ready to give that up.

Jim and Jane had been growing apart for several years now. Often, he would be at his home office desk hours into the night claiming that he needed to spend that time to meet his deadline, but in reality, it was an escape from confrontation with Jane. She wanted to talk about their problems, even going as far as to suggest they see a marriage counselor. Jim didn't feel this was necessary. He wanted to get things right but on the other hand he liked his life as it was. He had spent so many nights in his home office that he had even put in a cot conjuring up the excuse that it would keep him from disturbing Jane when he did finally come to bed.

Recently however, friends had convinced them to attend their church. Both Jim and Jane had found it interesting and a bit intriguing. They were ready for more and they had discussed meeting with the pastor to talk about their problems. Finally, they could see a glimmer of light at the end of their tunnel of woes.

Jim had done some reading on the side too. The pastor, in his most recent sermon, had suggested that the people spend a little more time with the Bible on their own. Jim had taken the minister's advice and had discovered where it talked about the need of salvation. He was convinced that this would be the starting point to get their lives back in order and he made plans to "take the plunge" the very next Sunday and give his life to Christ. He hoped that Jane would follow him.

Needing a break, he got up from his desk and went into the kitchen to fix a sandwich and get something cold to drink. He assembled a bologna sandwich and poured a glass of lemonade his wife had made just that morning, and then stepped out onto the back deck to get a breath of fresh air. The sky was unusually clear and it made him to think that for the first time in years his mind was also fresh and crisp in light of the decision he had made. He felt that their world was about to turn around for the better.

What was that out in the yard? It looked like a black garden hose, but unless Jane had recently purchased one, he knew that they didn't own one like

that. Besides, who would have left it laying in their neat and tidy yard? Jim had prided himself on keeping it mowed and neatly groomed. He had to investigate.

As he drew nearer the supposed hose, he caught what he thought to be a movement. Was something under this thing? Now the writer's curiosity in him was aroused and he had to know what this was exactly. Getting very close to the object the texture of the hose seemed different than any garden hose he had ever owned. It looked like scales and his immediate thought was that it was a snake. But there were no snakes that large in their suburban community – it couldn't be.

He was almost on top of it now and in an instant this "hose" rose up. An evil looking head lifted into the air, tongue licking in and out, and in horror Jim froze. It was a snake and it was so large there was no way he could get out of striking distance in time. His heart raced in fear. He put his hands in front of him in effort to protect himself if it did strike. He had no idea what to do and, in his haste, he dropped his drink and sandwich.

"YOU ... Mr. Sprague!" It couldn't be; did this creature just talk and call out his name? What was going on here? "You," it continued, "have become my enemy. We almost had you Mr. Sprague. You were going to be a good trophy when you divorced your wife and left your young ones. But then you messed it all up with this God-thing. What are we going to do with you Mr. Sprague?"

Jim couldn't believe his eyes or his ears. His heart raced faster and faster. This had to be a dream. Yes, that was it; he had fallen asleep at his desk and it was all just a nightmare. But it wasn't. Sharp pain from his chest now robbed his body of breath as this large snake began to wrap itself around his feet. He tried to run but tripped in the coils of the monster and he fell to the ground.

Now his hands were clasped tightly over his chest and the pain was unbearable. The snake licked its tongue in his face. He could feel its light flicks as it rhythmically moved in and out of the creature's mouth. He attempted to call out for help but the pain was so great nothing would come from his mouth and soon the brightness of the day faded to black.

The snake uncoiled from around his feet and slinked back as another figure stepped from behind the bushes surrounding the backyard of the Sprague's. "He looks so peaceful, doesn't he? He's now in our own version of deep slumber," spoke the demon with a hideous laugh. "I'll teach you to tear up my playhouse Jim Sprague!" and with that the creature bent over, slipped off his shoes and with another hideous laugh said, "Come my pet; we've got more work to do." In a smoky mist they both vanished into nothingness.

Chapter 8

The office seemed like an eerie place at 6:30 AM. Normally it was buzzing with phone conversations, people nearly running up and down the halls, paper being shuffled from one desk to another and casual conversations at the snack machine. Josh had come in early in attempt to put some finishing touches on the case he was to present in court later that day. He was surprised how much clearer he could think and the amount of actual work he was getting done without the usual and constant interruptions.

This case had a strange familiarity associated with it. Their firm was representing a family accusing the defendant of murder. The father of this family, Jim Sprague, had been found in their backyard dead. He had no history of violence; in fact, he was a model citizen. His wife, Jane had come home from her own job at the local bank. Jim wrote a syndicated column and worked from the office in his home. It wasn't unusual for her to come in from work to find him gone. He often went out to do research for his most current article. Normally he left a note for her but this time he hadn't. She thought that perhaps he had gotten a tip and had left quickly, or that he thought he would return before she got home. So, she didn't give it a second thought.

But then the kids, Jeffry and Susan, arrived from school and still Jim hadn't come home. She began to worry. Surely, he would have called by now. Suddenly Jeffry, an all-boy, blond headed youth, came rushing in the back door screaming, "Mom, Dad's lying in the backyard and he won't wake up!"

She rushed out the door to see Jim lying on his back. He wore a facial expression that spoke of utter terror. The autopsy had indicated death by heart attack, but Jim had never had a history of heart problems. In fact, he had taken a physical just a few weeks before and they had given him a clean bill of health. Something or someone had induced his heart failure and that was murder.

The strange thing about the case was that his shoes were missing – nothing else; just his shoes. A few days later a neighbor reported seeing a man running down the street with a pair of shoes and it was the only lead the police had. There were no marks on Jim’s body that pointed to a struggle. He had not been shot or stabbed. There was no blood; just a very frightened man who had lost his shoes.

A week later Franklin Trombaugh, a local homeless person, had been found with a pair of shoes identical to those Jim had been wearing. They were a very expensive pair of shoes so it was unlikely that Trombaugh had purchased them and who would throw away a pair of shoes like that? Even though there was no DNA evidence to prove that they had belonged to Jim Sprague, it was the only evidence they could come up with.

Josh had been appointed to represent the Sprague family in their accusation of Franklin Trombaugh. But as he went over the case in those early morning hours at the office, his mind drifted twenty-three years in the past. He thought of poor old Tom Stanberry and remembered the horrible sight that had been burned into his mind that day. He thought about the pair of old work boots he had seen in the shoe tree, making the hair prickle up on the back of his neck.

After that tragic day twenty-three years earlier, Josh had not seen the evil creature or that horrible snake again. As time passed the event was buried and hidden in the recesses of memory.

If anything positive had come from this, it was the inspiration he had received to help those who were misunderstood, who had been taken advantage of, or who had received injustice and unfairness in their lives. He had finished high school in Crothersville, had gone on to study law, graduating with honors. He even passed his bar exam with exceptionally high scores. Josh had put his whole life into this and it was reflected by his early success. He was soon offered a very lucrative position in an influential law firm in New York City. Good decisions and choices had paid off for Josh and he found himself, once a small-town country boy, now living in the fast lane of the most powerful city in the world.

In spite of all this success he had kept a semblance of his Godly upbringing. He really didn't attend church regularly and seldom picked up his Bible, but he did manage to say a mumbled prayer now and again. This was one of those times. He was strangely apprehensive about this case. Mostly, all they had was circumstantial evidence against Franklin Trombaugh. Again, the shoes found in his possession seemed identical to those belonging to Jim Sprague, but without DNA proof, it was at best a stretch.

The Sprague family, the exact opposite of Franklin Trombaugh and well-off financially, didn't deserve the loss of a good husband and father like Jim. They were tragic victims of unfortunate circumstance.

On the other hand, Josh couldn't help feeling sorry for the homeless Trombaugh. He was the kind of person Josh longed to represent. Franklin was the under-dog. He was in his mid-sixties and had spent much of his confused life on the streets after returning from Vietnam in the early seventies. He just couldn't get his mind together to hold down a steady job and wound-up pan-handling on the streets of New York. It had become a way of life for him. The ceiling over his head was a deep blue during the day and a dark black at night. He had learned to cope with all the dangers of the street. Franklin had accepted his existence, becoming so accustomed to it that it was second nature. This man had no prior record of arrest or of being in trouble with the police. He just happened to have found a pair of shoes remarkably like those of the victim.

How could Josh feel good about putting a man like that behind bars? The thought rubbed against him like shaving with sandpaper. But it was his job. It was how he had made his living, and so he suppressed his own thoughts and returned to the papers in front of him.

Deep in thought, Josh was suddenly startled by a noise in the outer office. When a shadow moved across his opaque window, he got up not quite knowing what he might encounter. He quietly stood and grabbed the nearest thing on his desk – a black stapler – to use as a weapon should the need arise. He cautiously took a look through the office door that he had left cracked open. With a sigh of relief, he opened the door and left the stapler on the file cabinet, "Bert, it's you."

"Oh, hello Josh; you're certainly getting an early start," replied Bert Holloway, the senior counselor of the firm, Holloway, Crape and Brown. Josh always wondered who made that first pot of coffee each morning. Now he knew.

"Yeah, well, the Sprague-Trombaugh case is going to court today and I thought I'd spend a little more time with it."

"Smithson," began Holloway, "I've got the greatest confidence that you can handle it."

"I'll do my best sir, but I've got to say that I don't have that good 'warm and fuzzy' feeling about it; I mean, all our evidence is circumstantial and I'm somewhat worried that we could get plastered for beating up on a defenseless, homeless guy."

"That's certainly a justified concern Josh, so you've got to play this smart. I'd suggest you concentrate on the evidence, no matter how circumstantial, rather than the character of Mr. Trombaugh."

"I was thinking the same thing sir. Still, I suppose my weakness has always been to favor the under-dog and Franklin Trombaugh is most definitely that in this case. But I'll do everything I can to suppress those feelings."

"Good man, Josh. That's why we brought you into this firm; we strongly felt from your record that you'd be able to do this very thing. Still, don't let your guard down, son. The defense attorney will be watching for any sign of weakness from us. Be strong and confident in your presentation."

"I will sir."

Three hours later found Josh sitting in the courtroom. As they waited for the judge to take the bench, he spent the time mostly looking down at the notes he had made, but he wasn't really going over them. He had rehearsed them endlessly and felt he knew them by heart. He couldn't afford to even glance toward the defendant. The large lump in his throat and the nagging burning made him to know that something wasn't right about this case. Had he taken just one look at Trombaugh he knew that he would lose his confidence.

Somehow, he managed to get through the trial without revealing his insecurities. It progressed with unusual rapidity and he was surprised that the defense had no more counter evidence than they had. It made him feel sorry again for poor old Franklin Trombaugh. He couldn't help but think about his life of misfortune. He felt the defense lawyer was fulfilling his duty as if he really didn't have time for a worthless, homeless person.

The jury had only been out for about thirty minutes before they returned with a guilty verdict. It was like the cards were stacked against Mr. Trombaugh.

Josh returned to his office with yet another victory for his firm but he couldn't feel good about it. He felt dirty, like he had taken part in illegal activity rather than putting away the man who had supposedly killed Jim Sprague.

His peers slapped him on the back and the senior partners smiled, affirming their profitable win. Josh had brought honor to the practice.

They decided to celebrate the quick victory and went out for a couple of drinks. Josh had been taught against drinking excessively during his childhood days and he tried to honor that teaching. Sometimes circumstances demanded differently and most of the time he would order only one drink and sort of sip on it while the others put down one after another. No one seemed to notice. He clung to a scripture he barely remembered that suggested one not drink in excess. This night he went through the motions, smiling at the jokes and stories but not really wanting to be there. But he had to be; he was the guest of honor.

About ten o'clock Bert's cell phone rang. He spoke briefly suggesting that the call wasn't personal. After he hung up Bert turned to Josh, "I've got a bit of bad news, Josh. It seems that after the trial they took Franklin Trombaugh to his cell where he awaited transport to prison. While he was alone, he managed to take his bed sheet and hang himself. He's dead."

Jason Pritchard, another lawyer with the firm, made some kind of joke about a homeless guy off the streets and how at least he wouldn't be a burden to the taxpayers now, but Josh couldn't laugh. In fact, he wanted to run out the back door and have a good cry.

"There's something else," began Bert, "The guard who found Mr. Trombaugh said that his shoes were missing. They weren't on the body and he couldn't find them anywhere. The cell door hadn't been tampered with; kind of strange, huh? It's almost like a twist of fate seeing as how he had stolen Sprague's shoes."

Joshua swallowed a huge lump in his throat that nearly made him gag as he spewed the last sip of his drink all over the floor. He excused himself as just being a bit startled by this news and then dismissed himself with a story about getting up early the next morning, but really, he just needed to get out of there.

The trip home seemed to take hours, though it was a mere thirteen minutes. He arrived at his apartment, unlocked the door and flipped on the light. As he did, he could see a shadow retreating into his bedroom. He felt the small hairs prickle up again on the back of his neck, much like they had just that morning. This time it wasn't Bert. He quietly felt into a bureau drawer for his pistol. It was loaded but he had never fired it. He had always meant to take some time and go to a firing range to practice but never seemed to get it done.

Josh slowly made his way into the bedroom. Looking around in the dark he couldn't see anyone but he did feel a draft like the window was open. Quickly he flipped on the light just in time to see the tail of a very large blacksnake slithering over the window ledge. "Oh no - Not again!"

Chapter 9

Digging through trash was not the way he had pictured his life at all. But one had to eat and stay warm. In days gone by he would never have imagined that he would be doing this, but he had learned that treasures lurked beneath the otherwise smelly mess. He had also learned that if you hit the bins behind the most luxurious apartments early, before the sun had a chance to heat up and ruin discarded food items, that you could actually come up with a fairly good meal; but you had to beat the sun, the worms, the maggots and the others like himself in order to accomplish the mission at hand.

It simply amazed him how people could be so wasteful, throwing things away just because they were no longer needed, or more often than not, wanted; like a coat with a stain on it, or a pair of trousers that had merely faded in color. The man laughed almost out load as he picked through the garbage discarded by these well-off folks, remembering a time when he had done the same thing. Specifically, his mind drifted to a shirt he had once treasured. It was a loud-print shirt. His wife hated it. There were so many colors in it that he thought it went with anything, but her taste in clothing told her that it really matched nothing. One day while he had been at work, she pulled it from his closet and threw it in the trash. Then, even though he was angry with her and wanted to retrieve it, his pride wouldn't allow him to and so he lost his favorite shirt. He wished he knew then what he knew now; he'd have no trouble at all pulling it from the refuse container.

Franklin Trombaugh was a man now quickly advancing in years. At sixty-six he had his share of aches and pains but fifteen years of living on the streets had conditioned him to be a lot tougher than most men his age. Just the other day a much younger man than himself had tried to rob him. This younger man carried a knife he had found. The end of the blade was broken off but it still had a fairly sharp edge and he had learned that it was enough of a threat to most folks to cause them to give up what they had.

Franklin had spent the latter part of the sixties and early seventies in Vietnam. He had learned to fight, not only offensively, but also for his very life. Probably the worst scuffle he ever experienced took place deep in the jungle one extremely hot afternoon. He and his platoon had been on routine maneuvers when they spotted a large group of "Charlie" coming their way. They were heavily armed, but so were those in his platoon. Each group was stealthily moving through the trees and undergrowth being careful not to reveal their location to the other, when one man cried out. He still didn't know to this day if it was an enemy soldier or one of their own but from his cries of sheer terror, it was obvious that he had been attacked by a large, poisonous snake. They were thick in the Vietnamese bush and soldiers on both sides hated them with a passion. The man's unfortunate confrontation instigated what turned out to be a very long day for the men from both sides.

Bullets began flying from every direction. Leaves from the plant life were being ripped apart and the bark from the trees was showering down like a weird type of rain as it was torn from their trunks. Grenades were exploding everywhere and apparently the enemy had men with mortars somewhere behind them because their shells began to fall like a fiery hailstorm.

Men were screaming out in pain as bullets tore through their bodies and soon the ground was running with crimson streams. Franklin remembered that he was more scared that day than he had ever been in his life. But he was also determined to live. It seemed that the day would never end, and in a way, he didn't want it to, fearing the ending might be the result of a stray bullet tearing through his own body. Men from both sides were falling like a forest at the mercy of an army of lumberjacks and after several hours only a handful were left from either side.

Explosions and flying bullets became more infrequent as they exhausted their ammunition and it came down to bayonets and knives. Franklin had also run out of ammo and had strapped his M1 to his back as he pulled out a knife that looked more like a short sword. As he moved through the bush, he ran across a buddy who had been hit in the leg, and putting the man's arm around his neck he moved as quietly as possible through the jungle, hoping to find more friendly faces and somehow get out of there. But there were none.

They ran across a group of five North Vietnamese soldiers who had also run out of ammo. They were doing much like he was – moving through the thick under-growth, knives in hand trying to escape with their lives. In a way he almost felt sorry for them and wished he could speak their language. He wanted to say something like, “look guys, we’ve all had it here. Let’s just go our separate ways and live to see another day.” But he knew that even had he been able to talk with them they would not have taken him up on his offer. So, he carefully laid his buddy down far enough away that he would be safe, covered him with leaves for camouflage and began working his way towards the five men.

One of them had sat down and you could tell that he was exhausted. Franklin could relate to that. Knowing he had no choice, he slipped up behind the man, covered his mouth with his hand and pulled him down into the bush like taking a man under the water, and he slid his knife across the enemy’s neck nearly cutting off his head.

Now there were four. But they were all grouped together. So far, they hadn’t missed their comrade so Franklin still held the element of surprise. He had no idea where he found his strength, but nearly without thinking he jumped to his feet growling and yelling at the top of his lungs. The men turned and began to fight. He slung his knife in every direction and somehow ignored the pain as their own knives sliced through his arms and back. It seemed like hours but in merely seconds Franklin had managed to kill all four men. Bleeding himself, he went back to where he had stashed his buddy and they made their way to camp.

Back in the city, as the young man confronted Franklin, the vision of that day in Vietnam rushed through his mind. With a fury he hadn’t felt in years he attacked the man with the broken knife and somehow took it from his hand. With one swipe he cut the man deep in the arm and he ran like a fox being chased by a hound. Franklin stuck the broken bladed knife in his own pocket and went back to his business.

He tried to keep his sanity but many a day found him hiding behind one of the trash bins he had dug through, sobbing nearly into a physical fit. He tried to push it from his mind but he could never escape the most horrible thing that had ever happened to him. He had witnessed a lot of blood and killing in the war but nothing affected him as much as watching as his own wife and son died.

They weren’t rich but he was making a living at one of the local factories. The lady he had married, Julie was her name, was a wonderful woman. To him she was the most beautiful creature in the world. When she walked into the room his heart pounded, even after five years of marriage.

He remembered one occasion, when they had stopped at a local fruit stand. It was a hot, humid day and he stayed in the car with the engine running to keep it cool as Julie had gone into the open-air market to get some tomatoes. Several women were milling around the market and his manhood demanded he examine them all, not in a lustful way but comparing them to his own wife. Yes, some of them were beautiful women and some were average, but none were as good as his Julie. He often did that; but when he looked at another woman, she was never the lady Julie was.

Together they had given life to a son, Bobby. On Saturday's when he didn't have to work, Franklin and Julie would take him to the park to play. They would sit on the bench watching their son with admiration as he swung, climbed the slides and ran around with the other children his age. Their life seemed complete and Franklin would have been satisfied if nothing exciting ever happened to him again; these two people had become his world.

Bobby normally rode the bus to school but one particular day they had overslept. That morning had been a confused day at best as they scrambled to get ready for work and school. Franklin called his plant and explained what had happened and due to his nearly perfect attendance and work record they said they understood and allowed him time so that his wife could take their son to school in their only car. The plan was that as soon as she returned, he would go on to work.

Franklin and Julie lived in a neat but quaint house on a very busy street. It wasn't unusual for traffic to be traveling at forty to fifty miles an hour in effort to beat the changing light half a block away. He saw the delivery truck speeding down the street but didn't think much of it as Julie began backing their car from the driveway. He saw the truck but apparently Julie didn't. Instead of coming to a stop, in her haste to get Bobby to school on time, she backed completely out of the drive right in front of the truck. It happened so quickly Franklin only had time to raise his hand and open his mouth to sound out a warning when the truck struck their vehicle. It had been carrying a heavy load of machine parts and the driver didn't even have time to apply the brakes.

He specifically remembered Julie waving at him in response to his hand in the air, thinking that he was merely waving "goodbye." The image had been forever burned into his mind like an old-fashioned computer monitor that had been left on too long on a certain screen, leaving impressions that could not be removed. The truck ran right over top of their car and he could still hear the crunching sound of metal being reduced to scrap, instantly taking the two people he loved the most from his life.

He of course never made it to work that day – in fact he never made it back at all. After the funeral services he spent his time just sitting in the dark in their home, until the bank foreclosed. Having nowhere else to go he found himself walking the streets and he had never stopped.

As the years passed, he befriended one man who ran a mission in the city. On days when he couldn't find a "decent" meal from the trash containers he would go to the mission. The man, Jasper Horton, had been kind to him. He talked with Franklin like he was an average guy – not a homeless guy on the streets. It was refreshing.

After the meal Jasper would pull out his worn guitar, sing a few songs and then talk to the group of men and women about God. Normally Franklin would have gotten up and walked away and never returned, because he had come to hate God. How could God take away the two people who had meant so much in his otherwise miserable life? He blamed God for that. Anytime a group would be passing out leaflets or talking to the homeless on the streets Franklin would go to the other side, or turn in the opposite direction regardless what food items they may have been passing out along with their leaflets. He wanted nothing to do with God.

But Jasper seemed different. He talked a lot about God but in a way that the average street person could understand. He didn't cram God down their throats like most did and he always finished his message invitingly, but also leaving it up to the people whether they wanted to have him pray with them or not. When Jasper talked with Franklin one on one, he spoke about average, ever day things that most homeless men encounter, and only mentioned God causally in their conversations, never forcing him into confrontation. It kept him coming back.

As time passed, he softened a bit towards God. Jasper, in one of his mini-messages had explained how that the death of others wasn't necessarily God's fault but a result of sin in the world. "Our lives are so delicate and the mistakes, crimes, and sins of others often results in the innocent being hurt or even killed. That isn't God's fault but man's fault," Jasper had said. It made sense to Franklin, so when the day came when, during one of their conversations, Jasper asked Franklin how he felt about God, he had no problem spilling his guts to the man. It was good to be able to talk about it to someone he had confidence in. Jasper listened like a big sponge soaking in water. It seemed he really understood where Franklin was coming from. He told Franklin, "Man, you've had a lot of hurt in your life. You need a friend much bigger than me," and as he spoke tears welled up in his eyes and they streamed down his face as he added, "When you are ready Franklin, let me know. You need Jesus Christ, man. If anyone in this world needs a friend like Jesus you do."

Jasper didn't take advantage of this moment of weakness but left it completely up to him. Franklin admired that. He told Jasper that he would think about it, and it wasn't an excuse because over the last few days he had thought long and hard. He had arrived at a decision and planned that very evening to pay a visit to Jasper after his daily crowd had dispersed. He was ready to give his life to God.

This day had been a fortunate one for Franklin. Digging through the trash container he found a nearly perfect pair of brown leather shoes. He looked down at his own, more like leather wrapped around his feet than shoes. He tried to remember when he had a "new" pair of shoes but couldn't. Quickly he threw off his own well-worn out pair and put these "new" ones on his feet. How could he have been so lucky as to find a pair just his size that fit so comfortably?

He walked out of the ally wearing his "new" pair of shoes and was almost showing them off as he made his way down the street. He knew the others would envy and admire him for making such a find.

One of the guys tried to talk him into trading for the shoes but Franklin held his ground. It was going to take a small fortune to get him to give these up. The other man became angry because he wouldn't consider the trade and after walking a few blocks he noticed him talking to the police down the street. That was unusual because most of the homeless had something to hide and they went out of their way to avoid the police.

Any homeless person who had been on the streets very long knew that if they were arrested more than likely a young lawyer by the name of Jason Pritchard, who worked for the firm Holloway, Crape and Brown, would be the one prosecuting them and he had a reputation for putting away the homeless. Unofficially Pritchard had remarked that he felt it was one way he could "clean up" the streets. He seldom lost a case and most of the homeless prosecuted by him never returned.

Then Franklin noticed that the cops were looking at him. He couldn't believe it; this guy had ratted him out because he wouldn't trade his new shoes. When they started in Franklin's direction he ran, darting back and forth through allies. There was no way that he was going to let the cops catch him, if he had anything to do about it that was.

Soon he heard sirens and he could see police all over the streets. This was ridiculous! He didn't know any homeless guy who had done anything bad enough to call out the bulk of New York's finest. Why were they so hot after him? What had this other guy told them anyway? He ran as fast as his sixty-six-year-

old legs would take him and finally, even though he was in excellent physical shape for a man his age, eventually he had to rest. He dug his way behind a large trash container and under a stack of cardboard feeling that he was well hidden. But it was hard to control his heavy breathing and in moments he could hear the police running down the alley. He tried to hold his breath but apparently, he hadn't done a good enough job because the next thing he knew the cops were dragging him from his hiding place by the legs.

Hours later he had been processed and was still trying to figure out what he had done. His shoes and clothing had been replaced with jailhouse uniforms and state issued shoes. He had to admit that he felt better in clean clothes rather than his tattered, smelly rags, except he did wish that he could get his "new" shoes back.

Later that day a lawyer had been assigned to him and he found himself sitting across a table from suited interrogators. His lawyer seemed cold, he supposed because he certainly didn't stand a chance of making any money from him, although he would be paid by the state, but he did counsel him about what kind of questions to answer.

"What do you know about a man named Jim Sprague?" came the first question.

"I never heard of the guy," Franklin responded.

"Come now Mr. Trombaugh, you must know him. After all, you had his shoes. You took them right off his feet didn't you!" accused the man.

"Wait a minute now, I found those shoes just today! I didn't steal them or nothin'; they were in the trash in the alley" responded Franklin.

"Oh now, come clean Mr. Trombaugh; we know what you did. We've got a witness that says they saw you take them from Sprague! You took them right off his feet after you killed him, now, didn't you?"

Franklin remembered what it felt like to take the life of another man. But that was something he hadn't experienced since the war. "You've got this all wrong! I never killed anybody and I never stole this guy's shoes. Like I said, I found them in the alley this morning!"

"Okay. We'll get to the bottom of it. I certainly hope your lawyer there is a good one because you're going to need him in court."

Franklin swallowed hard. "I guess Pritchard will be the prosecutor, won't he?"

"Not that it really matters," retorted the interrogator, "but the prosecuting lawyer is a guy by the name of Smithson; Joshua Smithson with Holloway, Crape and Brown."

Well, it was the same firm but at least it wasn't Pritchard. Maybe this Smithson fellow wouldn't be so hard on a homeless guy, or he hoped so anyway.

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"Guilty as charged," came the jury's verdict. Franklin Trombaugh swallowed long and hard. He was innocent. He knew that, but somehow this jury had no mercy on a worthless homeless guy. Maybe it wasn't all Pritchard's fault. Perhaps more people than just him felt that way about cleaning up the "trash" of humanity from the streets. They were an embarrassment to most folks. It was people like him that gave a city a bad name, or at least that seemed to be the consensus. He'd just have to learn to make the best of prison like he had all the other events of his life. This Smithson guy had been no better, although he thought that he saw a soft moment in the man, but Smithson refused to make eye contact with him. Just the same, the circumstantial evidence had been enough for the jury. The dead man's family seemed to feel as much justice had been done that could be done for the loss of a husband and father.

Franklin felt sorry for the family. From the tragedy in his own life, he understood what they were feeling right now.

At least he'd have three meals a day without having to scrounge around trash bins and he'd have more over his head than a few sheets of cardboard when the rain was pouring down. He could take care of himself pretty well for an old guy so maybe prison wouldn't be such a bad thing after all.

His only regret was that he had missed his time with Jasper. He really had intended on giving himself to God that day. He didn't know how to do it himself although Jasper had tried to explain it in his messages many times. Besides, maybe he'd see Jasper again and he wanted to experience the expression on his face when he let him lead him to God.

It would be a while before they would transport him on to prison so for the next few days, he'd still be locked up in the city jail. After the trial they took him back to his cell and removed the leg restraints and handcuffs. It was over now and Franklin resolved to just try and get a good night's sleep. Most of the

other inmates complained about the hard cots they had to sleep on but after stretching out on concrete and pavement for so long it felt like a fluffy featherbed to him. Soon he had drifted off to as peaceful of a night's rest he could get, locked up in a noisy jail.

"You ..." who was that? It had to be the guy in the next cell. Couldn't these idiots figure out that they needed their beauty rest? They were ugly enough as it was. "You ..." there it was again. He was in the process of raising up to yell at the guy in the next cell but as he opened his eyes, he couldn't believe what he was seeing. There before him was an eight-foot tall - he didn't know what. He had seen some ugly faces over the years but this one took the cake. "How'd you get in here?" was all he managed to say.

"You Franklin Trombaugh; you don't deserve to live another day. You have taken many human lives in what you called war. You just stood there and watched as your wife and child were killed and you didn't do a thing about it. You have spent your miserable life running from the truth and you don't deserve to be alive.

Normally he would have had a few choice things to say to someone talking to him like that. There wasn't one person living on the streets who would have had the guts to stand up to him. He was tough and put on the appearance of being the meanest guy out there. But this thing flooded him with fear.

"Now wait a minute," he started.

"No Franklin Trombaugh – You wait a minute! You are a worthless, no-good scum of the earth miserable excuse for a man! You aren't worth the money the taxpayers are going to spend on you to keep you alive in prison the rest of your life. You only deserve to die!"

Strangely what this creature was saying began to make sense to him. The things it was saying were exactly the thoughts that had gone through his mind many times over the years. Often, he had been tempted to just walk out in front of a truck or a train and just get it over with. But something pulling at his heart had always stopped him. He didn't know why or who but he had never been able to go through with it. Now here was this, this, thing, echoing his very thoughts and it made perfect sense.

Why would God want a trashy, filthy man like himself cluttering up His heaven anyway? Maybe this thing was right. Maybe his only answer and the one that would be best for everybody involved was to just end it all right then and there.

"Yes, yes," agreed the creature like he knew what he was thinking. "Yes, Trombaugh, that's right. Just do yourself in. It'll make the family of this Sprague guy happy to know that the one they believe to be their loved one's killer never has an opportunity of getting out. It'll do your heart good to be able to make one last good decision on this earth. I'll help you," and with that the thing grabbed the sheet covering him. "Here, I think you know what to do with this," and he handed it to Franklin.

His hands were shaking now. Another great war was being fought right inside of him. In a fleeting second, he saw the face of Julie and Bobby. He saw the bloodied faces of each of those five men he had killed in Vietnam. He could also see the faces of the family of this Jim Sprague in the courtroom. He felt sorry for them. If he ever got the opportunity to try and convince them that he didn't kill Jim Sprague, they'd never believe him. Maybe this was the best present he could give them.

As these thoughts flashed through his mind, he found himself tying the sheet around the single light attached to the ceiling of the cell. Then he tied it around his own neck while standing on the cell's only chair. He remembered the sorrow he felt as he kicked the chair out from under his feet and dangled from the ceiling.

Then the creature began to speak as if someone else was with them, "See? All too easy; these worthless humans can't resist me, can they?" Franklin looked down as the creature slipped the shoes from his feet and he breathed his last.

Chapter 10

Instantly Joshua ran to the window and slammed it shut. His first thought was that his imagination was running wild, until he caught sight of the very tip of the snake's tail disappearing over the window ledge as he pushed it down. He stumbled backwards landing on the foot of the bed and sat there for awhile. Trickle of perspiration were streaming down his face as he began to once again recall the event that had taken place twenty-three years earlier when he was just a boy in Crothersville.

He could still see Tom Stanberry gently swaying in the soft breeze as his body hung in the barn. Just as vividly as if it had happened yesterday, he envisioned those old rag-tag socks that covered his shoeless feet. In the same instant Tom Stanberry's face turned into that of Franklin Trombaugh.

"How could this be?" he questioned, "I had convinced myself that this was all a childhood nightmare, but now ..." He suddenly felt the same fear that had gripped his very soul that day he had found Tom Stanberry and he had seen that horrible figure in the barn. "Y-o-u-u-u-u" it had said. He shivered as he got ready for bed. While brushing his teeth his eyes darted to every shadow in the room, real or imaginary.

Crawling under the covers he felt like a little boy again and the temptation to pull them over his head crossed his mind. He left the bathroom light on. "Man, the guys at work would have a hay-day with this if they knew about it," he

thought. Finally, he was able to drift off but only in very troubled sleep. He felt as if he was wide awake, but when he would wake up, he realized that had been asleep. He dozed in and out like this for several hours. In a nightmarish dream, which seemed more like a vision, he kept hearing that creature say, "Y-o-u-u-u," until he bolted upright in the bed. The dream was so real he felt the creature was right in the room speaking the words out loud.

He rubbed his eyes in attempt to focus in the dim light that came from the bathroom then jerked around toward the chair that sat across from his bed as he heard, "That's right, you."

Was he hearing things or what? "No, you aren't hearing things; I said it. You have been chosen."

As Josh stared wide-eyed, he began to make out the figure of a man sitting in his chair. He was a very handsome man who looked like he might go seven feet tall or better had he been standing instead of sitting. In fact, he looked cramped up in that small recliner, or at least it looked small with this guy sitting in it. He was dressed in a navy-blue suit.

His first reaction was to reach for the gun he had left on the table just beside the bed. His eyes shifted from the man to the pistol. Just as he turned to grab the gun the man laughed a huge, hearty, nearly echoing laugh, "You don't need that thing. It wouldn't do you any good. Besides, I'm on your side."

So, he was taking sides now. "Listen, Joshua . . ."

"How did you know my name? And how did you get in here?" His questions began with a stumble as if he were trying to remember the words in a play, but then anger rose up in him and the authority of a good attorney took control of his voice, "Who are you anyway?"

"Easy my boy," began the stranger in his recliner, "Let's take one thing at a time."

Josh finished what he had started and picked up the pistol which didn't seem to bother the man at all. In fact, he just leaned back a little farther in the recliner as if he was repositioning himself to get more comfortable.

"Listen mister," he began as he pulled back the trigger and pointed the gun right at the stranger's head, "I need some answers and I need them now!"

"Okay," spoke the man without so much as even a flinch, "what would you like to know?"

"Let's start with your name and who you are," demanded Joshua.

"That's not really important, son," the man began.

"Maybe not to you, but right now, after what I've been through today and seen tonight it's high on my agenda," returned Joshua.

"Okay, okay, my name is Jerimeil. I let myself into your apartment, in a roundabout way. I assure you that I am completely friendly and have no ulterior motives in mind. I'm really only here to help and advise you in your mission."

"And what mission might you be referring to Mr. Jerimeil, or whatever your name is, and how do you know who I am?" repeated Joshua.

"Oh, I've known of you since you were but a baby sucking milk from a bottle, Joshua Bayne Smithson. You always had a very bright and vivid imagination. You were gifted that way, you know. Like that time when you fell from that apple tree when you were eight years old. You broke your arm and spent most of the summer pretending that you had been wounded in a war."

The man had his full attention now. He thought hard about that time in his life and couldn't recall ever sharing it with anyone here in New York. Come to think of it, he hadn't shared his fantasy of being wounded in a war with anyone – not even his own family and especially not his older brother. How could this stranger know about that? "Go on," he said.

The man continued, "That shoe tree back in your home town of Crothersville really sparked some adventures in your young mind. But even then, you were being exposed to what would eventually become your mission."

"How could that have had anything to do with my becoming a lawyer?" questioned Josh.

With a chuckle Jerimeil said, "Oh no my boy. This is just a brief moment in your life. You won't continue to practice law, at least not here in New York City. No, son, this was just that; only practice for what's to come."

"Okay," started Joshua, "I'll admit that for some strange reason you know more about my past than anyone else around here, but how could you possibly know what my mission in life is going to be? How do you know that I won't spend the rest of my life right here doing what I do best?"

"Because my good friend, where I come from, the past, present and future are all the same; we can see what's going to happen just as if it already has."

Now Joshua was thoroughly confused. This guy didn't make sense. Nobody could do that unless he was God. Whoa, wait a minute! He had to be dreaming now. He believed in God and even considered himself to be a Christian, but this was just way too far out there. With all the billions of people in the world why would God give a second thought to him? That couldn't be it.

"Yes," Jerimeil returned, just as if Joshua's thoughts had been spoken out loud, "you are on the right track. But I'm not God. I'm just a messenger from Him."

"An angel? No way. I mean, you don't look anything like an angel. Where's your long white robe? Where's your halo and wings? I've seen angels and you don't look like any of them."

"You've seen angels or pictures of angels?" asked Jerimeil. "People imagine angels to look all sorts of ways. But the name 'angel' means a messenger, and that's what I am. I guess you could call me your guardian angel, of sorts anyway. I mean, we don't do things necessarily like in all the stories you may have heard. Most people never see the angel that's been assigned to help them along the way. But this is a special case."

Intrigued and exhausted as well, Joshua laid the pistol back on the table, stood to his feet and looked back toward his empty, mussed up bed. He wasn't laying there so he couldn't be dreaming. But how could this be a real experience? He turned away from the man for a moment and secretly gave himself the proverbial pinch just to make sure. It hurt. This had to be real. He heard the man chuckle again as he turned back toward him.

"Satisfied?" asked Jerimeil. "I am real, just as Dicronifer, who you saw going out your window, is real."

"Dicronifer?" questioned Joshua, "you mean that ugly, hideous beast has a name too?"

"He does, and he is your mission in a way. You have been chosen to put a stop to his vicious and detestable acts."

"Wait a minute, may I call you Jerimeil?" began Joshua.

"Of course, you can my boy, of course you can."

"But how can a mere man stop a creature like that? What is he anyway . . . is he the devil?" Joshua swallowed hard not believing these words were coming from his own mouth.

"No Joshua, Dicronifer is not the devil; but just like I am a messenger from God, he is a soldier of the devil. He exists to take the very soul from every human being he can before it's too late for him."

"How can a mere man like me ever hope to stand up to such a powerfully evil foe like this Dicronifer? And why would God even allow someone like me to do His work? I mean, you know what I did today ... I put an innocent man behind bars. I convinced a jury that this man was guilty of murder with no more evidence than a pair of shoes. I know that Franklin Trombaugh was innocent. But because it was my job, I suppressed my feelings and persuaded them to pronounce the man guilty. He died today because of what I did. You claim you know the past, present and future all at the same time. You must know what I'm saying is true. I'm not worthy enough to be considered the dirt God walks on!" By now Joshua was sobbing, his face wet with tears. How could he spill his guts to a total stranger who just showed up in his room? But it seemed so right. He was strangely relieved that he had finally told someone how he really felt.

"It's okay, son; really. Franklin Trombaugh, though he didn't deserve what happened to him tonight, had a choice just like everyone else. The likes of Dicronifer are hard to resist. He takes on forms that cause terror in the hearts of people. But Dicronifer didn't hang Franklin Trombaugh; he made that decision himself. Oh, for certain Dicronifer was standing there in the cell with the man. He even handed him the sheet with which he committed his suicide. It was also his frightful appearance that caused your poor Jim Sprague to be literally scared to death in his own backyard. But as evil and as powerful as Dicronifer may seem, he cannot lay a hand on anyone to kill them. He has a very influential power of suggestion, but when it comes right down to it every human being has his or her own power to resist. Even Tom Stanberry could have resisted. But both men chose to succumb to the suggestion of the evil beast, Dicronifer and do his bidding. You see, Dicronifer knows that if he can get someone to die in their sin that they will be eternally lost and condemned. That's his aim, Joshua and that's what you've got to fight."

"Well, what about that large blacksnake that seems to be everywhere Dicronifer is?" queried Joshua.

"The snake is merely an extension of Dicronifer. It cannot make a move without him. It is only another form of the same evil creature."

"So, what's the deal with taking their shoes and hanging them in a tree in a remote, unheard of town like Crothersville, Indiana?" asked Joshua defensively as if he had come to his senses.

"It's only a game to Dicronifer. In his own twisted way, he has taken the shoes to represent the souls of those he has influenced to destruction. They are like prize trophies to him. Even now he is on his way to the shoe tree to hang yet another of his souvenirs."

It all seemed more than Joshua could handle. "Okay. So, what if I decide to accept this mission against evil? How can I ever hope to stop him? If he is so powerful what's to keep him from turning on me and convincing me to do myself in as well?"

"He will try. The evil power of Dicronifer is hard to resist. He tempts you often you know. Remember that prostitute you almost were with two weeks ago? That was all a set up by Dicronifer. He knows that you are his foe. That's why he has always addressed you as 'YOU.' He knows that you have been chosen to stop him, at least for now. He recognizes that fact and his title 'YOU' is his way of letting you know that you are the chosen one."

"So, I'm to just strike out after this epitome of evil and take him out, is that it? How can I stop him? What special power do I have to bring this Dicronifer to his knees?"

With a sigh Jerimeil stood to his feet. When he was fully erect Joshua held a breath. He was nearly eight feet tall, his head nearly touching the ceiling. He shook his head and looked down at Joshua, "You don't have the power, son. You can't stop him."

Chapter 11

Joshua had never felt so confused in all his life. Would this day never end? He glanced at the clock which revealed that it was twenty minutes after midnight. Technically the day had ended. "So, this is going to be a two-day thing," he thought. Standing in front of him was an eight-foot-tall man who claimed to be an angel from God. This giant of a man had also told him that he – Joshua Bayne Smithson, had been chosen to do battle with a creature from his childhood, just when he had finally convinced himself that this beast had only been in his imagination.

Half-way believing that this angel – Jerimeil he had called himself - was on the level, he was about to accept the challenge placed before him only to be told that he didn't have enough power and that he couldn't stop the demon, Dicronifer. "This is enough to give even a mild tempered man a headache," he thought as he reached into his nightstand drawer for some pain killers.

He popped the pills in his mouth and swallowed without the aid of water then asked, "Now let me get this straight; you tell me that I have been chosen to stop this Dicronifer creature, but then you say that I can't stop him. I'm sorry, but this is all way too confusing for me."

"I understand," spoke Jerimeil, "But it can be done."

"Okay, I'm all ears; this should be good," returned Joshua.

"You see, Joshua, this is not a physical battle. Although you have been able to see Dicronifer, he is a spiritual being. He is an evil and powerful force but he is limited to influence. He cannot kill you, though he may try, but he can inflict pain on you. He can also influence others to come against you."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Joshua, "You say he can't kill me but he has taken the lives of others, two that I know! So, what's so special about me that he can't kill me?"

"Dicronifer could not kill all the others that have died as well," answered Jerimeil, "he could only influence them into taking their own lives. Some were filled with fear while others were convinced of his lies about themselves. When he implanted the thought of suicide, they saw it as their only way of escape."

"I can understand the terror and fear. This guy, Dicronifer, just from his appearance, makes the liver shiver," replied Joshua.

"Son, your own heart is filled with this same terror of Dicronifer. Because of it you cannot defeat him. You must find the only way to overcome this fear and discover the confidence you need to be victorious."

"So how do I do that? Is there some kind of class I can take for \$19.95 that will help me? Listen, I've attended the best of schools in this country and I don't know of any resource that can teach a man how to stand up to an evil, scary, spiritual creature like that!"

"This world has no idea of how to do it, son. In fact, it would not even acknowledge the existence of a being like Dicronifer."

"You've got that right! If I told anyone about this creature, or even that I had a conversation with you, they'd have me locked away in the loony-bin! Let's say that I'm even the least bit interested in this challenge of yours; how am I supposed to learn what I need to know to take on this, this, Dicronifer?" demanded Joshua.

Jerimeil looked over to the nightstand beside the bed. On it was a dusty, black book. Although Joshua's parents had given it to him many years ago, it still looked brand new except for the dust. "There," he said. "On the nightstand; there is your school."

Joshua looked over at the nightstand. All he saw was the opened pill bottle he had just taken from the drawer, his revolver, an alarm clock and a lamp. Then he spotted his Bible. Picking it up he responded, "Do you mean this?"

“Yes,” answered Jerimeil confidently, “yes, yes, yes! This book is the result of many, many experiences with creatures just like Dicronifer. Sometimes they are revealed but more often than not the incidents found there tell nothing of the evil influence. Still, each was the result of the conflict between Jehovah and Lucifer – good and evil. But all found a way to overcome from and through God. They wrote about their experiences and years later men were inspired of the Lord to compile them in a book. They are very ancient writings but, they make up the school that will show you how you must overcome your fear. The answer is there, son.” Then shaking his head, he said, “But it looks as if you have not spent much time reading it.”

Defensively Joshua spoke up, “Now wait a minute; I try to read something every now and again. Why just last week I read a few verses from the Psalms.”

“But you have not absorbed the book. You have not applied it to your life. You haven’t truly found the Savior it speaks to you about.”

Joshua was offended. “Listen, Jerimeil, you’ve got to know how much time I spent in church while growing up! I was the smartest guy in my Sunday school classes! I always knew the answers. I know I haven’t attended church like I did when I was a boy but I haven’t forgotten! How can you judge me like that? What right do you have?”

“Don’t forget who I am, son. I too am a spiritual being. I come from God and He knows all. I don’t judge you. Attending church and knowing the answers doesn’t make you ready. You must realize that you too are a spiritual creature deep inside. Yes, you have a physical body and a mind to think with, but inside of you, and every human being, resides a spiritual person. Most have not discovered this. Most have no understanding of it. But to allow God to revitalize your spirit and join His side is the only way.”

Still offended, Joshua argued, “But I have always been on God’s side!”

Shaking his head, Jerimeil again said, “You don’t know what you are talking about. Read the book. Don’t just look at the words on the pages but think about what it is saying. Ask God to guide you as you read. You will see. You will discover the truths there. It is the only way. I must go now.”

“Wait a minute,” begged Joshua, “You can’t just leave me hanging like this! How am I supposed to know what to do? You can’t go yet!”

“It is time. Read the book. It will take a few days but when you have completed it you will understand. I will return to you in four days. We will see

then if you are ready or not." After speaking these words Jerimeil faded then vanished from the room.

Joshua stood there alone. He shook his head violently as if trying to awake from a dream. Had this all been real? Was his imagination running rampant and out of control? Maybe he had been sleep-walking as he dreamed. But inside he knew that it was real. He knew that Jerimeil had been there. As a matter of fact, he could still feel the after affects of his presence, like particles of him were still floating around in the room.

It was now pushing 1:00 a.m. He would never be able to get up for work in the morning. He lay back in the bed and turned off his lamp, trying to drift off to sleep but his eyes were wide open. He wasn't tired at all. He kept replaying what had just happened in his mind. Over and over again he visualized the creature, Dicronifer, going out of his window with that twitching blacksnake tail disappearing over the side of the ledge. He remembered slamming it shut. Then Jerimeil was sitting in his chair. His words echoed continually in his mind.

At 2:00 a.m. he turned on his lamp and reached for his Bible. It was true that he had never read it through. He had always thought of it as a reference book of sorts. Every week or so he would flip through its pages and allow his eyes to rest on a verse of scripture. He would read it and always wonder what it was about – what it was referring to. He had to admit that he really didn't know much about it.

Turning to the first page of Genesis he began to read. Some of the passages sounded familiar to him because he remembered them from his Sunday school class years before. But a lot of it, he had to admit, seemed foreign and strange.

He still had doubts about what Jerimeil had told him. But somehow, deep inside, he knew that the angel had been right. This time, as he read, he concentrated on what it was saying. Strangely, even though he had always dreaded reading it, he felt drawn to it, compelled to read on. It was an old King James Version Bible so some of it was difficult to understand and keep the train of thought together. This was one of the reasons he had never read it before. He'd get discouraged and bored with the language of the fifteenth century and finally give up, closing the Bible and laying it back down.

He laughed at himself; here he was a big-time lawyer. He had graduated from college and law school. He was well versed in all the legal mumbo-jumbo with its technical terminology. He determined that if he could master "legalese" that surely, he could master the English language of centuries past. So, he

pushed aside the feeling he had experienced so many times before and kept reading.

Chapter 12

The alarm clock went off at 5:00 a.m. and Joshua was still reading. He had become so absorbed with the Bible that he was oblivious of the time. He had to get to work, but for some reason he wasn't panicked about it. Normally he would have found himself in the middle of an adrenaline rush trying to get himself together. But this morning, even though he had had nearly no sleep at all, he was strangely calm, collected, and actually happy. He had been given four days to read the Bible. It was a challenge but for the first time in his life he was looking forward to spending time with the black book his parents had given him so many years before. In fact, if he had any disappointment, it was when he had to lay it down and get ready for work.

There were no big cases on his agenda for the next few days and he had vacation time coming to him. Thinking about it he realized that he hadn't taken a vacation since he had been employed by the firm. He made up his mind that he would go to work today, but he would ask for at least two weeks off beginning tomorrow. He wasn't certain how Mr. Holloway would react to such a short-noticed request, but he was going to try anyway.

Joshua made a point of getting there early once again, knowing that Bert Holloway would be making his coffee. More than likely, he'd be there alone at this hour. Later, when the secretaries, partners, and other lawyers arrived, the office would be filled with hurry, rush, hustle and bustle, and getting a moment with his boss would be nearly impossible.

Just as he figured, when he walked into the office Bert was pouring his first steaming hot cup of black gold. Although Josh had never really acquired the taste for it, he had to admit that in that quiet, early morning atmosphere, it did smell deliciously inviting.

"Why good morning Mr. Smithson." greeted Bert, "Two mornings in a row being early; if I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to score some 'brownie' points with the boss." He jokingly referred to himself, and then added, "Can I pour you a cup of morning inspiration?"

"You know, Mr. Holloway, I think I'll take you up on that offer today. It smells mighty tempting," replied Joshua.

"Good man!" responded Holloway as he poured a cup of the black liquid for Joshua. "There's cream and sugar here if you need it."

"Thanks," said Josh. He had tried it without condiments before and remembered the bitter taste of straight black coffee so he immediately dumped in two spoons of cream and three spoons of sugar. Bert raised his eyebrows and joked, "You sure you want some coffee with your cream and sugar?"

With a laugh Josh returned, "Just a little please." They sat in the comfortable chairs that decorated the lounge area of the office, slowly sipping their coffee. Josh spoke first, "You know, Mr. Holloway, there is something I'd like to talk to you about."

"By all means, Joshua, but when we're hear alone you should really just call me Bert. I don't want to give the impression that we're all business and no pleasure you know. So, what's on your mind, son?"

"Well, Bert, something's come up and I was wondering if I could get a couple weeks of vacation?"

"You've been here long enough; I don't know why we couldn't arrange that; when're you wanting to start?"

"Tomorrow," replied Joshua.

"Well, that's a bit irregular Josh. We normally have a policy that you've got to give a week's notice but then again, after the week you've had you certainly deserve it." He had no idea. "I don't see a problem with it. Go ahead and make your plans and I'll see that it's all arranged."

"Thanks, Mr. Holl ... I mean Bert. It means a lot to me."

It was one of the longest days Joshua had ever put in at the office. He hadn't thought about a vacation before. Hours ago, he was skeptical of this whole defeating Dicronifer thing, but now he was filled with excited anticipation. He felt like a school boy again, impatiently fidgeting on the last day of classes before summer break.

He had thrown his Bible in his brief case and fought temptation to get it out during working hours. "Wow," he thought to himself, "I never in a million years would have figured I'd be so eager to read the Bible." Up until that day he had considered it as a book of impossible morals but a good tool for swearing people in. Now it was as if he had picked up a bestselling novel - One you just couldn't seem to put down.

During lunch he poured through several more chapters. He had read the book of Genesis that morning before work, and was just finishing up Exodus. He was amazed at the speed with which he was going through it and retaining the knowledge. It was like some Divine force had suddenly opened up his understanding.

At the end of the day, he decided to stop by the grocery store and stock up on quick-fix meals like cereal, the makings for sandwiches, canned soups and frozen dinners. This way he could devote a maximum amount of time to his reading.

When he got back to his apartment, he popped one of the frozen dinners in the oven, set the timer and got comfortable. Then he opened his Bible and began. He read late into the night and instead of sleeping in like most people do when on vacation, he continued getting up at 5:00 AM so as to get in as much reading time as possible.

By the end of the second day, he had finished the Old Testament. He was seeing what Jerimeil had said about spiritual battles hidden in those physical conflicts. He could see the working of the forces of good and evil in each. He paused and thought about the evil Dicronifer and imagined him, or a being like him as the influence behind each one.

The next morning, he began with the New Testament. It was much different than the Old Testament. He remembered some of the prophecies as he poured through the pages about the life of Jesus Christ. His particular Bible had references to Old Testament passages and he took some time to look many of them up, comparing them with what he had previously read. A completely new light illuminated the life of Christ as he discovered why He had said some of the

things Josh had originally thought were judgmental and even a bit cruel. He was amazed at the miracles Jesus had done. He found himself actually weeping as he read about the crucifixion but was overjoyed when three days later Jesus was resurrected.

Page after page he continued, through the book of Acts, then the writings of Paul and the other Apostles. He began to see the spiritual aspect in a whole new way. He also began to feel a twinge in his own heart. Many of the things he read about made him aware of his own inadequacy, his own failures, and his own ignorance about God and Jesus Christ.

By midnight he had completed the book of Revelation. He had done what had been unthinkable, at least to him; in only three days he had completed the entire Bible – cover to cover - for the first time in his life.

But something even more amazing and significant took place. With each realization, exposing the faults in his own life, he could no longer justify his position with God. When he closed the Bible, he was driven to his knees where he began to weep almost uncontrollably and he found himself crying out to God, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He remembered the words of Paul who had said, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; It is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9). He thought about the free gift given to every man, woman, boy and girl who asks for it, *"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Romans 6:23).

The words were flowing from his mouth, "Oh God, I have been a failure in your eyes!" Before this he had thought himself to be a good man wanting to do the right thing. Never had he considered himself a failure. "I'm so sorry Lord for sinning against You. Save me Lord; only You can save me from this terrible plight!" Then he spent nearly an hour just weeping as he laid his head against his sofa. When he finally stood to his feet, he felt clean - new inside. Something had most definitely happened to him. He looked around the room and it seemed that everything glowed with a new brilliance. He knew that for the first time, God had finally come into his life – he had been saved.

Chapter 13

Josh awoke suddenly. His body felt cramped as he realized that he had drifted off to sleep, still kneeling, with his head lying sideways on the sofa cushion. His neck was stiff and sore as he lifted himself.

"I said, hail to you, powerful man of God!"

He looked over to see Jerimeil once again sitting in a chair across from him. He started to stand but then fell painfully back into a sitting position on the floor. Was it time for Jerimeil to come already? A glance at the clock revealed that it was now 6:00 p.m. He had slept for what was left of the night and all the next day in that position. He hadn't realized that he was so tired.

Joshua groaned slightly then responded to Jerimeil, "I don't feel so powerful right now."

"Ah, but you are my boy, you are!"

With a slight twist of his head and squinted eyes, Joshua looked directly at the angel and said, "But the last time we talked, you told me that I wasn't powerful enough and that I couldn't defeat Dicronifer."

"That's right Joshua, but last night an extraordinary thing happened to you. For the first time in your life, you committed yourself to God. You read the

book through, cover to cover; you realized the spiritual battles that took place in days of old and you saw your own insignificance and threw yourself at the feet of the Christ. You have become very powerful.”

“So, I’m ready now? I can defeat Dicronifer?”

“Oh, I didn’t say that you were ready. I said that you had become very powerful. But you haven’t received your equipment yet,” answered Jerimeil.

“Equipment; what equipment would that be?” questioned Joshua.

“Why the equipment with which to do battle with Dicronifer, that’s what equipment,” Jerimeil answered with a tone that made him to think that the angel expected him to know what he was talking about.

“Jerimeil, I’ve got to tell you what happened to me,” Joshua changed the subject.

“Yes, yes, please do. I am excited to hear what you have to say about your new found strength,” spoke Jerimeil with much eagerness.

“It was, I guess, miraculous. I did what you told me to do. The very night you left I began reading the Bible. I took some vacation time to do it and, well, it’s hard to explain but it was if the Bible came alive in me.”

Jerimeil sat across from him with a huge smile on his face. He was intently concentrated on every word that Joshua said, “Yes, yes, go on, go on now,” he said.

“I did see what you were talking about the other night; you know, when you said that the physical battles found in the Bible were all really spiritual battles. It was like war between good and evil. In the eye of my mind, I could see the spiritual forces clashing with every sword drawn and every spear thrown.”

“Yes, yes! It’s true my boy, it’s true.”

“I read the prophecies and, to be frank, I didn’t completely understand them all, although when I got into the New Testament I could see where many of them were fulfilled.”

“Right you are, Joshua, right you are.”

"As I began reading the New Testament the physical and spiritual battles were still going on but they were different; more emphasis on the spiritual side of them."

"Yes, yes; wonderful, wonderful," Jerimeil seemed so excited that he nearly fell off the chair as he sat on the edge of his seat. It was as if a masterpiece of a story was being acted out right before his eyes.

"I finished the Gospels, read the Acts, and then got into the letters of Paul and the others. I have to admit, before I didn't do much reading in them because they seemed boring. But knowing what had happened to Jesus Christ, the crucifixion and His resurrection, then all the power and joy of the new Church even when being severely persecuted and hunted down like common thieves, well, it caused those letters to come alive. They made more sense and took on new meaning. It was as if the writers were looking into my very soul and speaking directly to me. After reading them and then the horrors and final rescue of the Church in the Revelation, my heart was broken. I realized that even though I had spent my entire life thinking that I was good enough, above the average individual, I really wasn't any better than anyone else. I was a sinner. I was doomed to die but Jesus Christ took my place."

"Wonderful, wonderful," squealed Jerimeil.

"I repented of my sin. I gave myself fully to Jesus Christ. No matter what happens from this day forth, no matter how much I fail, I love Him. Jerimeil, I have discovered God - The truth of God for the first time in my life."

"This is exactly what I hoped would happen my boy. Before, your morals were useless against Dicronifer, but now you have discovered real power – the power of God through His Son, Jesus Christ. You are ready for the tools and weapons you will need in your battle ahead."

"You spoke of these before. But I'm confused; if I continue in the word of God is that not enough? Doesn't that equip me for what lies ahead?"

"Yes; it does. But what I am about to give you is of spiritual significance. You must be strong in the Lord and put on the power of His might. You must put on all the armor of God so that you can withstand against the schemes of the devil. You now realize that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against principalities, powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this time. You will be doing battle with hosts of wickedness in the heavens."

"Jerimeil, that sounds awfully familiar. Isn't that in the Bible?" asked Joshua.

"Of course, it is. Let me show you," and with that Jerimeil picked up Joshua's Bible and turned to Ephesians 6. He read the entire portion to Joshua. "Now my boy, it is time for you to put on your own armor."

"I understand what you're talking about, but isn't this supposed to be spiritually understood? I've never heard of an instance when one adorned actual armor."

"This is true. But Dicronifer is a powerful foe. While the armor is spiritual and no one will be able to see it except for yourself and all other spiritual forces, it is there to give you more confidence. As you wear it your faith will be increased. It will help dispel the doubt with which Dicronifer will tempt. So, it is a spiritual thing. But you must wear it at all times. Again, in the physical world no one will be able to see it but you. You will appear to be normally clothed. But it will enhance the power that God has given you to do battle with this evil creature."

"Okay; lay it on me."

"Then arise my spiritual knight, arise."

Joshua pulled himself up from the floor. His knees still ached a bit and he was shaky on his feet. He didn't feel much like a knight.

Jerimeil also stood picking up a bag that had been lying beside his chair. Even though Joshua had found new spiritual strength and had more understanding than he had ever had in his life regarding spiritual matters, his five foot-nine-inch frame against the eight-foot build of Jerimeil made him feel small and insignificant. Could he ever hope to accomplish what was beginning to unfold before him?

Jerimeil reached into the bag and pulled out a beautiful six-inch-wide golden belt. "This is the belt of truth Joshua. You must wear it at all times. Our Lord said that the truth would make you free. You must always stand for the truth. This belt will remind you what the truth is. Even when doing battle with the deceptive and evil Dicronifer, you must still stand in truth." As Jerimeil fastened it on Joshua's waist, the feeling of unworthiness adorned his spirit, but the power of the truth made him stand fully erect on his feet.

Then the angel pulled another item from his bag. "This is the breastplate of righteousness." Joshua noticed an inscription on the breastplate that read *'Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us'* which he recognized from Titus 3:5. Jerimeil continued, "This

breastplate will protect your vital organs as you do battle. No sword can pierce through this armor because it is the righteousness of Christ. Never depend on your own righteousness but always be reminded of the inscription on the breastplate. When we stand in our own righteousness then the power of the breastplate is made ineffective. Be aware and never fall into this temptation. There will be times when Dicronifer will pretend to be weak and powerless before you. This is one of his tricks – an attempt to make you feel superior and proud. He will tempt you to think that you are righteous enough without God. Do not yield to this temptation for it will cause you great grief.”

As Jerimeil fastened it around Joshua’s body he could again feel his own insignificance as he realized that his puny, human efforts could never save him. He must have the righteousness of Christ.

Next Jerimeil took from his bag a pair of leather boots. He placed them on Joshua pulling them to just below his knees. He was amazed at how light and comfortable they were. “These are the boots that prepare you to carry the good news of peace. Peace is a precious element that few have truly discovered. These boots will protect your feet but will also carry you to places where the battle is different. Instead of warring to kill an enemy, you will be doing battle to bring peace to the hearts and souls of those you encounter during your journey. As you help them to discover peace, they too will be aided in resisting the power of Dicronifer.”

Jerimeil continued, “The next piece of armor I have for you is very important.” With that he pulled from the bag an oval shaped shield about two and a half feet long by a foot and a half wide. It was not made of metal but seemed to be constructed from some sort of leathery substance. He strapped it to Joshua’s left arm saying, “Dicronifer is a sly one. He will try to catch you unaware and will shoot fiery arrows at you in hopes of hitting you between your armor. This powerful shield, when held between you and his arrows will stop each and every one. It will build your faith knowing that it is designed to thwart those attacks. But be careful because his arrows are not only firebrands but are full of poison. He will tempt you to let your guard down – let down your faith - in effort to slay you with his fiery, poisonous arrows.”

The next item was a helmet. “This is the helmet of salvation. You actually found this last night. Like a helmet protects your head, your mind and your brain, so the helmet of salvation protects your very soul. With salvation the enemy cannot destroy you though he will try. Always wear this helmet because it represents the only thing that separates you from evil.”

Finally, Jerimeil produced a sheathed sword from the bag. He strapped it on Joshua’s left side, attaching it to the belt of truth. Joshua grasped the handle

of the magnificent weapon and pulled it from its sheath. The sunlight shining through the window reflected from the blade, causing the room to literally dance with an array of light formations. The handle was exquisitely studded with jewels of all kinds. "It's double edged," spoke Jerimeil. "It will separate the soul from the spirit. It is the word of God. You will find that as you defend yourself with it, the word you have read and placed into your heart, will be brought back to your memory. It is a powerful weapon not only against the likes of Dicronifer but also against man. Be careful how you use it and always polish it with prayer. Remember that you are not only a warrior against evil but you are a hero in rescuing those who are about to perish. Use the sword, but use it well and with wisdom."

"Joshua, this is also very important. You are to connect your spirit with the Spirit of God regularly. Pray without ceasing. Intercede for the helpless and spend time reading the book and talking with God. It is your lifeline."

Joshua hung his head. "I am humbled by this great blessing. In myself I know that I am not worthy of this honor but that only through Jesus Christ am I able to wear this armor. I will do my best and will always be quick to give glory to God."

"This is good. Now I must be going. Remember to practice with the armor and get a good feel for it. Also remember to never take it off, except for when you bathe of course. But remember that Dicronifer is a powerful foe. Being a spiritual creature, he can appear at any moment. Never forget that no one else can see your armor; it is only visible in the spirit world. When others view you, they will see you in regular clothing; whatever you choose to wear under it. Go with courage and honor my friend. You will soon have your first encounter. Be ready."

Joshua spoke up, "But, Jerimeil, aren't you going to be helping me?"

"I cannot. We angels have our own battles in which to engage. This is your battle and I cannot interfere. But I will check on you from time to time to see if you need my advice."

"Well, how am I to know what to do next? How will I know where to go and who to protect?"

Jerimeil looked Joshua over from head to foot as if he should have known the answer to these questions then said, "You will find my boy, that something like a sixth sense will stir within you. It is a kind of knowing; it is the Holy Spirit speaking to your heart. You will have to be listening but He will give you instructions. Sometimes it will seem like there is no answer and that you are

alone and helpless. But if you will heed these instructions as well as those in your Bible, you will know what to do, where to go and when to do battle.”

“Wow! That’s some far out stuff you’re talking about there. I’m not sure I’ll be any good at that.”

“As I said before, continue reading the book and spending time in prayer. It will come; you’ll see. It is time to go. Until we next meet, I wish you God’s speed.”

With that Jerimeil faded from the room as he had done before. Joshua stood fully armed. He had grown so much in his spirit since his last encounter with the angel but was he ready? He felt very small. He had no idea what he was about to experience, but he knew he had been chosen for a reason.

He admired the sword as it glistened in the light. It was an amazing weapon. He prayed that God would give him wisdom as he used it.

Chapter 14

"How am I ever going to get used to this stuff?" questioned Joshua.

He was referring to the articles of armor given him by Jerimeil. At first it seemed a bit awkward and he felt kind of like a cat wearing a sweater for the first time, nearly walking bow-legged. He tried taking it off, changing clothes then putting it back on. Then he tried putting his clothing over top of it. Regardless whether the armor was under or over his clothes when he looked down, he could always see it on top. According to Jerimeil, it would be visible to no one else except for himself and other spiritual creatures of course, so he decided to put it to the test.

It was now Saturday morning. He put on his shoes and stepped out into the warm morning sunlight and began walking down the street. Not many were out on Saturday mornings, not like during the week when all the business offices were flooded with workers. Most of the people on the streets on a Saturday morning were casual shoppers or joggers. As he walked, he would often look at his reflection in the store front windows. He could plainly see the helmet atop his head and the reflection from the other armor. His sword swung handsomely at his side. But no one else seemed to notice him. If they saw the armor, he would have at least gotten an occasional stare that said, "Who is this freak?" But there were none of those.

"Hey Mr. Smithson; how are you today, sir!" he heard the call. Who could this be? He turned to look and saw Barney Stein coming from behind him. Barney was the office boy where he worked. Barney's job was to deliver the

mail to the various associates of the firm, carry papers from one to the other and responsible for other general clerical tasks. This was going to be interesting.

"Why, hi Barney; good to see you though I didn't expect you to be in this part of town on a Saturday morning," replied Joshua.

"Well sir, I normally come here on Saturdays to visit my mother. She lives just a block down the street."

Josh remembered that he normally wasn't out of his apartment this early on a weekend. He would either sleep in or just lounge around for a few hours before doing anything constructive. So really, he was the one out of character here.

"I just saw you, sir and thought I'd say 'hi.' So how are you enjoying your vacation?"

Joshua had nearly forgotten that he was on vacation. It had started on Tuesday and it was now already Saturday. Where had the time gone? He had often heard others in his office comment about how vacation time always seemed to go by quicker than work time. It had been so long since he had taken a vacation that he really hadn't understood what they meant, until now. His thoughts quickly jumped to the task he had to do. How was he going to defeat this demon, Dicronifer with only ten days left?

"Say, I like that outfit Mr. Smithson." That comment jolted Josh back to his immediate conversation with Barney. Could he see the armor? Was that what he was referring to?

"You like it, huh?" queried Josh, feeling Barney out in effort to discover whether the younger man could see the armor or not.

"Yeah, that's a great sports shirt, and it really compliments the trousers." Josh had put on a yellow golf shirt and a pair of brown pants. He had always been gifted with a knack of color coordination.

"Why thank you Barney; I appreciate you noticing. Most men don't give a second thought to what another man is wearing unless it's really awful, you know?" From Barney's comments he knew that the young man couldn't see his armor on top of his clothing. The test had worked.

"Well, enjoy the rest of your vacation Mr. Smithson and I'll see you a week from Tuesday," replied Barney and with that he was off and down the street to visit his mother.

Josh decided to walk a couple more blocks before returning to his apartment. It was such a nice day and now that he was sure no one else could see his armor he thought he might just stop in at the corner diner for breakfast. He hadn't done that for ages and this week he felt he really deserved it.

However, his special treat was postponed when the hair on the back of his neck began to stand on end, and a feeling like he had never before experienced left his body drained and weak. Nausea began to twist and churn his stomach. Was he coming down with something? All of a sudden it seemed that life went into slow motion. From the corner of his eye, he could see a bright and flickering object hurtling at him. Instinctively he raised his left arm on which his shield of faith was strapped. He heard a thud and felt a jolt that made his arm flinch back. When he lowered it a flaming arrow was sticking in the other side of his shield. As he grabbed the arrow to pull it out a lady walked by without a second glance or word.

Josh pulled the flaming arrow from his shield throwing it to the sidewalk and another man passed by, stepping right on top of it as the flames from the arrow flickered around his feet. He never flinched. It was all spiritual and no one could see what was going on except for Josh. His left arm nearly jerked up and over his head like it had a mind of its own, or so it seemed, as a second burning arrow imbedded itself into his shield. As he stood holding it over his head, he realized that, although passersby couldn't see his armor or the fiery arrows falling from the sky, they could see him standing there with his arm extended above his head. A look to the window in the building beside him reflected his position. His knees were slightly bent and he saw his armor-clad body holding the shield up like a small umbrella. "People must think I'm nuts," he thought as he spotted an alley-way a few feet in front of him. Deciding to get off the street before someone called 911 to haul off a lunatic, he made a dash for it with the flaming arrow still smoldering in his shield.

This had to be coming from Dicronifer. Jerimeil had told him that the shield was to stop the fiery arrows of the enemy. He removed the second arrow, cautiously scanning the area. The demon had to be somewhere close by. Finally with a glance upward he spotted Dicronifer taking a gigantic leap – almost as if he were flying – from atop the building across the street to the one he now stood beside in the alley. He had no idea of what to do and took a big gulp as he prayed, "God help me!"

Dicronifer appeared on the ledge just above him. Josh looked up at the creature. He hadn't changed a bit and certainly hadn't gotten any prettier as he viewed the monster from his childhood. His face looked like a giant red prune and his eyes danced with fire, appearing more like small windows with a roaring

furnace on the other side. He stood as tall as Jerimeil, eight feet or better. He could see the hands of the demon - more like skeleton hands only the bones had an old look – a dirty gray color. The creature bent at the knees in almost a crouch as he gazed straight at Josh and roared, “YOU!!!”

Fear welled up inside of him and he remembered the words of Jerimeil who had reminded him of the verse of scripture from 2 Timothy 1:7 that said that God had not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and a sound mind. He quoted this over and over in his head until the fear began to disappear. Then he remembered that anytime he had seen Dicronifer the huge blacksnake was close by. The sixth sense Jerimeil told him about went off like a flashing red light and siren as he instinctively pulled his sword and whirled around just in time to see the snake ready to strike. It had slithered right up behind him and was coiled in position. He had forgotten how big this thing was. Stretched out it was nearly twelve feet in length, as big around as a weightlifter’s upper arm, and a head the size of a football. The creature backed off, hissing as it eyed the sword raised in Josh’s hand, “You! You! You!”

He heard a horrible laugh coming from behind him and being careful not to turn his back on the snake, risked a glance to the top of the building where Dicronifer stood fully erect now, howling with laughter. He was surrounded and had no idea how he was going to get out of this situation. Fright was replaced with anger. His eyes danced back and forth from the snake to Dicronifer, waiting for whatever was coming next.

“You think you can defeat me?” snarled Dicronifer, “you haven’t a chance boy! I’ll have your shoes too before this is over!”

Josh answered, “You can try, jail bait, you can try, but it will be over my dead body!”

Dicronifer roared again with laughter, “Why that’s the whole idea boy, that’s the whole idea!”

This type of arguing was definitely not going to work. As the snake moved closer when he turned his eyes to Dicronifer, Joshua remembered David’s situation when he had faced the giant, Goliath. The words from 1 Samuel 17:45 flashed in his mind as if they were printed on a giant billboard, and he began to speak them out loud, “You come against me with flaming arrows and this slithering beast, but I come against you in the name of the Lord!”

Dicronifer stopped laughing and looked at Joshua, seeming puzzled by his words and perhaps a little disappointed that his arguing had been replaced with scriptural quotations, then said, “Do you think you can beat me with words boy!”

Josh spoke again, this time quoting Hebrews 4:12, *"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account!"* He couldn't believe that he remembered that. But it seemed to be working.

Dicronifer placed his hands on his hips and huffed, "I might not be able to get to you now, boy, but you'll never stop me! You'll never stop me!!" YOU!" and with that the demon faded into nothing. Josh looked around at the blacksnake that was now retreating in the direction Dicronifer had disappeared. It was crawling right through the wall. Joshua swung the sword with a hushed swoosh severing the tip of the snake's tail. As it fell to the ground the serpent let out a hideous scream as it said, "YOU!" then disappeared into the wall. The tip of its tail lay twitching on the asphalt. Victoriously, yet defiantly, Josh rammed his sword into that tip of snake's tail and raised it into the air as it burst into flames and burned into nothing.

He slid his sword back into its sheath and walked from the alley. A smile decorated his face growing broader with each step. He felt like he had accomplished a lot, but he also knew that he had no idea of what to expect next. He really needed to talk to Jerimeil again.

Arriving back in his apartment he suddenly felt exhausted. He grabbed an apple that was in a basket of fruit on his kitchen counter and crunched into it with sprays of juice flying to the left and right as he thought about what had happened. He had won this battle but only with the word of God. When he had spoken his own words, they were turned against him. He knew now why Jerimeil had required him to read the entire Bible. He was amazed at how the verses popped into his mind. He also knew that it was going to be very important that he continue reading in order to keep his sword – the word of the Lord – sharp and ready.

He pulled his feet up on the couch and laid back. He laughed to himself as he thought about whacking off the tip of that snake's tail, "I guess he'll be called Ol' Stubby from now on," he chuckled to himself, and with that, exhaustion from the spiritual encounter overcame him and he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 15

Joshua found himself once again face to face with the evil creature, sword in hand. He warded off the fiery arrows cast after him one after another while swinging the sword in his defense. Then with one quick thrust he pushed the sword into the mid section of the beast as it squalled out in pain, then fell to the ground.

"Finally, I have defeated you!" he exclaimed with his sword pointed straight into the air.

"It won't be quite that easy."

"But it's already done; look – there he lies!" Joshua defended himself.

"Sometimes you humans are so vain," spoke the voice again with a little chuckle.

Slowly Josh rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He looked in the direction where the demon's body was supposed to be and instead nearly rolled off the couch. Then focusing his attention to the window, he saw the black of night. He had slept the rest of the day away.

"Having victorious visions, are we?" He looked over to find Jerimeil, as usual, sitting in the chair opposite him.

"You sure know how to burst a guy's bubble, you know that?" defended Josh. "It was just a dream," he continued.

"Sure, it was my fine young man, but you must be very careful not to become over confident. Always remember where your strength lies and who the source of your power is."

"I know, I know, but, Jerimeil, you should have seen it! I have to say that I was really scared at first but then something just came over me and it was like I was invincible. There was no way I couldn't win against that slithering excuse for a snake and that beast, Dicronifer!"

"Josh, my boy," it seemed Jerimeil always called him that when a lesson was forth coming, "God will give you one victory after another but you must guard against pride and over-confidence in your own ability. If you remember from your reading, another by your name, in the scripture encountered the same thing."

Josh thought about it for a moment, puzzled as to whom Jerimeil was talking about, and then it suddenly dawned on him - Joshua from the Old Testament account. "I know who you're talking about but remind me of the exact situation if you would please."

"Delighted to my boy," there was that 'my boy' stuff again, "If you remember, Joshua and the nation of Israel had just defeated Jericho by following God's unusual directions of marching silently one time around the city each day for six days. On the seventh day they marched a total of seven times around the city and on the seventh trip they blew their trumpets and shouted with a great noise, and the walls of the city came crashing down."

"Oh yeah, I remember. It was an exciting victory and nothing short of a miracle."

"That it was but it came only because they were obedient to God's command. However, not everyone was obedient. Do you remember?"

"Yeah," began Josh slowly, "Yeah, I do. A guy by the name of Achan hid some clothing and a chunk of gold, right?"

"You are remembering, oh that's tremendous! Yes, yes, you are right. It became the source of great distress for the Israeli forces. The very next city they came to was small in comparison to Jericho. Feeling very confident in their victory, they decided not to send the entire army against them, but only a

fraction of the men. But because of sin in the camp God was not with them and they were sorely defeated. Joshua was so disappointed with God. I remember him crying out, 'God why have you let this happen to us?'"

"Wait a minute, you remember? You were there?"

"Oh yes, yes. Remember, I'm an angel. Of course, I was there. No one could see me but I was there. But to continue, God revealed the sin in the camp and after Achan had been discovered and they had found the hidden items buried in his tent, they stoned him and his entire family and so purged themselves of the sin."

Joshua interrupted, "I've always wondered about that; why did Achan's wife and his children have to pay for their father's sin? Wasn't that unfair of God?"

"It may seem so on the surface, but you've got to know the history of the people from that time. They are very vengeful. Had his family been spared they might have risen up against Joshua after they had grown, and become more of a curse than what Achan had been. Besides, this was way before Christ came and introduced the age of grace. You've got to remember that the Old Testament was a revelation of God's holiness and justice. He had to deal harshly with them in order to teach them just how much the world needed grace."

"Okay; I see," responded Josh, "it makes more sense to me now."

"Anyway, the point is that only after they had humbled themselves before God and listened to Him again, did they have the ability to defeat Ai. In their pride and arrogance, they had failed to seek God and were horribly defeated because of it. I just don't want you to learn the same hard lesson that they had to learn. Always give God the praise for His divine intervention in giving you victory over the enemy."

"Those are good instructions, Jerimeil, but don't worry; I've got it under control," Josh assured, but Jerimeil wasn't so convinced.

"Just be careful my boy. Always remember that in yourself you are powerless against the evil of Dicronifer. Only in your acknowledged weakness to God do you find strength. Remember the Apostle Paul said this very thing; he said '*when I am weak then am I strong*' (2 Corinthians 12:10)."

"Okay, okay, I get it. I'll try to watch myself. Man, you really know how to knock the wind out of a sail don't you?"

"Just trying to help, just trying to help," defended Jerimeil.

"Ummh, while you're here I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions," Joshua changed the subject.

"Of course, my boy, of course," responded Jerimeil, eager to be of assistance to his young apprentice, "What's on your mind?"

"Just how am I going to track Dicronifer down? I mean, I don't have the slightest idea of what to do next. Shouldn't I be hunting for him now that he's on the run?"

"Be careful Joshua, be careful. Dicronifer's been around for a long, long time. It is very possible he let you win just to give you false hope and put some pride in you. He knows that if he can get you to let your guard down by not depending on the Lord that he can slip in and defeat you. He's done it many times over the centuries. He will pretend weakness and let his foe win perhaps even several times. Just when you think you've got him it is then that he will lash out with all his fury. He can be extremely ferocious and without the guidance of the Lord, he can tear you to pieces. Just remember what happened to the seven sons of Sceva in the book of Acts. They had observed what Paul and some of the others had done and they went in to a demon possessed man. The demon in the man recognized that they didn't have the goods – they weren't really depending on the Lord, and it ripped the clothing from their bodies and sent them out of the house naked and sorely wounded.

These evil creatures like Dicronifer have great power and know the human race. They have terrible strength and capabilities, but one of their most effective weapons is tricking people into relying on self rather than on the Lord. When they succeed, then they can certainly overpower you and send you down the road with your tail between your legs, so to speak."

"So, am I to just let him come to me? How can I keep him from attacking other people and prevent them from suffering the same fate as Tom Stanberry, Jim Sprague and Franklin Trombaugh? Am I not to protect the victims of Dicronifer or am I to just go on my merry way until he decides to show up?"

"Don't seek temptation son. Remember, our Lord prayed His model prayer saying '*don't lead us into temptation.*' Enough evil will come at you without you looking for it. Dicronifer is always on the job. Now that you have encountered him, he'll be watching for you. Only if you stay in the word, practice with your sword, spend time in prayer to our Lord, and always be on guard, will you stand a chance of defeating Dicronifer. He has defeated many people by tempting them to fear in their hearts. He can only tempt them. But

with him it is an evil art. He knows how to tempt people in ways that are most effective. He studies his victims and knows the very thing that will get to them. When he succeeds then he merely sits back and lets them defeat themselves. Once done he'll steal their shoes as a representation of their souls and hang them in that tree for all to see. To him it is his trophy room. Every time he slings a pair of shoes up into that tree it is a sign that he has done his job once again, and, son, he's very good at his job.

"But if you will do what I've told you to do and keep yourself humble, not filled with pride in your own ability, you can and will defeat him."

"Thanks, Jerimeil. I guess I desperately needed to hear that. Maybe I was getting a little over-confident there. But I'll watch myself," assured Josh.

"No, don't watch yourself; submit yourself to God; resist the devil and he will flee from you."

"Okay, I understand," replied Josh, a little frustrated that he had once again been shot down in his choice of words. But he recognized the passage quoted by Jerimeil. It was straight from James 4:7. Jerimeil was good with the word, but then, if he had witnessed the incident of Joshua in the Bible, he had probably witnessed nearly everything else found in it. He didn't just read the word but he had personally taken part in most of what had been written.

That was an edge but he would just have to make up for experience by doing what Jerimeil had instructed; read the word, pray and be especially watchful for that evil Dicronifer and his big, stubby-tailed blacksnake.

Chapter 16

Dressed in a white nurse's uniform Karen Lacey put the finishing touches on her makeup as she readied herself for another day's work. Her mouth stretched wide with a yawn. Even though she would have loved to crawl back under the covers she did love her job. She smiled as she remembered playing hospital with her large collection of dolls in her room back in Crothersville and vowed one day to do it for real.

Now, a young woman, she had paid the price, made the necessary sacrifices, completed the required education, and had actually landed a good position as a nurse. There was just something about taking care of those who needed help and couldn't care for themselves that fulfilled her like nothing she had ever experienced before. She worked for the Beth Israel Medical Center in the bustling environment of none other than New York City in Manhattan.

At first, her small-town upbringing and fear of the things that happen in large cities terrified her. Soon, however, she grew more accustomed to the city and the endless activity excited her. It wasn't every Crothersvillian girl who got the opportunities that she had received.

However, the nightlife wasn't for her. She really wasn't into dating and so, other than an excursion or two during the week with girlfriends from work, she dedicated most of her energies to the hospital.

There was one particular young man of whom that she had taken notice. He was a young lawyer about her age. She had kept up with him over the years, though it seemed he had completely forgotten her. In a way she was offended at that.

During middle school and her early high school days she had been the steady of Kim Brandenburg, the basketball star of their class team. Kim was rough, tough and exciting. She had felt privileged and was the envy of all the other girls because of her relationship with Kim. She had even joined the cheerleader's squad just so that she could see him play.

As time wore on, Kim became more and more popular and she caught him on several occasions flirting with other girls. She felt jealous but didn't want him to know it, so she pretended that it didn't bother her. But this tactic had worked against her because it left Kim to believe that she was okay with it, and he took full advantage of his popularity, especially with the girls.

Something very special happened to Karen in the middle of her sophomore year. She had attended church for as long as she could remember. It had become a regular part of her life. Often, she had sat back and witnessed people who would respond to the pastor's altar call which he gave at the conclusion of every sermon. He did it so regularly that it seemed a little silly to her. Why, one time he even insisted on following his routine after a particular Sunday sermon during which a visiting young man, who was sitting on the front row, rudely and loudly interrupted the sermon with his snoring. He had fallen to sleep and apparently had a terrible problem with it because he tossed and turned in the pew just as if he had been snuggled between the mattress and covers of his bed and snored like a lumberjack. It only took two or three snores to hear snickers coming from every nook and cranny of the room. There was no way anyone was concentrating on the pastor's sermon, although she was certain that it had been an important one. Still, their pastor insisted on an invitation and wouldn't you know it, his only responder was the guy who had fallen to sleep.

The pastor very patiently, however somewhat aggravated, prayed with the young man and gave him counsel. Although no one could hear what the pastor was saying to him, Karen just knew that part of his counsel had something to do with falling asleep in church, especially while seated on the front row. However, the man's snoring had been so loud it wouldn't have mattered if he had been seated on the back pew. The results would have been the same.

One Sunday, as Karen sat in her usual seat, she hadn't been concentrating very faithfully on what their minister was saying because she was feeling sorry for herself, thinking about Kim and his continued practice of flirting

with the other girls. It had become common-place and the past week he even had the nerve to do it while she was standing next to him. She thought about it growing angrier by the second when the pastor said something that jerked her attention back to the message. He was talking about a woman named Abigail. She was the wife of Nabal who had been a very selfish and foolish man. Here was a woman with whom she could identify. Kim was far from her husband but he too was being a very selfish and foolish man. Nabal had refused to give provision to David's army even though David and his men had been looking out for him and had protected him from raiding armies. David had become so angry at Nabal that he took a portion of his small army with intentions of killing the man. Abigail had found out about it and had intercepted his attack on her husband with several pack animals laden with food and supplies. Because of her kindness and appreciative heart David had repented of his plan to kill her husband.

After telling Nabal what she had done, several days later he died, apparently of a hardened heart. David was so impressed with Abigail that, after Nabal's death, he returned to her and made her his wife. It was a fascinating love story to Karen and the message that followed turned out to be the one that pricked her heart into responding to the invitation and her life was changed forever.

The straw that broke the camel's back fell in the latter part of that year. She and Kim had been on one of their usual dates. Even though he was rude and crude, most of the time he had been a gentleman to her, even though for the life of him he couldn't understand why she wanted to become a "religious fanatic" as he called it. On this particular date he began making sexual advances towards her.

"Come on Karen!" he persisted, "All the other girls do it. What makes you so special? Are you too good? Do you think you're better than they are?"

"I'm not better," she argued, "It's just that I have committed my life to God and one of those commitments is to keep myself pure for whoever my future husband is to be."

"Well come on babe, that's me ain't it? So, what's the problem?"

"We are far from being married, Kim."

"Awe babe, it's just a couple of years before graduation. You know you're the one for me, so what's the hold up?"

"Kim, you know I've always wanted to be a nurse and that means college and nursing school. We're a long way from being married."

"Come on babe, you don't need that stuff. You know I'll take care of you. I'm going to be a professional ball player, Remember? We'll have money coming out our ears. There's no need for you to be bothered with a job. All the career you need baby is taking care of me."

"It's not the need for money you moron, it's what I've always wanted to do with my life. Can't you understand that?"

"All I understand babe is that I want you," he said as he began to pull at her blouse.

Something inside of Karen flared up. For the first time in her life, she saw Kim for who he really was. He was every bit as foolish and selfish as Nabal had been. His promises to be with her were always clouded by his ever-increasing flirtation with other girls. She knew at that moment that she was only a conquest for him. She felt with everything in her that had she considered for one moment giving in to him that he'd have his way and drop her like a hot potato.

"No thanks and I'm not your babe!" she said as she opened the door of the parked car and stepped out on the sidewalk.

"You're making a big mistake Karen," yelled Kim as she got out. "You leave now and that's it. There are plenty of girls out there who'd die for one night with me you know. You leave and you are history."

"Guess what? I'm history!" she shouted as she walked away. That was the end of her relationship with Kim. It was funny, even though they had been steadies since middle school, the air smelled fresher and her steps felt lighter as she began walking towards her home. "Let's just face it," she said in her thoughts, "I'm finally free!"

It wasn't long after that when she had secretly become an admirer of another young man by the name of Joshua Smithson. He was smart and seemed like a guy who was going places in life. It had been rumored that ever since the tragic death years ago of Mr. Stanberry, he had committed himself to becoming a lawyer. He knew it would take very hard study and for the most part Joshua was a straight "A" student. Of course, he suffered a lot of teasing and was poked fun at even by his own friends but it never deterred him from his goal. She admired this in Joshua and it grabbed her attention.

Secretly she studied him. While it seemed that she had lost all interest in boys after Kim and most of the other girls thought that she had flipped out and teased her about becoming a nun, a new quest had joined the ranks of her goals in life and this one was right up there with becoming a nurse. Somehow, she knew that someday they would get together.

After high school they went in different directions and it seemed that future contact would be out of the question. It was ironic that they both wound up in New York City of all places. Both were following their dreams. She was dedicated to her work but it hadn't kept her from keeping up with Joshua. Being a lawyer, his name and picture popped up every so often in the daily papers and even occasionally on the evening news.

She still admired him. But she had also begun to despise him because while she had kept up with him through the years, he probably didn't even remember that she existed. She had developed a love-hate for Joshua Smithson. These feelings were the exact opposite and it would appear that they in no way went together but somehow fascination, admiration and disgust were all merged into the same emotion when she thought of him, saw his picture in the paper or caught a glimpse of him on the news.

"Why am I thinking about this of all days?" she asked herself as she finished getting ready for work and walked to the parking garage to her car. This was a special day. She had been with the hospital for a year now and her annual review was scheduled for today. She was certain to get a raise and she could use the money. But more importantly, a promotion might be in order. These things were real and greatly out-weighed an infatuation she had for a young man who had all but forgotten she existed.

"Lord, get this guy out of my mind. I don't have time for him right now," she prayed as she drove away. Little did she know ...

Chapter 17

Vacations end all too quickly for most people and it was no different for Josh. He couldn't believe that it had gone by so fast, but then he had managed to cram a lot of things into those few days. He was not the same person he had been before. In a way it seemed like a lifetime ago and, based on the changes that had happened during these fourteen days, this was literally true. Had anyone told him before that he would be walking around with an invisible suit of armor on, he would have accused them of being insane. He would never have thought that he would be so closely knit with God. Yet here he was; an invisible-armor-clad Jesus freak. He wondered if he would appear different to his co-workers. Did he look different? If not, he certainly felt different. These thoughts tumbled around in his mind as he wound through the rush hour freeway traffic, trying to be on time his first day back to work.

He was committed to the mission he had been given, but there was something about getting back into a daily routine, returning to the "old grindstone," so to speak, that clashed with his spiritual mandate. He found it to be a different kind of battle. The demands of a job somehow overshadowed his experience making it to seem more like a dream. Did it really happen or had he slept for two weeks and imagined it all?

He never got a chance to really answer that question because, in a sense, the answer found him. As he inched his way through traffic, he was suddenly jolted away from his thoughts by a bright streak that he saw from the corner of

his eye in the sky above. "What was that?" he thought. Then, in the same instant he saw Dicronifer land on the roof of a building just off the upcoming exit ramp. Instantly another small streak of light was hurtling in his direction and he instinctively recognized it as one of Dicronifer's fiery arrows. It struck his car with a thud, and then fell to the highway. "Hey, watch the paint job man!" Before it could hit the ground another flaming arrow was headed in his direction. Even though he knew it was a spiritual battle that was taking shape, he was concerned for the other drivers around him and so as quickly as he could he made his way to the exit ramp and sped off the freeway.

Once on the street, he parked in the first space he found open and exited his car. His newly found spiritual instincts caused him to raise his shield just in time to catch another arrow that spewed hot sparks all around him as it struck. Remembering his last encounter, he knew that the monstrous blacksnake was somewhere close by and he didn't want to make the mistake of taking it for granted. He looked around being careful to not take his eyes off Dicronifer for too long. He couldn't see the slithering beast, but that didn't mean that it wasn't there.

Now directly at the foot of the building on which the demon stood, Joshua heard his blood curdling laugh, "You think you're up for more of me boy?"

Anger welled up inside of Joshua, "Dicronifer, you evil beast, you will be defeated! You will stop terrifying innocent people!"

With another terrible burst of laughter, Dicronifer bellowed, "Boy, boy, boy, you puny excuse for a human being – you are just flesh and blood, but I am eternal! I have witnessed more in the last few centuries than you will ever know! Your scrawny bravery is no match for my genius and power!"

Searching for a response Josh blurted out, "You and what army!"

Feeling confident in his courage he was knocked to the ground from behind. Once again, his spiritual instinct through and by the Holy Spirit caused him to swing his shield to his back just in time to stop the deadly fangs of the blacksnake. The creature struck - head flung against the shield. It had saved Joshua from what could have been a deadly blow but the strength with which the snake hit the shield knocked him off his feet. He quickly rolled away from it crashing against the building and even though his back ached from hitting the brick wall, it gave him some stability and he was able to get back on his feet.

Without hesitation the serpent struck again with even more fury. Joshua, now standing against the building, was able to roll across the wall allowing the snake to crash headlong into the brick surface. It left the creature disoriented

and bought him enough time to get into a more strategic position, now with both enemies in front of him instead of being between them.

He glanced at the snake and saw that it was regaining equilibrium when suddenly several flaming arrows struck all around him. Dicronifer didn't use a bow to shoot the arrows but instead hurled them with his hand. He had flung a handful all at once in Joshua's direction. He looked up at the demon revealing a clenched-tooth determination from the beast as he reached for another handful of fiery arrows. Joshua braced himself, shield raised in defense and instantly took another glance at the snake which was now slithering in his direction. In a moment it was once again in striking position. He couldn't afford to lower his shield with Dicronifer about to fling another handful of arrows, so he quickly pulled his sword from its sheath preparing to do battle with the serpent.

As it struck, he swung the sword. Flaming arrows were again falling all around him and he felt at least two thudding against his shield. Then there was pain in his left arm like he had never felt before. With a deafening burst of hideous laughter Dicronifer bellowed, "I've got you now boy! You have been defeated!" As his sword swung in the direction of the blacksnake it looked as if it was on target to slice it in half and then, with a million black specs it vanished as the sword swooshed through it. Joshua fell to the ground. His arm was burning with pain and a quick examination revealed that one of the arrows had hit directly in his upper left arm. With a relieved look up at the roof he discovered that Dicronifer had also disappeared.

He remembered Jerimeil telling him that the arrows were not only on fire but that they also were poisonous. The blood trickled down his arm to his fingertips and began dripping on the pavement like the faucet of a sink that had not quite been shut off. His mind was growing fuzzy and he knew he had to get to a hospital as soon as possible.

Managing to stumble back into his car he drove furiously down the street trying to keep his mind clear enough to remember the way. It took nearly half an hour to reach Beth Israel Medical Center on 1st Avenue at 16th Street. He pulled up as best he could, opened the door of his car and fell to the ground below. A security guard saw him and immediately got help. Josh was fading into unconsciousness as they loaded him onto a gurney and wheeled him inside.

He opened his eyes after what seemed to be minutes later, but a look at the wall clock indicated that he had been there nearly three hours. He was laying on a cot in the emergency room. He still felt weak, nauseated and dizzy. A nurse saw his eyes open and came over to him, "Mr. Smithson, are you feeling any better sir?"

He wasn't. He looked at his left arm and was surprised to see that it was still bleeding heavily. As he had raced down the blocks in his car he had somehow managed to pull the arrow from his arm but it had only made it bleed more profusely. Why hadn't they bandaged him up or something? "Not really," he managed to say, then asked, "Don't you think you need to put something on this arm," as he held it up as high as the pain would allow.

"What makes you think that you need a bandage Mr. Smithson," the nurse responded. "There's nothing wrong with your arm." She couldn't see it. Even though the entire left side of Joshua was covered in blood and the cot on which he lay was stained a deep red, she had no idea that he was hurt. "The best we can tell, you had something that didn't agree with you for breakfast which made you pass out. You're lucky you were able to stay conscious long enough to get here. But you should be fine now. We were just finishing up the release forms for you to sign. You should be fine."

Josh realized that this whole scenario was spiritual. He had been sorely wounded by the beast, Dicronifer. He was infected with the poison from the arrow but no one knew it. Would he die with no physical explanation? How could he convince the medical staff of the seriousness of his wound if they couldn't even see it? He tried to raise up but when he put weight on his left arm, he fell back to the bed screaming.

"What's wrong Mr. Smithson? Are you in some kind of pain?" asked the nurse.

"My . . . arm," he managed to say.

"I'll get the doctor and be right back." Josh laid back down on the bloody cot.

When the nurse returned with the doctor, a man about Joshua's age, blond hair and probably very handsome appearing to the ladies, he immediately began asking questions. "How long have you had this pain?" he asked. "Have you ever had a history of arthritis or rheumatoid?"

How could Josh let the doctor know that the infliction in his arm came from a flaming, poisonous arrow that had been flung into his flesh by a demon? He would be transported directly to the psychiatric ward if he tried to explain. Instead, he said, "No, nothing like that. Maybe I just slept on it wrong last night. I think I'll be fine now doctor, thank you."

"I'll write you out a prescription for some mild pain medicine but otherwise I think you'll be okay." That was easy for him to say. "Perhaps you should take the rest of the day off and get some rest."

Man; in all the confusion he had forgotten that he was on his way to work. His first day back from vacation and he was already several hours late. This wasn't going to be easy to explain. But how could he possibly work in this condition?

"Thanks doctor, I'll do that." Joshua once again began to lift himself from the cot. He managed to stand trying not to grimace but he knew he hadn't been very successful. If it wasn't so serious it would be nearly funny. He could sure use Jerimeil right now. He signed all the papers for his release and the insurance company and began to painstakingly walk down the hallway that would lead him back to his car. His mind was on what he was going to say to Bert Holloway.

"Just a minute sir," he heard a new voice coming from behind him. He turned to see who had spoken to him and found that it was another nurse, or at least she was dressed like a nurse. With her shoulder length, brunette hair and her shapely form, his mind wandered from his current situation. She looked very familiar in a way.

"Yes?" he answered.

"Josh, could you step in here for a moment?" she asked. He hadn't seen her in the emergency room but he figured she may have seen his papers which would explain how she knew his name. He was a little taken back because she was the first in the hospital to call him Josh and not Mr. Smithson. "Sure," he responded as he began walking her way.

She had been standing in a doorway and as politely as he could he walked past her and into the room. She closed the door being careful to leave it slightly cracked then motioned for him to have a seat in the office chair. It was a storage room of sorts with medicines, bandages and other supplies lining the shelves. A desk sat in the middle of the room with the office chair behind it, in which he now sat.

Joshua watched as she busied herself getting antiseptic and bandages. "That's a very nasty wound there. I'm not sure why no one else seemed to notice it, unless they thought it was artificial blood that went along with that ridiculous Halloween costume. Why would a grown man dress like that in the middle of July anyway?"

What was this? Could she actually see his wound and the armor? Being careful not to reveal anything he asked, "Miss, what are you talking about?" He had no idea why he had addressed her as "Miss;" he didn't know whether she was single, married, widowed or divorced.

"I guess the others working in the emergency room were just being polite. They see all kinds you know. But this one takes the cake. Do you know how ridiculous you look dressed like a Roman soldier – over top of your street clothes at that! What's your gig Josh?"

Stumbling for something to say all he could manage for the moment was, "I can't really comment on that right now." That was a cop-out.

"Did you manage to cut yourself with that expensive looking sword you've got there," then without hardly finishing her sentence, "Say, you haven't become one of those Star Wars freaks have you?"

Josh knew immediately what she was referring to. He had seen all those people who gathered for the annual Star Wars reunions on TV. He didn't really understand why grown men and women dressed up like characters from the series of movies. He had no problem with those who filled their vacations and spare time like that, but it seemed a waste to him. He could see how she might take him for one of them.

"No, I didn't cut myself with the sword," he replied sheepishly. "Like I said, I can't really comment on that right now."

"Okay; your business. It just seems out of character for a big-time successful lawyer like yourself, that's all."

Now his curiosity was really stirred up. This woman had to have looked at his papers, or she knew him somehow, "Do I know you ma'am?"

"You don't recognize me, do you?" She seemed a bit hurt, insulted and playfully teasing all at the same time.

"I'm sorry. You look familiar to me, but I deal with so many people on a daily basis, I just can't pull it out of my head where I may have met you. You seem to know my name; may I ask what is yours?"

She tore the bloodied sleeve from his shirt, "This is ruined so I'm sure you don't mind," then began to clean his wound. It almost seemed that she was having fun as she applied the burning antiseptic to his arm.

"Well?" insisted Josh.

"Karen . . . Karen Lacey," she responded not taking her eyes from what she was doing. Josh rolled this name around in his mind, then remembered a freckle faced girl from his grade school years back in Crothersville. "Not the Karen Lacey from Crothersville?" he questioned.

"Well, what-da-ya-know! He hasn't completely forgotten about his roots, has he?" Karen playfully insulted him.

"Look, Karen, I would really like to catch up on old times, but what if I told you that I was hit with a flaming arrow that had some kind of poison on it? I feel weak and dizzy-headed; do you think that you could give me something that might take care of that?"

"Didn't the doctor give you a prescription?"

"Yeah, but it's for some kind of mild pain, not one to counteract poison."

"Sorry, Josh, but I'm not allowed to give out medicine without doctor's orders; I could lose my job for that," she responded, sounding more sympathetic now. "But do you really expect me to believe that you were hit by a poisonous, flaming arrow on the streets of New York? Come on Josh, that's a bit farfetched, even for this city, isn't it?"

"I've got the arrow in my car if you care to take the time to look," he responded.

With a laugh of disbelief and a shake of her head Karen spoke again, "Look, Josh, I don't know what you're into here but it's really all a bit suspicious to me. Are you in some kind of drug ring or something mob associated? I mean, what do you expect me to believe with you dressed the way you are carrying a weapon around your waist and talking about being hit with an arrow ... it sounds like something out of an old gladiator movie!"

He could see her point. Wanting to explain to her what had happened, he decided to take the risk; just maybe she would understand. After all, she had been the only one so far, that wasn't a spirit being, and who could actually see his wound and the armor. Maybe he should wait and talk with Jerimeil about it. But she was her now and wanted answers. "Karen, I'm going to confide in you. You just might think that I've flipped my lid ..."

"I already think that," she interrupted.

"Okay, okay, I would too if I were in your shoes," then with a sigh he said, "So, here it goes," and with that he began to tell her all about his encounters with Dicronifer, from his childhood under the shoe tree back in Crothersville to all that had taken place over the last two weeks. As he spoke, she continued to work on his arm, never glancing up as Joshua spilled his guts. He finished by saying, "and that's the story. I know you must think that I'm ready for a white jacket and a ride to the funny farm, but, Karen, what I've told you is the honest truth."

As she put up the gauze and antiseptics she spoke hesitantly, "Josh, I think I understand. You see, just before I finished high school, I too had an experience with the Lord. It wasn't as dramatic as what you just described but it was very real and has affected my life forever," as she turned to face him Joshua could see tears trickling down the sides of her cheeks. "Somehow, I guess that's why I can see your wound and the armor when all the others can't. I don't know; all my life I've felt like there was something else, something more that I was to be doing. But I could never lay my finger on it. Since I've been here the Lord has allowed me to not only help people medically but there have been incidents where I have been able to share the love of God with others and it's made a huge difference, not only in their lives but in mine as well." Then, like shifting to a new gear in a big rig truck she said, "You know Josh, since this seems to be more of a spiritual thing rather than a physical one and I can't legally give you something for the poison in your system, maybe I have a better solution anyway; what if we prayed together about it?"

Josh hadn't thought of that. She just might be right. After all, the Bible did say in the book of James that the prayer of faith would save the sick. "Yeah," he began slowly as if digesting the idea, "Karen I never thought of that. I think I'd like that very much." So, they prayed together, somewhat awkwardly at first, but by the time they were finished they felt much more comfortable with it.

After their prayer Josh started, "Karen, it's kind of funny, isn't it, how that our lives have crossed again? It's almost as if it were meant to be."

"Maybe . . . who knows but God?" she questioned. Then, wiping the tears from her face a gleam replaced what had seemed to be sadness as she said, "You know Josh, I can't really give you any medicine for that poison, but if everything else that's been happening is spiritual, maybe the poison is too. It could be that God will administer spiritual medicine to counteract the spiritual poison that's infected you."

"You know, Karen, I'm only two weeks into this thing and I can't say that I've had a lot of experience in that area – none really – but from what I

remember reading in the Bible, I think you may be right." Josh did admit to feeling better. "Well, I guess I'd better get going. I've got a lot of explaining to do to Mr. Holloway. Listen, Karen, how can I get in touch with you," he finished.

Sternly but even more playfully this time, she responded with, "Hey mister! I'm not that easy you know!"

"I'm sorry Karen. I didn't mean to come on too strong; but I really would like to talk about old times and catch up with what's happened in our lives since. What do you say?" She pulled a sheet from the "sticky note" pad on the desk and wrote down her phone number and address, and cautiously handed it to Josh, "Okay, but you better not abuse this privilege," she said with a smirk.

"Don't worry, I won't," promised Josh.

The drive home was a quiet one. He had never taken the freeway at this time of day and was surprised at how much the traffic had thinned. He turned over in his mind all that had just taken place. He thought about Karen and their old school days. The truth of the matter was that he had carried a huge crush on her back in grade school. It was in the sixth grade when he thought there was no girl like her in the entire world. But her boyfriend at that time was a big blond headed guy named Kim Brandenburg. Kim was tough and bullied all the other boys, particularly those smaller than him. He used to pick on Joshua a lot in those days.

During high school he and Karen were in different classes so he eventually lost interest in her. Besides, Kim was now on the basketball team and Karen had become a cheerleader. She was way out of his league. He had no idea what had happened to them after that. He concentrated more on his studies and had figured out what he wanted to be in life, so he hit the books hard in order to make the grades and get into a good college, then move on to law school. With a goal like that he had no time for girls and to be honest, hadn't really thought much about dating since. Oh, there were times he longed for some female companionship but he generally pushed it out of his mind with something like, "I'll take care of that later when I'm better established in the firm."

But now, since becoming reacquainted with Karen, he couldn't stop thinking about her. "This is silly," he thought to himself, "With this new mission in life what business do I have getting involved with a woman? Besides," he thought, "A lady like her probably wouldn't have anything to do in a romantic way with a guy like me anyway." He dismissed it from his mind but still wanted to get with her to rehash old times. He had pulled out the slip of paper with her information it out with intentions of just throwing it away, but reconsidering, he put it back into his shirt pocket.

“We’ll just hang on to this a bit longer and see what happens,” he thought.

Chapter 18

*F*or the next few days Josh took it easy. Both Dicronifer and Jerimeil had been silent and neither had shown up, and for that he was somewhat relieved. He needed the time to heal and to think things through. Because of his "automobile accident" (or at least, that was the best stretch he could come up with; he had noticed a couple of new scratches on his car since the incident) he was able to take a few sick days that had built up since coming to the company, although he didn't sense the same "at ease" attitude from Bert Holloway, his boss. It was nearing three weeks since he had been to work and he knew he was pushing the line. But with all that had happened he was thankful for this time. Who would have thought three weeks ago that he'd be in the position in which he now found himself?

He hadn't wasted this time, filling it with more Bible study, prayer and going over the instructions he had been given by Jerimeil. His Bible had become a constant companion. He had purchased a leather pouch just the right size for it and attached it to the belt of truth and so it was always with him and he felt it to be of equal value as the double-edged sword that hung on the other side.

He also spent a lot of time practicing with the sword and shield. He had discovered the hard way that they were his most valuable weapons against Dicronifer and that hideous blacksnake. He chuckled as he thought again about "Ole' Stubby" as he had come to nickname the snake since slicing off the end of its tail.

Everything had been strangely quiet and even though he welcomed this time he knew it wouldn't be this way forever. Little did he realize how much his life was about to change in the next few hours.

By now he was beginning to suffer from boredom and had started interpreting it as laziness, even as his eyelids grew heavy. He thought, "I've got to get back to work," just before he slipped into a deep slumber on the couch. In his dreams he was once again doing battle with Dicronifer. His sword blazed as he fought with the demon on one side and "Ole Stubby" on the other. He was holding his own when Dicronifer pulled a new weapon from his arsenal – a monstrous, jagged sword of his own. The demon raised it high over his head, ready at any instant to let it fall on him with his full fury. Then with one of his horrible laughs Dicronifer swung downward. Josh was totally unprepared and he cried out, "Help! I'm in trouble!" He was startled from his dream by the words, "Yes, you most certainly are."

Rubbing his eyes to bring them into focus, he saw, as he half-expected, Jerimeil seated across from him. Did this guy have impeccable timing or what? As if forgetting for a moment that Jerimeil was able to hear his thoughts, he said, "Oh, Jerimeil ... what did you say?"

"I was agreeing with you Josh. Yes, you are in trouble," returned the angel.

"Okay," began Josh slowly, "so I was dreaming. How does that make me in trouble?"

"Joshua," began Jerimeil as if he had been waiting a lifetime for someone to ask him this very question, "You need to learn that now everything about you is affected by your mission. Even your very dreams are like warnings; prophecies of what is to come. Give heed to them my young friend. I can't tell you much but I can tell you this: The terrible weapon you dreamed about is indeed just one of the many and awful articles of destruction found in Dicronifer's arsenal. Watch for it because one day when you least expect it, he might use it, as well as a host of others."

"You know Jerimeil, sometimes it just doesn't seem fair. I mean, I was just minding my own business trying to make a living when all of this was sprung on me. What did I do to deserve all this?"

"Young man, it isn't what you did to deserve this; it's what you have been chosen to do by Jehovah Himself. Why do you think Dicronifer revealed himself to you during your childhood? Even then he knew you were to be his foe. Do

you think that was all just a terrible coincidence? Since birth the Almighty God of Heaven has been preparing you for this time.”

“Okay, but what if I had chosen not to follow His plan? What then? Would God just have thrown me aside and picked someone else? Would He have forgotten about me?”

“Oh no, my son; in no way would God have ever done that. Yes, He would have given the mission to another but He would never have forgotten you. He is a merciful God just as you have read in the Scriptures. He would never have cast you aside although you wouldn’t have been operating in His will. But He never gives up on anyone.”

“I’m sorry Jerimeil. I don’t mean to doubt. I’m just feeling a little, oh, I don’t know, bored, depressed, I need to move on. This waiting is really taking a toll on me.”

“Well then, things are about to look up. A new chapter begins today my boy. But it isn’t going to be an easy one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sorry, I can’t tell you any more than that but just know that things are about to get, shall we say, very interesting.”

“Awe, now why would you say a thing like that? You rouse my curiosity then jerk the rug out from in under me.”

Both responded with a chuckle. Jerimeil knew that Joshua was only kidding, but Josh also knew that Jerimeil could only do and say so much. He really did understand even though it was very frustrating at times.

“I can tell you this Joshua Smithson, you are getting ready to meet your partner.”

“My what - partner? You never said anything about a partner before! Why do I need a partner?”

“Okay, okay, don’t get overly excited with this wonderful news,” teased Jerimeil, “You of all people should know that very seldom in history as recorded in the Bible did God send anyone to do a job all by themselves. Nearly every time others were involved. The Bible gives the credit to Moses for putting together the Tabernacle with all those artifacts and works of art, but in reality,

Moses possessed none of those skills. Had it not been for people called to help him none of it would have come about as it did."

"Yeah," Josh reluctantly agreed, "I see what you mean. You're right I suppose. I just hadn't thought about a partner and I'm still getting over the shock of it. So, who is he? When will I get to meet him? Don't you think we'll need some time to train together?"

"Take it easy, son, take it easy; all in due time. You'll understand soon; just be patient."

"Well, now that I think about it, a partner would be really nice. I mean, the other day Dicronifer almost had me when he hit me with that poisonous arrow. I thought I was a goner."

"And you would have been had God not interceded."

"God interceded? Man, I drove myself to the hospital, half dazed I might add. I couldn't convince the doctor that anything was wrong with me. If it hadn't been for Karen, well, it may have been a lot different."

"Precisely my son. God gave you the strength to get to the hospital and it was God who provided a fellow believer to be able to see into the spiritual. There's no doubt that God was looking out for you."

"Well, I guess so, if you put it that way. It's hard to see those small miracles when they're taking place. We humans give ourselves too much credit. don't we?"

"Frankly, yes. If people could only realize the protecting hand of God upon them as they go hurtling down the highway and as they put themselves in precarious and dangerous situations."

"But," Joshua questioned, "Why then do some get killed? If God is always protecting and watching out for us why do the innocent often die?"

"Many have asked that very question over the centuries, my boy. The answer is really a simple one, although most don't want to hear it. The fact is that God does warn people. They will get a feeling, actually the Holy Spirit, telling them that they shouldn't do what they are getting ready to do, or say what they're getting ready to say.

"Sometimes He allows something to happen, like a flat tire, that is meant to delay them and keep them from harm and they can only see the

inconvenience through their anger. When they don't heed those warnings often it puts them right back into the trouble God is trying to save them from.

"Too, many times the innocent die because of the harsh judgment or intentions of others. God will not violate the free will He has given to man, even when he uses it for selfish and evil things. Sometimes others suffer from man's bad decisions."

"Wow; didn't know I was going to get a Sunday school lesson today. But thanks; I'll remember that."

Both of them grew silent for a time. Joshua's mind drifted to Karen. Mentioning her name to Jerimeil paved the way for her to invade his thoughts. Should he ask Jerimeil about her? He sported a crush on her in high school but he felt a little ridiculous about it now. Still, he couldn't stop thinking about her. It wouldn't be fair to involve her in his life right now. Things were way too dangerous.

"Human love; it's something isn't it," Jerimeil broke the silence. Once again Joshua had forgotten that the angel knew what was going on in his mind.

"I can't get even one by you, can I?" retorted Joshua.

With a laugh Jerimeil responded, "I'm afraid not my boy, I'm afraid not. But don't fret about it. A relationship will come in due time."

"She's a good woman, Jerimeil. I'd sure hate to see something happen to her. I don't want to put her in danger."

"Don't worry about her, my boy. Remember that she is one of God's children too. He is also looking out for her."

"She's strong in the Lord," responded Joshua. "I admire her for that. She stuck with what she wanted from life and she's been very successful."

"Yes, she has. But just as with all humans, things change. Life takes unexpected turns yet even those can be orchestrated by God. You should see her."

"You think so?" Joshua said as he experienced a skipped heartbeat.

With another laugh, Jerimeil said, "Sure. Don't worry about it; ask her. You'll never know until you do."

"Well, you probably know already so why not just save me a lot of trouble and tell me? Will she accept if I ask her out? I mean, I won't lose my focus or anything; just a friendly time to catch up on the past."

With a twinkle in his eye Jerimeil said, "Go ahead ... give her a call. It can't hurt. You've got some time; take a chance. You'll never know unless you try."

"You ornery angel you! Okay, okay, I'll call her. Just don't get wise on me if she says 'no'. She was awfully aggravated with me the other day."

"Oh, I know, I know. Don't worry about it; just do it." And with those words once again, in his mysteriousness, Jerimeil began to vanish before Joshua's eyes.

He felt better already. He needed these encouraging words and he felt Jerimeil, and ultimately God, knew it. A surge of strength and energy seemed to surround him and even though he had no idea what she would say, he picked up the phone and began dialing the number on the piece of paper Karen had given him.

While waiting for the phone to ring he thought about the prospect of a partner. This would really give him a boost, even though he had protested to Jerimeil about it.

After a couple of rings, she actually answered. Joshua drew a long breath. He hadn't felt like this since high school and his face turned red as he shrugged off his boyish fears. "Hello, Karen?"

"Yes, you were expecting Inspector Gadget or someone?" She smarted back.

He ignored her response and said, "It's me; Josh."

"I recognized your voice. You have another poison arrow in your car or something?"

Josh was beginning to get used to her wisecracks and they were starting to remind him of the way grade school girls would pick on the boys. In a fleeting second, he remembered how the girls used to chase him, slap him and yell at him, all in effort to get him to notice them. As kids the boys all pretended that they were annoyed by this physical teasing. It wouldn't do for another boy to get the idea that he loved the experience. But secretly, every boy enjoyed it immensely. "No, nothing like that. Hey, Karen, I was wondering if you'd like to

go to Spencer's with me tonight ... you know, to do some more of that catching up? What do you think?"

"Well," she began, "I'm terribly busy right now. I got a promotion the other day and it's a big responsibility. I couldn't be out late."

"Fine, that's fine. We'll eat early and when you're ready to go just let me know and we'll call it a night. What do you say? Well, just say yes, okay?"

"Okay ... yes. What time?"

With a flutter in his heart he suggested, "Why don't I pick you up at say 6:00? That will give us an early start and plenty of time. Besides, I've got to get back to work myself; I'm beginning to feel lazy just lying around here."

"Most men are, lazy I mean," she just couldn't get off the offensive, "But that sounds great. I'll see you at 6:00."

Joshua's heart raced ninety miles an hour. He was a grown man and had done battle with an actual demon. But the thought of this beautiful, petite lady made him feel like an ice cube in the Mohave Desert. After hanging up the phone he raced for the shower. It was now four o'clock so he had two hours to clean up from all his "lounging around." He had to get cracking!

Chapter 19

At 5:55 PM Josh was sitting in his car outside Karen's apartment building. "Don't want to seem overly anxious," he thought to himself. "If I show up too early, she might get the wrong idea." But then he didn't want to be late either. He decided to sit in the car until one minute before 6:00 and then he would go to the door. That should put him right on time.

Upstairs, Karen watched nervously out the window. "Why is he just sitting there?" she wondered to herself. "Maybe he's just getting up his nerve to come to the door," so she sat by the window being careful to stay far enough away so that he couldn't see her, "Don't want him to get the wrong idea."

Finally, Josh got out of the car and proceeded up the stairs to Karen's apartment. Karen let him ring the bell twice before she answered, even though she was standing just on the other side of the door. Finally opening the door Joshua stood, with his hands behind his back. She had seen him get out of the car with a bouquet of flowers so even though she knew what he was hiding, she pretended to be surprised when he handed them to her, "Thank you, Josh. I'll just get a vase to put these in and then I'll be ready."

As they approached the car Josh awkwardly jumped ahead in front of her to open the passenger door, "Man, it's been a long time and I'm pretty rusty at this," he thought as she stumbled around him to get in. They drove the seven blocks to Spencer's restaurant with silence intermittently broken by occasional

remarks about the weather and what had taken place that day. Both of them felt out of place and, for the moment anyway, Karen seemed to be fresh out of wisecracks.

Spencer's was a popular place to dine and typically there was a long wait for a table but it was early enough that they were able to be seated fairly quickly. Josh was thankful because he was fresh out of subjects for idle chit-chat.

The couple ordered their meals; salads and drinks came almost immediately. Karen began, "Well this is a first. I never thought I'd be on a date with the famous Joshua Smithson." The wisecracks were back.

"I don't know about famous," responded Joshua.

"Oh, come on! Your picture is in the paper all the time and I've seen you on the evening news too."

"You saw that?" questioned Josh, "The cameras always make me feel like a cat trapped in a dog pen – I never know where to put my hands and my perspiration level is always escalated," but he was impressed and glad that she had been reading about him and watching him on the news. "You've got a very important job you know. I defend people and try to help as much as I can and I suppose that means something but, Karen, what you do can be a matter of life and death. That's impressive."

She was glad that he didn't jump on the bragging-band-wagon but switched the subject to her, "Thank you, Josh. Most people don't notice. They see a nurse and think, 'oh she's just a nurse' never realizing that doctors wouldn't be able to find the Kleenex box without us."

"Well, I for one am glad you were on the job. If it hadn't been for you, I'm not so sure I'd even still be here," came back Josh.

Again, silence pursued as they fidgeted with their salads. Karen ventured a glance at Josh. If she hadn't understood, he would have looked more comical than anything with that helmet perched atop his head, and the weapons hanging from his belt. He reminded her of a royal soldier, very handsome and desirable if all this wasn't showing overtop of his suit. But because of her faith and knowledge from what she had read in the Bible she understood and so the brief smile quickly faded from her face. "I see you have a new piece of equipment on your belt."

"Oh, you mean my Bible. I decided to start carrying it with me. I'm not sure if others can see it or not since it isn't a part of the spiritual armor, but it's

good to have it with me. I suppose I'd never have time to pull it out and find a particular verse when I have to face Dicronifer again, but it's reassuring to know I have it ready anyway."

"This, Dicronifer did you say? Just what is he like, Josh?"

"He's the worse character I've ever encountered, and I've been around a few in my line of work. Karen, he's a real demon. The Bible talks about them but to actually see one, well, to be honest, it's scary. I never met a creature so full of hatred. He actually wants to kill and destroy everyone he comes into contact with. Like I said, I've met a few murderers and bad characters but even then, there's at least a sense of humanity in them. Most of them are sorry for what they've done and would take it back if they could. But Dicronifer; well, he doesn't regret anything and only hungers for more. He's like walking and talking evil."

Karen paused. She thought about what Josh had said. She had been a Christian a lot longer than him, but she had never encountered a creature like that. Then she asked, "Just how did you come into contact with a demon?"

"Really it isn't a recent thing. I mean, I hadn't seen him for years and frankly thought I never would again. But I first saw him way back in grade school."

"Yeah, you mentioned that before."

"No one knew, not even my parents. You're the first I've ever talked to about that experience, well, except poor old Tom Stanberry, for I only saw him a couple of times. I never understood why until recently. Those encounters were in a way preparation for what I've got to do now. He's the one responsible for Mr. Stanberry's death you know."

Karen was intrigued now. She started to ask him more about it but the waiter was coming with their food. He served them and they bowed their heads for a brief prayer of thanks for God's provision and then began to eat. But she couldn't get her mind off what Josh had just told her. The story back in Crothersville was that Stanberry couldn't kick his drinking habit and so decided to end it all. She would never for a moment suspected that a demon was involved in the incident. "Josh, I had no idea that it went down like that!"

"No one did, Karen. I was the one who found him hanging in his barn. I suppose that's why I kind of became a social outcast after that. I even quit fishing when that hideous blacksnake came up out of the water."

"Wait a minute; you never mentioned a blacksnake. You've got to tell me about this one." And so, Joshua proceeded to tell Karen the entire story. He could see that she was engrossed with every word. In fact, it felt good to get it off his chest. They had a good laugh together when he ended by telling her how the snake got his nickname of "Ole' Stumpy."

They finished with their meals and Josh handed the waiter his credit card to pay the bill. He was wondering what they were going to do next. Perhaps Karen would just want to go home. After all, he had only gotten this date with her on the promise that he'd get her home early. The waiter returned with his card and he was about to suggest making a stop at a nearby park to just sit and talk some more when Karen got the strangest look on her face. "Something's not right," she said.

"What do you mean Karen? Was there something wrong with the food? What is it?"

"I'm not sure. I can just sense it. Someone's in trouble." Josh could see the pained look on her face and could nearly feel the compassion she felt inside for whoever was in trouble. But how did she know? "Josh, you've got to get me out of here; I'm, I'm beginning to feel strange . . . nearly sick," Karen interrupted his thoughts. They quickly left the restaurant and stepped outside. The evening air seemed to help but then she ran to the ally beside the restaurant and as politely as she could discarded the contents of her stomach.

"Karen, are you going to be okay?" Josh asked.

"Yeah, sorry about that, but I think I'm better now," she answered. They began walking towards the car when she suddenly stopped in her tracks once again with a pale look on her face,

"Karen?"

"Josh, something is terribly wrong. I've never felt it this strongly before," she answered.

"This is something you've felt before?" questioned Josh.

"Sometimes; I just get a strange feeling that someone's in terrible danger or in trouble. Usually, I can pray and it leaves, but not this time. I don't understand what's ..." and then she stopped mid-sentence and slowly began to look up. Josh watched with great concern as she panned the night sky. Had she flipped out? Could this beautiful young woman whom he had been infatuated with as a teenager really be a nut case? But then he looked down at himself and

saw his spiritual armor and realized that she had to be thinking the same thing about him.

Interrupting his thoughts she pointed, "There . . . Up there on top of that building . . . do you see him?" Josh followed her finger, not really knowing what he was looking for when, just as if a floodlight had suddenly been turned on, he spotted what she was pointing to. On top of the building a block and a half down the street a figure was standing on the ledge of the seven-story structure. It certainly looked like suicide to him. But there was more. In the dim light he could also see an eight foot or so figure behind the person on the ledge, his hand outstretched like he was trying to push the victim. Josh also caught a glimpse of something moving, curling around the feet of the taller figure.

"Dicronifer!" was all Josh could say.

"Oh, Josh, we've got to do something. That poor man is about to jump from that building. Somehow, we've got to stop him!" The tone in Karen's voice was one of pained panic. Josh could tell that she was literally feeling what the person atop the building was experiencing. He knew that this was going to be an even more dangerous and challenging encounter with the demon and his stubby-tailed snake because it wasn't just him against them but this time, he also had the troubled individual and Karen to look out for. "Karen, you stay here and call 911. I'll go see what I can do," responded Josh. He thought, "This way at least she would be out of harm's way."

"Not on your life Bucko! I'm going with you! I saw it first remember." Josh knew that any further arguments would be futile and just a waste of precious time. They had to act now or they were going to witness the suicidal influence of Dicronifer first hand. They ran the block and a half to the building which fortunately had an elevator. Josh knew that we wasn't in that good a shape to run up seven flights of stairs to the roof and have the energy to go straight into combat with Dicronifer without catching his breath, and certainly, knowing what he knew about the creature, that would be the case. Reaching the seventh floor they quickly found the access door to the roof. At the top of the stairway, Josh grabbed the door knob and was about to push it open when Karen said, "Wait . . . Josh; step to the side as you open the door."

It proved to be excellent advice, and it was once again as if Karen knew what was about to happen because as soon as the door was pushed open a flaming arrow struck the back wall. Dicronifer knew they were coming and was ready for them. "Quick, Karen, get behind me," responded Josh and he held his shield in front of them as they exited onto the roof. Instantly a handful of fiery arrows were flung in their direction, and several embedded themselves into the shield. From his past encounters with Dicronifer he was very alert in scanning

the rooftop. He knew that "Ole Stubby" was lurking about somewhere. Sure enough, from the corner of his eye he saw the blacksnake flinging himself from his right side and he instantly swung his sword to counteract the snake's strike. He didn't cut anything off this time but he did succeed in stopping the striking snake because his head hit right onto the flat of the sword nearly knocking both Josh and Karen over.

As the man stood on the ledge of the roof Dicronifer and the snake began a relentless attack on Josh. "Karen, see if you can get that guy down while I hold them off," spoke Joshua, but she needed no instruction because she was already running toward the man. Josh planted his feet firmly and braced himself for a furious battle and he was not disappointed because Dicronifer began hurling flaming arrows by the handfuls in Joshua's direction. He wasn't sure where his strength came from because he began a pattern of deflecting the arrows with his shield while swinging the sword with all his might as Dicronifer continued his onslaught. Simultaneously, the snake was striking from what seemed to be every direction. If it hadn't been a battle for life and death the situation would have appeared like he was having a very energetic dance with his weapons.

As Jerimeil had said, his dreams proved to be prophetic in nature because Dicronifer pulled a new weapon from somewhere - a jagged-edged boom-a-rang - and he flung it into the air. At the critical moment Josh raised his sword, edge out, as the treacherous weapon hit the sword then fell to the rooftop in two pieces.

The battle continued and Josh fought with strength he didn't know he possessed. Dicronifer must have figured that he was getting nowhere and so as if they had silently communicated, both the demon and the snake began to spread out and it looked as if they were moving toward Karen.

In a split-second Joshua glanced her way and he saw her taking the man's hand and helping him down from the roof. Strangely he could hear her voice as he started to chase the demon in effort to keep them away from her and the victim.

"It's okay sir. You don't have to do this. God has something better in store for you," he heard her say. In instinctive reaction to her words the man turned without protest as she helped him off the ledge and they sat down together on the rooftop.

The words flowed from Karen as if she were reading a script as she spoke with the man. "What's your name, sir?"

"James Copperfield," came the answer.

"May I call you James?" She asked. "Call me Jim," he responded.

"Jim, I don't know what this is all about. I'm not sure why these creatures want you to jump from this building, but it isn't what you really want to do, is it?"

"No. But I'm so frightened of them. It was as if I was compelled to do what they were telling me to do."

"Can you tell me what's so bad in your life that you think you have to end it?"

"I'm embarrassed to talk about it, but I guess I need to tell somebody or it may never go away. You see miss . . . miss . . ."

"I'm Karen, Jim."

"Karen, I've been a terrible husband to my wife. I love her with everything in me but I just can't help getting drunk on Fridays after work. Then I come home and take all my frustration out on her. Last week she told me that she had had enough and that if it happened one more time, she was going to leave me. I don't want that and I really want to stop. I want to be the kind of husband she needs. I want to support her and be kind to her. But something in me compels me to do it. I just can't stop!"

"Have you spoken to anyone else about this?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact, I have. There's this preacher who has a small church down the street. I stopped in there in the middle of the week and, well, it just seemed to be the right thing to do. I told him the whole story. He told me that the first thing I needed to do was to find God in my life. He also told me that after that, I needed to seek professional help; find a counselor and let my wife know that I'm serious about changing my life."

"That was good advice, Jim. I'm a nurse and I've run into others like you. There's only so much the medical profession can do. But I'm also a Christian. I found Christ several years ago and I can tell you first hand that He will make a difference. Look, Jim, if you're really willing to change and fix your marriage, I can help you find God right here and right now. Then I have a few contacts who are also Christians that can help you with the counseling the pastor spoke to you about. Is that what you want, Jim? Are you ready, really ready to make the change?"

In torrential tears now Jim responded, "Yes, yes, yes. Karen, yes, I am."

"Then pray with me," she instructed him and instantly began to pray the sinner's prayer, allowing time for Jim to speak with her.

Josh witnessed all of this as he continued to chase Dicronifer doing everything he could to keep him away from Karen and Jim. But the demon and the snake were ever widening their distance making it tough to hinder what they obviously intended to do. They were both very close now to the praying pair. He could see a pained expression on Dicronifer's face and he knew that together, he and Karen were succeeding.

Just then, the snake struck hard and furiously at him. Josh once again blocked the snake, this time with his shield. The creature struck with strength Josh had never felt from it before and it was successful in knocking him off his feet. Fully expecting a second strike while he was down, he rolled into defensive position, but instead of striking he saw the snake nearly smiling at him and he instantly knew that this had been a part of their evil plan. Josh, still swinging the sword even while on his back, knew that he was in a very weak and precarious position. He looked towards Dicronifer, ready for another hail storm of flaming arrows to be flung his way. Instead, Dicronifer was preparing a handful of those things to throw at Karen and Jim. There was no time to get on his feet and jump between them and in his desperation, he screamed, "NO-O-O!"

It was enough of a warning to get Karen's attention. Then something completely unexpected happened. In his mind's eye he thought that his warning would cause her and Jim to jump out of harm's way. Instead, Karen looked straight into Dicronifer's eyes and confidently, defiantly and commandingly said, *"Not by power, not by might, but by My Spirit, says the Lord!"* (Zechariah 4:6). As she did, she pointed her finger directly at Dicronifer. Instantly, from out of nowhere, a transparent shield formed, large enough to cover both Karen and Jim. As the handful of flaming arrows departed from the clenched-fisted Dicronifer, they all struck the shield bouncing off, actually ricocheting in every direction. Josh had to hold his own shield over his head to keep a couple of them from hitting him.

One of those arrows went flying back in Dicronifer's direction and squarely struck him in the chest penetrating his hairy body. The demon cried out as he pulled it out. He was in horrible pain as he looked at Karen, and then at Josh and screamed, "YOU! YOU! And YOU! You will get yours! This is not the end of the matter!" and with that both he and the blacksnake fled, jumping from the roof. They continued their retreat in mid-air and then vanished from sight.

The battle was over. Josh was totally exhausted. He got up from the rooftop and walked over to Karen and Jim, "Are you okay?" he asked.

Karen looked at him nearly dumbfounded at what had just happened, "Yeah, I think we're fine." Then looking at Jim asked, "Are you okay Jim?" In nearly the same breath she looked at Josh and said, "Josh, this is Jim; Jim this is Josh."

"Hi Josh. Man, I'd be a goner if you two hadn't showed up. You saved my life," then looking back to Karen, "and Ma'am, you saved my spirit." Jim had given his life to the Lord even while the battle had been taking place. As they all walked from the roof and back into the elevator Karen counseled Jim a bit more, then gave him the business card of a Christian counselor she knew, "Take this Jim. Give this man a call first thing in the morning and tell him that Karen Lacy recommended you. He will help you overcome your drinking problem and give you sound advice about how to handle this with your wife. Things are going to be okay. If you'll stay on the path you've chosen tonight, you will save your marriage and get your life back together."

"I'll do it," he said.

Josh and Karen gave Jim a ride home and after he left the car and disappeared into his house Karen looked over to Josh and said, "You sure know how to show a girl an exciting time. I'll never forget this date."

With a laugh Josh agreed, "I know what you mean; I won't either. But, Karen, how did you know that Jim was in trouble? And most girls would have been eager to do what I had asked, staying behind and calling 911. You had a strength and courage that many men don't have. You didn't seem afraid to face the demon and his sidekick. What's that all about?"

"I'm not sure," she responded. "It was as if I wasn't Karen Lacy anymore, and it was natural for me to be at your side during the battle. Talking with Jim, convincing him to go ahead and follow the advice of the pastor he had spoken to, just flowed out of me like a fresh spring of water. I've got to admit, it also gave me a rush that I nearly enjoyed."

Josh paused in thought for a moment. He wasn't sure how to respond. And then it hit him. He remembered the last conversation he had with Jerimeil. He looked Karen square in the eyes and said, "You . . . you're . . . my partner!?"

Chapter 20

"Partner?" she questioned, "Joshua Smithson, just what do you mean by that?" It sounded more like some kind of advance, and even though she had fond thoughts of Josh, she didn't want to give him the wrong impression.

"Listen, Karen, earlier today I had a talk with the angel, Jerimeil. I told you about him, right?" Karen slowly nodded her head. "He sprung it on me, I guess the way I just sprung it on you. Having a partner was something I wasn't anticipating. But he told me that I'd soon meet my partner."

"And you think that I'm that partner? Listen, Josh, I've got a career that I'm dedicated to. I can't just go off fighting with demons and such. Besides, that armor would look a lot worse on me. I don't think I'm ready for that."

Joshua tried to imagine the invisible armor on Karen and nearly shivered at the thought of how it would detract from her femininity, and then continued, "Karen, I didn't think I was either. In fact, new things are being revealed to me every day. When Jerimeil first came to me I had no idea that I'd be walking around wearing an invisible suit of armor. I would never have imagined sword fighting with a demon and "Ole' Stubby." And I never in my life imagined battling evil with a partner. But here we are."

When Josh mentioned "Ole' Stubby" Karen gave a half smile. It was a humorous name but one would be wrong to underestimate the large blacksnake.

She had seen how fiercely it had attacked Josh. If it could have gotten to him it would certainly have tried to kill him. "I just don't know Josh; I just don't know."

A moment of silence followed and Joshua thought about what he had just told Karen. It really was a shock and she was right to resist. They hadn't seen each other for years except for during the last few days. Even though he had that crush on her in their earlier years they really never spoke to each other and were more like casual acquaintances' passing through the halls of the school. They had never had a serious discussion until just recently.

Still, he felt something for her. She was indeed a special woman. She could be funny and almost flirtatious while at the same time speaking with wisdom you'd expect from a person twice her age. He did respect her feelings and ended their conversation with, "I understand, Karen. I guess if I were in your shoes, I'd feel the same; maybe even run in the opposite direction. I'm sorry I pushed that on you so abruptly. I guess we both need to pray about it and see what God wants from us. You know, the excitement of it all, well, it gets the adrenaline rushing and we men have a way of just putting it out there. In spite of all the thrill and danger I did have a great time tonight and I'd love to see you again."

Inside Karen was glowing. She had hoped that they could see more of each other but she didn't want Josh to suspect, so she responded with, "I had a great time too, Josh. We'll see. Let's give it a day or two and see what happens. In the meantime, I've got to get up early for work and it is way past my bedtime now. Got to go . . . call me," and she stepped out of the car. Joshua watched as she walked up the steps to her apartment building, admiring everything about her. She was even more beautiful as a young woman than she had been all those years ago as a child and teenager. He hoped she would think that he was just being polite and waiting for her as any gentlemen should, until she got safely inside, but in reality, he wanted this moment to last a lifetime.

She disappeared with a quick glance and wave at him as she closed the door to the apartment building and Josh started the car. He sat there for awhile playing their possible relationship over in his mind before pulling away.

Inside her apartment Karen ran to the window and as she had hoped, Josh hadn't pulled away yet. She was careful to peer from it so he couldn't see her; that impression thing you know. But it was flattering that he felt something for her as well.

She thought about him doing battle with the demon, Dicronifer. Even though she hadn't flinched then, it made her shiver now. Josh had put his life on the line defending her and Jim. It was as if the entire incident had jumped right

off the pages of Camelot. She had cared for him before but only in a flirtatious, casual way. Now, and she shook her head at the idea, she felt she may be falling in love with this man who was crazy by worldly definition.

Still, she knew differently. She was a Christian. She had read about the spiritual conflict that goes on between good and evil, God and the devil, and the battle in the mind of mankind. It was no different except that Josh was fighting it physically instead of mentally.

She pondered the idea of being his partner. It sounded exciting and dangerous. But then she shook her head again in disbelief that she would even entertain it. After all she had a career. She had sacrificed a lot to get to where she was today and she wouldn't flippantly shrug it off.

As she prepared for bed her mind continued to dwell on all that had happened in the last few hours, and even though she tried to think of something else, it was if she had become a slave to these new considerations. With lights out she crawled between the sheets muttering, "It's way past bedtime; I'll never want to get up in the morning." But sleep seemed to escape her as her mind danced in thought like an impatient child on Christmas Eve. "What's wrong with me; I should be exhausted," she spoke out loud. Finally, after tossing and turning for what felt like an eternity, she drifted off.

The encounter with the demon filled her dreams. She relived her words with Jim as Joshua was doing battle with Dicronifer and the snake. Vividly, as if it were just happening, she watched as the hideous snake tried to work its way around to her and Jim. Josh was doing his best to cut it off as he continued to fight with Dicronifer. Then the flaming arrows were flying through the air in their direction. Her hand went out as the transparent shield formed around them and the arrows bounced from it like sparks from a sparkler on the Fourth of July. "I have powers," she spoke in her sleep.

"Yes, you do Miss, yes you do," came an agreeing answer. Where did that come from? Was it part of her dream? Rousing slightly, she opened one eye just enough to see a large man sitting on the chair at her dresser. How did he get in her room? Now she was fully awake and she sat upright in her bed, terrified, but also strangely calm as if she knew this was a kind man and meant her no harm.

"Who . . . who are you? How did you get into my apartment? What do you want?" she commanded as her questions spilled out one after another.

"Calm down Miss, I'm not here to hurt you." Somehow, she knew that and believed him. But still, a girl should protest at the appearance of a stranger

in her bedroom, "What makes you think you can just barge into a lady's room?" she screamed, even though she really wasn't angry.

"Relax Karen Lacey, relax. My name is Jerimeil, I believe our mutual friend, Joshua Smithson, has told you about me," replied the angel.

Jerimeil stood to his feet. As he did Karen was overwhelmed at his size. Josh had told her about him but to really appreciate who he was one had to see him personally. Standing at least eight feet tall with white hair, a very muscular build, he was clad in a navy-blue suit. His eyes were bluer than any she had ever beheld and his skin looked as if to touch it would be like running your hand down a fine silk garment. His features appeared ancient yet surprisingly youthful. It was time to stop protesting. She knew who he was even if he hadn't given her his name because Josh had told her all about him. He could be no one else other than Jerimeil. "Yes, Josh did tell me about you. But . . ."

"Not to worry Missy, not to worry. I completely understand. We spiritual beings can take your breath away," he answered nearly as a joke.

"Why have you appeared to me? You know, I really don't doubt what Joshua has told me. I've been a believer long enough and have read the Bible often enough to know that angels exist and I do believe in you. It wasn't necessary, really."

"Oh, I beg to differ, Miss Karen, I beg to differ. It is necessary that I speak to you in person. I need to explain a few things to you. Dicronifer is a very evil and terrible menace, and a threat to humans. He must be stopped."

"I've seen a little of his diabolical scheme," responded Karen. "He's like a wild animal, preying on the weak."

"Yes, but not just that; you see, his primary purpose is to keep men and women from coming to God. As a believer you understand why men and women need to come to God. You know about salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ. Dicronifer's primary mission from his master, Lucifer, you know him best as the devil, is to destroy those who are near to making a commitment to our Lord. His victims are most often those who have been in terrible trouble, or who have been dependant on substances, or even who have committed horrible crimes. You and I both know that they desperately need Christ. Dicronifer's specialty lies in convincing them that they are not worthy and they are the waste of humanity and that it's best to just end their lives in some form of suicide."

"Yes, I see; like Jim tonight."

"Miss Karen, I want you to know that your intervention along with Joshua's, saved that man's life. Dicronifer is good at what he does and he would certainly have succeeded had the two of you not been there."

"I think I speak for both of us when I say that we were glad to be there. But I have a question; you being a powerful angel and all, why don't you stop Dicronifer? Why place such an important mission on frail humans like Josh and me?"

"Ah, Miss Karen, that is a very good question. The truth is that I have fought with Dicronifer for centuries. But I am powerless to take his life-existence from him. Our God, the great Jehovah, is so adamant about observing the rights of the free-will of His creatures that we are forbidden to take the life of another, even one so evil as Dicronifer. Though we have spent much time trying to stop him, we cannot simply kill him. The other thing is that, just like mankind, angels are made to live forever – or better put, exist forever. I can't exactly call Dicronifer's existence living. Also, angels and demons are spiritual creatures. Our lives can't just simply be taken."

"But why us; what can humans possibly do against spiritually powerful creatures?"

"Miss Karen, your part is not so much to defeat Dicronifer as it is to save his victims. Yes, I am an angel and a very powerful creature. But my interference, while it may bring awe to people, is not enough to convince them of salvation. They look on angels as holy and untouchable beings. We are considered perfect, though we are not. We can tell people about their need for salvation, but the argument is much more convincing when it comes from another human who has experienced it. They can relate better. That's why you and Joshua are so important to this mission."

"Joshua said something about a partner. In fact, he seemed surprised and has some notion that I'm to be his partner. What's that all about?"

"You are to be his partner in this mission against Dicronifer. But, as I spoke a moment ago about free-will, you have a choice. You don't have to accept it. It won't affect your own salvation. You can choose. I completely understand if you decide not to take the position because it is very dangerous. But Joshua needs a partner. You yourself know that often men are rash in their decisions. They sometimes think with their physical abilities rather than their minds. His courage, might and power are necessary in the battles he will encounter against Dicronifer. But God also uniquely gave women abilities necessary in defeating evil. Women tend to think more clearly. They tend to lean to the spiritual side a bit more than men do. If Joshua is to have a partner

it must be a woman. Only the combination of a man and a woman will succeed in finally defeating Dicronifer. But it is dangerous. It will require sacrifice on both your parts. It will require the two of you to make decisions you never thought about concerning your careers and life-choices."

"It sounds like you're trying to talk me out of it," Karen replied half kidding.

"Not at all Miss Karen, in fact I'm hoping that you will accept the mission. But the great God, Jehovah will never force you to do this. Neither would He have me dress up the truth and talk you into something without knowing that it will require sacrifice and risk. But I will also tell you that it won't go without great reward in the end."

"Jerimeil, would I be given armor like Joshua's?" Karen asked trying to hide the fact that her feminine side dreaded wearing all that garb over her nice clothing. "A woman, Christian or not, still wants to look her best," she thought.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to look good as long as you aren't vain about it."

Karen's face turned red, "I forgot that you hear my thoughts as well as my words."

"Don't worry about it, Miss Karen. In every society, whether rich or poor, all women feel like you. God made you that way. As long as you don't go overboard and dress with modesty there is no wrong in it. The truth is that God gives each of His children special gifts. It is true that all believers have the spiritual armor. But not all physically wear it as Joshua does. You have been given your own weapons and gifts that demonstrate your part in this mission. Your very unique and special gift is in healing, like the healing words you spoke to Jim tonight. You also were able to raise that transparent shield to block the fiery arrows of Dicronifer. And don't forget the extra spiritual sense you had that danger was close and someone was in trouble. You have been given other gifts as well. From your conception God especially equipped you, just as He did Joshua and every other believer in this world. Your unique desires, abilities, talents and personality are all gifts from God. All have been called into service but each to his own service that fits who he or she is."

"Wow! I've been a believer for a long time but I never thought about it exactly like that. It is exciting and it makes a lot of sense."

"Miss Karen, many try to stereo-type a service, or as many humans call it, ministry, as including certain duties. It is a fault of humans to put descriptions

on service. But all are not the same. When a believer tries to serve Jehovah in the same way someone else has, that person will most certainly fail at some point. Just because one is successful doesn't necessarily mean that another can duplicate it and expect to succeed. Each of you must discover his or her own niche and do the service that God made only you to do. This will bring more success and will also fulfill you the way nothing else can. That is God's plan."

"So, and I'm not saying 'yes' just yet, but if I choose to be Joshua's partner, you're telling me that God has given me the gifts to be successful?"

"That is absolutely correct!" responded Jerimeil gleefully. The angel seemed overjoyed that she had understood the points he was making.

"How much time do I have to decide?" asked Karen.

"I wish I could tell you to take your time. Unfortunately, Dicronifer will strike again soon. Joshua doesn't know it yet but in two days I will be appearing to him once more. I will tell you that it will be the day after tomorrow at 4:00 PM in his apartment. If you choose to say 'yes', I would like for you to be there. I will have some more information that will apply to both of you. If you aren't there, please remember that it will not affect your relationship with God. But I also warn you that it might bring sorrow into your life, not as punishment for saying 'no' but only because of the regret you may carry with you. I hope to see you then." With these final words Jerimeil seemed to just vanish into nothing. Karen watched as the angelic being faded from sight and she knew he was completely gone when the indentations from where he had been sitting on the padded chair reformed to the original shape.

Karen didn't sleep much the rest of the night, although the two hours she did get seemed more restful than a full eight hours. She was surprisingly alert when her alarm clock went off the next morning and she got ready to go to work.

Chapter 21

On Thursday Joshua finally felt that he was ready to return to work. His muscles still ached from the intense battle on Tuesday night, but other than that he felt okay. From the tone in Mr. Holloway's voice the last time he talked to him by phone, he knew that he was close to crossing the line.

Besides, he was ready. It wasn't like his job would interfere with his mission from God or anything. He had heard of a lot of pastors who worked a job and still took care of a congregation, so why couldn't he? In a way he felt sort of like Clark Kent alias Superman. He would hold down his day job and still be able to fulfill his obligation to Jerimeil in the battle against Dicronifer and "Ole' Stubby."

He had been off from work for three weeks now; two weeks vacation and a week recovering from his "automobile accident." He wasn't sure how he was going to explain this to Holloway without lying about it –he couldn't do that; but he'd come up with something if his boss pushed the issue.

Fortunately, the trip in to work was uneventful; nothing like the last one. The traffic wasn't unusually bad, but he had noticed before that for some reason it normally wasn't on Thursdays. He supposed that was because so many were longing for the weekend and decided to take a "middle of the week holiday." He arrived at the office about half an hour early and had set his mind to get right to work and dig in to his next assignment. He was in the middle of unpacking his brief case when he noticed that the picture of his family, which normally sat on the far-right corner of his desk, was missing. "That's odd," he thought.

"Oh, hi Smithson; I wasn't expecting you back until Monday," spoke Bert Holloway somewhat nervously. Josh looked up to see his boss standing in the doorway. He was about to speak and return the welcome when a young man walked up behind Bert. Holloway turned to the man and for the first time in his life Joshua saw his boss's face turn a crimson red.

"Good morning, Dan; and how are you today?" Bert greeted the young man. Then without giving him a chance to answer he turned to Joshua and said, "Josh, this is Dan Buxton. He's new here. He just started this past Monday.

Josh wondered suspiciously about this latest addition to their office staff. He hadn't noticed a new desk in the outer room and he knew that all the side offices were taken. Had one of the other associates left the company? "Hi Dan," started Josh; "It's a pleasure to meet you, and welcome aboard."

"Good to meet you as well," spoke Dan coldly as he stretched his hand toward Josh. He grasped it and they shook but it seemed more like a thumb-wrestling match as they each tightened their grip.

"Joshua, we need to talk and catch you up on a few things ... could you grab your briefcase and come to my office please?" asked Holloway.

It wasn't at all like Bert. Why would he insist on Josh bringing his briefcase? Normally he would have said something like, "Get settled in and come see me when you're ready," or something similar to that. Without a word Josh did as Bert Holloway had asked and followed his boss. As they walked, he couldn't help taking a glance over his shoulder and he saw Dan entering his office. What was going on here? Josh noticed Bert pause and whisper something to Jane, his secretary before entering his own large, comfortable office.

Bert Holloway walked around his desk and took a seat in his lushly padded chair motioning for Joshua to be seated in one of the guest chairs facing him. He had expected to have a discussion with his boss regarding the extra week he had taken off but this felt more like he had been sent to the principal's office for misbehaving in school. "Josh," Bert started, "There's been some changes since you've been gone. I understand people needing a vacation and no one can help an unfortunate incident like an automobile accident, but three weeks is a long time. We've got a very heavy workload and I had no choice but to do something, so we hired Dan."

Josh could understand that. All the associates in their office were working overtime and had a case load that was nearly impossible to carry. He had no

problem with adding a new lawyer to the firm; in fact, it just might make things easier for all of them. But why was this new guy in his office? "I understand Mr. Holloway," began Josh. He had asked Josh to call him 'Bert' but something seemed strangely out of place so he reasoned that he should keep this more formal. Bert didn't protest. "We could really use the help," Josh continued.

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Josh. Dan is here to replace you. We just couldn't wait any longer. We had no idea if you'd actually be back on Monday or not. We had to do something. Though we do have a heavy workload our budget and profitability margin wouldn't allow us to simply add another associate so we had to make a choice."

Not sure of how to respond Josh protested, "But, Mr. Holloway, I'm back now. Things will be just as they were before, you'll see. This isn't necessary at all. Haven't I been a faithful employee all the time I've been here? Doesn't my track record speak for anything?" Josh was trying to maintain his composure but was feeling a little hot under the collar right now.

"Come on, son. Certainly, you understand our position. We had no choice."

"But you did have a choice. You could have called me to see where I was at with this thing. Look, I'm ready to go back to work and you'll see, I'm the same guy I was before," but Josh knew inside that this wasn't really true. He wasn't the same as he was before. He no longer felt that ruthless passion to get the job done. He needed the money but inside he knew that his primary focus was on his God-given mission.

"Josh, I'm sorry son. It has to be this way. We don't want any trouble here. Look, I've prepared you a nice severance check," returned Holloway as he shoved it across his desk at Josh. "Take it man and let's part peacefully. I've got the personal things from your office here," continued Bert as he reached down producing a brown box. The missing picture of his family was on top of several other items, including his bar certificate. "I'm sorry Josh but that's it." Then he pressed the intercom button summoning his secretary and said, "Jane, please send up the escort now." Now Josh knew what his boss had whispered to his secretary.

In a moment one of the building guards appeared and Bert Holloway motioning to him said, "This man will walk you out. It's been a pleasure working with you Joshua, and good luck."

Josh wanted to protest further. What was going on here? It didn't feel real – more like a dream; he was numb over his entire body and his world was

falling apart. He looked again at Holloway, and then decided additional words would only make matters worse. He stood with his briefcase in one hand and the brown box under his other arm. As he did, he glanced out the window behind Holloway. Dicronifer was bellowing in laughter atop the building across the street. Somehow, he had something to do with this. Bitterly he spoke a muttered "good-bye" and carefully avoiding the stares from his former fellow employees, followed the guard out of the building.

Once in his vehicle he leaned his head against the steering wheel and wondered, "Well, what now . . ."

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As Karen was driving to the hospital, she felt unusually keen and aware. She knew that after the night they had on Tuesday, even with "catch-up sleep" on Wednesday, she should still be exhausted and dragging in to work, but instead she felt more like a different person as she parked her car and walked into the hospital lobby making her way to her own workstation. "This is going to be a glorious day," she thought.

Beginning her customary daily duties, her minded drifted in thought to all that had happened; she was glad that she had become reacquainted with Joshua Smithson, and felt humbled that God would honor her as He had. She had been involved in conversation with a genuine angel. Not many people could boast of an experience like that.

About half way through the morning her supervisor approached her, "How are you today, Miss Lacey?" came her greeting.

"Oh, hi Margret; I'm unusually well today, and just how are you ma'am?" Margret Spicer was an older lady – probably around her mid-fifties, though no one knew for sure. She wasn't telling and it had become an office game to estimate her age behind her back, although Margret knew it was going on and rather relished being the mysterious supervisor on the third floor. She was short and heavy set. Her hair was a dyed-brown – you could tell because her gray roots would show about half an inch or so before she would return to the beauty shop for a "tune-up."

"I'm doing just fine, thank you. Say Karen, when you finish up with that could you look me up? I've got something I need to talk to you about."

"Sure Margret; no problem. I'll be there in ten minutes or so," answered Karen as she hurried herself so she could comply with her supervisor's wishes.

Margret didn't have a private office but rather sported a desk, chair, a couple of filing cabinets and a guest seat surrounded by three five-foot translucent dividers. Passersby could peer over the top and frequently did, especially from behind where Margret couldn't see them. It had happened so often that she had purchased a small shaving mirror which sat on the edge of her desk, pointing to the top of the divider behind her. Many had been the time when other employees had stopped and quietly taken a gander over her shoulder to see what they could discover about other employees from the paperwork that cluttered her desk. The mirror had stopped most of it but it didn't stop the occasional and quick "walk-by." They slowed their pace a bit in effort to get a good look, but they no longer lingered knowing that they would be spotted by the eagle-eyed Margret through her "review mirror."

Even more damaging than a look over the divider were those who would congregate across the aisle, eavesdropping when she had another employee in her office. At one time her dividers had been solid and carpet covered. But when she discovered that people were listening in on her conversations, whether over the phone or with a guest, she had requested the translucent dividers. At least if people were standing too close, she could see their silhouettes. This helped, but nosey people have creative ways of scooping their news.

This made Karen more uncomfortable as she made her way to Margret's semi-private office area. She had never participated in the eavesdropping gatherings, but she had witnessed them many times. Whatever Margret was about to tell her, she knew that it would be all over the hospital, or at least their floor, before she had taken three steps out at the conclusion of their meeting.

Even though there was no door, Margret had insisted that her employees knock on the divider before entering and so Karen complied. "Oh, hi again Karen; please have a seat."

"So, what's up?" Karen asked her. They had become casual friends over the last year. Karen was a conscientious worker and did everything she could to obey the rules. Though Margret was not a Christian, she admired Karen's stand and had more than once commended her on her willingness to conform to the hospital rules, as well as the little boundaries that she had requested. Margret had great respect for Karen because of her willingness to comply. This allowed the convenience of harmless puns and jokes. Both Margret and Karen had enjoyed them and Karen was very careful not to let any of them extend beyond the employee-supervisor relationship.

But today Margret seemed cold, ignoring Karen's question. "Karen, about a week ago, did you treat a man unofficially?"

There it was. When Josh had come in with his badly bleeding wound that one no one else could seem to see, she had pulled him into a storage closet and treated it for him. She knew now why only she could see it, but then it was all very strange to her. It was not her intentions to second guess the doctors but the evidence was there in plain sight. She had to do something, feeling compelled to help Josh. She needed time to think. She wouldn't lie to Margret but at the same time a frank admittance to the truth could cost her job.

"What . . . what do you mean, Margret?" This bought her a few moments.

"I'll get straight to the point, Karen. Look, you are a model employee. You've been the example I would have liked for all my employees to be. But I received a report the other day that you were seen taking a man that had been treated in the emergency room into a supply closet. When you both emerged the alleged report says that he was wearing a dressing on his arm that wasn't there when you went in. Karen, if this is true it not only breaks hospital rules but it means you treated a patient without doctor's orders and broke regulations. It could not only cause friction and problems internally with the hospital but if discovered outside these walls, could get the institution in trouble. What if something went wrong and the man decided to sue the hospital? There are just all kinds of repercussions here. So, I have to ask you, and I hope that you can unequivocally deny it."

Karen sat there for what seemed to be half an hour, but really was only a few seconds, struggling for an answer that wouldn't be an outright admission. This had to be the work of Jessica Fraily. Jessica was a young lady fresh from college. She had graduated nursing school with honors but her goal was to get to the top by stepping on heads. She couldn't settle for working her way up like most people and if she could get something on someone, she wouldn't hesitate turning them in all in effort to get their position.

She knew that Jessica was jealous of her recent promotion. It wasn't the most glorious job in the hospital but it did require responsibility. She not only assisted doctors from time to time, but did her rounds with patients and took inventory of the floor's supply closet. At the end of each shift, she would fill out the paperwork that would be used to replenish what had been used from the closet. That sounded simple enough but it also required one to be very alert. It would be all too easy to place a check on the wrong item which could have devastating effects on a patient's treatment. She also had to make sure that the right medicines and supplies had been issued and properly stored.

Jessica felt the responsibility would be a feather in her cap. Several times she had commented on how it seemed Karen had a "cush" job. It really wasn't

but it's hard to convince a jealous person of that. It had to have been Jessica who had turned her in.

"Well, Karen, I'm waiting. I have to tell you that your silence is not a good sign," interrupted Margret.

"Margret, I am well aware of the hospital rules and regulations. Do you really think that I would do something purposely to make the hospital look bad? I love my job and I don't want to jeopardize it." She was still stalling for time.

"That's still not an answer, Karen," responded Margret who seemed to be getting a little impatient now. There was nothing she could do short of lying. If she told the truth she could be fired; but if she lied, not only would she be going against her own Christian principles but she also knew that Jessica Fraily wouldn't let it go at that. She swallowed hard. She was in a corner and now all she could do was to own up to it and put herself into the merciful hands of God, "Yes, Margret. I did do that; but there were extraordinary circumstances. You see . . ."

Margret interrupted and as she shook her head she said, "Karen, there are no excuses. There can be no extraordinary circumstances. With your record I would really like to just discipline you with a few days off without pay, but this report has gone all the way to the top. It's out of my hands. I was told that if it were true that I had to let you go." She paused for a moment then continued, "I don't want to. You have been honest with me and that's just another great attribute to your record as far as I'm concerned. But the people upstairs have given me no alternative." A tear trickled down Margret's cheek as she said, "Karen, this is one of the hardest things I've ever had to do but let's go clean out your locker and I'll walk you to the door."

Karen knew she was deeply hurt. She had seen other employees let go and Margret always had a security guard walk them out. As far as she knew this was the first time her supervisor had ever offered to do it herself. "But, Margret," Karen attempted one more time to defend herself.

"Stop, Karen. I can't listen to any arguments. This is hard enough. Please, let's just get this over with."

Karen understood, though she couldn't help but feel bitter. Margret peeked over her shoulder as she removed her personal items from her locker. That was another hospital policy. They had to be certain that a dismissed employee hadn't stashed away medical supplies, medicines or pills. Afterward they began the walk through the gauntlet of starring eyes. She knew that everyone else already knew. She had desperately tried to be a good Christian

witness to these people and she couldn't help but feel she had let them down. Right then she felt a little angry at Joshua Smithson and even though part of her was very fond of him, at that moment she nearly hated him, blaming him for this tragedy.

As they neared the elevator that would take them to the first floor, she spotted Jessica Fraily. If there had been any doubt before that she had been the one who had turned Karen in, there was none now. The smirky half smile on her face spoke louder than a thousand words. At the front door Margret grabbed Karen and hugged her. Karen couldn't be mad at Margret. Her supervisor was only doing her job and she knew that this was just as unpleasant for Margret as it was for her. Climbing into her car she couldn't help but think, "How am I going to pay for this now?" Near panic grasped her mind as she thought of rent, food, credit card payments and utilities. How would she live until she could find another position? Who would hire her now with it on her record that she had given treatment unofficially to a patient and had second-guessed a medical professional? Her anger towards Joshua intensified with every fleeting moment. She had to get this off her chest right now. She wasn't headed home but to Josh's apartment. She knew that he was supposed to return to work today but that didn't matter. If he wasn't home, she would just wait until he got there.

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Josh was pacing the floor. Fear gripped at his heart as he thought about losing the job that had brought him so many fulfillments. It had been his vision to not only make a good living but to also use his position to really help others. That was all but gone now. How would it look on his record when applying to other firms? He had been fired for lack of attendance – not a good thing in a professional occupation.

Even though traffic was normally heavy on the street below his apartment, somehow, he heard a noise that drew his attention to the window. Stepping out on the balcony he saw Karen getting out of her car. "Isn't she supposed to be at work?" he thought, as he glanced at his watch to see if time had once again escaped him. This was strange.

As Karen parked and made her way to the apartment building entrance, she knew that steam had to be rising above her head because inside her temper was boiling. She had a mouthful to say to Joshua Bayne Smithson - right now! Feeling that her anger was justified, her steps quickened and it was as if her feet were pounding the sidewalk. Her sense of humor nearly made her look back to be sure she wasn't leaving deeply impressed footprints in the concrete.

Just before entering the building a tingly feeling ran up the back of her neck. She reached to feel if a bug had landed on her when from the corner of her eye, she saw movement. Snapping her head in that direction she stood stunned as a large blacksnake coiled around a bench on the sidewalk. It raised its head nearly smiling, if a snake can smile, and said, "You . . ." A glance around at people passing by revealed that no one was stopping – or running (depending on how much they may have been afraid of snakes) indicating that no one else could see what was taking place. Of course, many New Yorkers were noted for their out-of-the-way avoidance of anything happening on the streets. For the most part they had "seen it all" and only wanted to continue with their own business and not get involved. But the sight of a large snake coiled around a bench, talking none-the-less, well that would have attracted attention.

"You . . ." it spoke again, "We will get our revenge on you!" She had no intention of getting into an encounter right now and so without hesitation she flung open the door and nearly ran into the building as the snake's evil laughter faded with the closing door. Her anger level had taken a plunge, being replaced with fear and panic. But in her mind, she felt guilty that she had not seen the devil's hand in what had taken place.

She quickly made her way to Josh's apartment and rang the bell, fully expecting him not to answer. Before the bell had finished its tone routine the door opened and there stood Josh. "Karen . . . I didn't expect to see you today."

She pushed her way through the door not wanting to take any chances of "Ole' Stubby" following her. Josh looked not only surprised but also shocked, "Karen, what's going on?"

"Well, I guess I should ask you the same question," she fired back. "Weren't you supposed to be going back to work today?" Josh hung his head and starred at the floor. His reaction reminded her of a child who had been caught doing something he wasn't supposed to do and couldn't find the right words. She wasn't angry at Joshua now and in a way felt somewhat cheated in that. She knew something was amiss because Josh just wasn't the kind of guy to shirk responsibility and she knew that he wasn't lazy. "This day is just not going well," she finished.

Josh looked up at her and spoke, "You said it, Karen, you said it." He proceeded to tell her what he had just experienced.

When he finished, she told him her own story. "Don't you think it's a bit ironic that both of us would lose our jobs the same morning; what's going on, Josh?"

"I wish I could answer that question. The fact is, I'm as baffled by the day's events as you are. I know that somehow Dicronifer is behind it. I saw him as I was leaving my office and you saw "Ole' Stubby" downstairs as you were coming in. There's no doubt in my mind that this is their work. They have influenced Mr. Holloway and your Jessica in effort to get back at us. We really struck a nerve the other night when we stopped him from convincing Jim to jump from that building."

"Okay," started Karen, "now that we've established who's to blame, what are we going to do about it? Josh, I need my job and besides I really like being a nurse. Now that I have this on my record there isn't a hospital in New York that would be willing to take me on right now."

"I know what you mean. I'm kind of in the same boat. What law firm in town wants a guy who was fired for lack of attendance? Karen, I don't know what to do except to pray. We've both been trying desperately to be in God's will and here we are – in the pit of despair. You'd think a few blessings would be in order, wouldn't you?"

"You're absolutely right about one thing, Josh. We've got to pray. This is a spiritual battle that's being played out in our physical lives. We both know who is responsible. It isn't our former bosses or Jessica Fraily. They yielded to temptation just like all of Dicronifer's victims and became mere puppets to him. Josh, this is a battle just like the one we were in the other night except the weapons are different. Swords and arrows aren't swooshing through the air but we are in a fight just the same." With these words both Josh and Karen knelt at the couch and began to pour their hearts out to God. They knew now what they were up against and they weren't about to let Dicronifer win. Both of them were weeping, unaware of what the other was praying, yet knowing that they were standing together in this battle. Josh suddenly reached over and took Karen's hand. It took her by surprise at first, but then it felt good to know that she wasn't alone in this. She gripped his hand firmly in return as they continued to pray.

Even with their eyes tightly closed, they both saw the great light that seemed like the brilliance of the sun had left the confines of the blue sky and entered the room where they knelt. It interrupted their prayers and with faces still wet with tears both looked up, squinting their eyes in the light. Slowly it faded and, in its place, stood Jerimeil. They were surprised to see him show up in this fashion, but then Josh remembered that each time before when the angel had appeared to him, he was stirring from a deep sleep. Naturally he wouldn't have seen the light.

Karen remembered her encounter with Jerimeil before and stealing a quick look at the clock she was amazed – 4:00 on the nose! Had he tricked her into being here?

“Greetings young ones,” spoke the angel, “You have experienced great difficulty today and God has heard your prayers. I have come to give you further guidance regarding the events of the day and of your continuing mission.” Both Josh and Karen seemed to understand and weren’t even tempted to speak a smart word. They were deeply hurt about their jobs, but even more so because they had been attacked by the evil one. “Understand,” Jerimeil continued, “that what you have felt, the rejection, the embarrassment and the emotional pain are exactly what Dicronifer has inflicted upon his victims. The emotions you have experienced are the same, resulting in him being able to convince them to take their own lives. That would normally be his next step. But you have chosen the more excellent way in seeking God who will bring healing to your situations.”

Josh finally ventured a question, “You mean that He is going to give us our jobs back?”

“Ah, my boy, perhaps not in the way you know them now. But the mighty Jehovah will restore what has been taken from you.”

“But why would God allow this to happen to us?” began Karen, “We have been trying our best to bring glory to Him in what we do. So why would He take away what we have loved the most?”

“My dear girl, God hasn’t taken these things from you. Don’t forget about the free will of mankind. Those involved have choices to make as well as you. God will not dishonor that even though it may work to bring harm to others. It happens every day; some innocent life, a child, a mother, or a father, becomes the victim of another’s wrong choices. Many have questioned God about this very thing over the centuries. Many have blamed Him for their tragedy causing further pain in their lives. But Jehovah is not responsible for the choices others make in light of the free will He has granted to them.”

“So, what are we to do now?” asked Josh.

“Make lemonade my boy, make lemonade!” responded Jerimeil.

“What? This is no time for refreshments! Do you mean we’re to just sit around and drink lemonade while all these terrible things are happening?” came back Karen.

With a chuckle Jerimeil continued, "No, no, no, not at all. But before this is over you may wish that were the case. You see, time is growing short. You must stop Dicronifer before he begins his next journey."

Confused, Josh asked, "Whoa, wait a minute. What do you mean next journey?"

"Let me explain," Answered Jerimeil, "Dicronifer travels in cycles. He's been doing it for many years now. He begins in your hometown and ends in your hometown. He will start always toward the west, but usually in a slightly different direction. He will go around the entire world looking for people who have found themselves in desperate situations. He then begins to work on them, convincing them that they are worthless to God and humanity. Although he can inflict fear and sometimes pain, he cannot take their lives. Instead, he has developed a sort of craft in convincing these poor victims to do his work for him resulting in their own suicides. Sometimes it is by hanging; other times, jumping from a high building or a bridge. The one thing common in each situation is that he has developed a habit of stealing their shoes once they have come to their demise. Somehow, since man has called the bottom of the shoe the sole, Dicronifer has associated that with the soul of man. In his own twisted sort of way, he collects these shoes as tokens of taking their lost souls. Keeping these shoes in a bag he continues on his journey until he finds himself once again at the tree in Crothersville, Indiana, here in the United States. He tosses his prizes into the tree as a display for all to see."

"Why would he choose such a small place as Crothersville, Indiana?" asked Karen. "What's so special about that town?"

"Nothing at all; there's no explanation except that's where he decided to leave them," answered Jerimeil patiently. It was as if he knew that both Karen and Josh needed to understand just what was going on.

"Jerimeil," began Joshua, "we can do battle with this creature, and we are willing to be used by God to save and help others, but how can we who are mortal ever hope to stop a powerful spiritual being like Dicronifer? If I understand correctly, we can't kill a spirit. So, what can we really do?"

"You are right my boy, you are right. You cannot kill a spiritual being. But you can stop him. I cannot tell you how right now, but when the time is right you will know and you will be given the tool that will do the job. For now, you must follow him. Even today he is once again on the move. His path will take him due southwest in a line towards Crothersville. You must follow him and stop him from further destroying lives."

After a minute of silence Karen had another thought and she spewed out, "Are you sure that you didn't have anything to do with us losing our jobs today? It seems mighty convenient that suddenly we are free and you've asked us to follow this creature."

A smile crossed Jerimeil's face as he answered, "I understand your concern but no, the Kingdom of God doesn't work in that manner. The Lord will take advantage of your misfortunes. That's what I meant a moment ago about making lemonade from life's lemons. God can use every situation and incident if allowed to do so. Of course, the choice is still yours. Both of you can refuse right now. Even though it won't be God's will for your life, you can choose to refuse. You can stay right here and God will still love you and still bless you. But He desires you to be in His service. You must decide."

Both Karen and Joshua bowed their heads. Each knew in their hearts what they had to do. It wasn't going to be easy. Neither was sure that it was really what they wanted. But in another way, a strange way, each of them had a longing to be in the will of God. After what seemed to be an eternity of silence Josh sheepishly looked at Karen and asked, "So, what will it be partner?"

Karen glanced at Jerimeil, then at Josh and returned her gaze to the floor. In her heart she wanted more than anything else to serve God. She also knew that she was quickly falling in love with this man. Her own will wanted to play hard to get but her heart wanted nothing more than to follow Joshua Smithson to the ends of the earth. In her own sarcastically humorous way she responded, "Okay . . . we'll give it a couple of weeks."

"Wow Jerimeil! She said yes!"

Karen felt like Josh had "popped the question" and her face turned red, but as she continued to look at the floor, she was hoping that neither Jerimeil nor Josh had witnessed the slight smile that fell across her face.

"Then you have no time to waste my friends. You must get ready for your journey quickly," replied Jerimeil.

"But," interrupted Joshua, "how will we know which way to go? There are a lot of towns between here and Crothersville. Where do we start?"

"Don't worry my boy, don't worry. Remember the gifts given to each of you and follow them." Jerimeil's image began to fade, "Just be obedient to what God is putting in your hearts."

As Jerimeil continued to fade then disappeared altogether, Joshua remembered the extra sense that had been granted to Karen and he knew that she would know where to go next.

Chapter 22

Josh and Karen busied themselves packing what they could for the trip. At this point they had no idea where they were going, except they knew that the final destination would be Crotherville. They made the decision to keep Josh's car only because it was larger. That didn't keep Karen from feeling cheated. She loved her car - a sleek canary yellow Mustang. Although it really didn't fit her conservative character, she had always imagined herself in a car like that and she loved driving around in it. But traveling with two vehicles was not practical so they made the decision to sell it. Joshua's Oldsmobile, though older, had a big trunk and much more space in which to stretch out when traveling a long distance produced those over-the-road body aches. It was a navy blue four door sedan; not nearly as sporty as Karen's Mustang, but it was practical because of its roominess and creature comforts.

The word "belongings" had been redefined. They made the decision to keep a desktop computer, and Karen's was much newer (at least she had that on Joshua). Though he loved the fullness of a desktop keyboard, Josh was satisfied to at least have his laptop. They had agreed to take only the clothing they needed, their personal grooming toiletries, and those sentimental things that could not be replaced. Somehow Karen ended up with five bags to Joshua's two. Everything else they had put up for a quick sell on EBay. With their jobs gone, they closed the leases on their individual apartments and liquidated what they didn't need. Each of them felt they would never be coming back to New York; to live anyway.

After being dependant on a job and the security of a steady income, striking out with only those things mentioned was scary, but the adventure of it was also exciting. As established, they knew their final destination was to be Crotherville, but there was a lot of territory between the small town and New York City. The only plan for the trip was to stay on the main interstates as much as possible, which was frustrating for Josh who, like most men, normally made a plan and stuck to it, giving a sense of control and destination. They had agreed to rely solely on the extra sense that God had granted Karen. Knowing that she was calling the shots made her feel some better about things, although she realized the responsibility in actually listening to the direction of God.

They could have made the entire trip in a full day's travel because the entire distance was a little more than seven hundred miles; with stops it would have taken around fourteen hours. But because of the mission they knew the trip would be longer. They had pooled their money and Josh, still feeling guilty for the loss of Karen's car, agreed that she would carry it except for a hundred dollars he kept for incidental spending. As they climbed into the car, he thoughtfully held the door for Karen. He wanted to make the trip as pleasant as possible for her because even though they had both given up much he felt she had made the greater sacrifice.

The limited itinerary of their trip was to take Interstate 78 from the city until it merged with Interstate 81. At Harrisburg, Pennsylvania they would pick up 76 until it merged with 70. This was the most direct route, but they had no idea how many side trips would be required in effort to keep up with Dicronifer.

Josh took his position on the driver's side, situating himself, trying to get comfortable while wearing his armor. It took more time than he wanted. "How am I supposed to drive seven hundred miles with this helmet on my head, wearing a sword and a shield?" he asked himself in thought. He figured that he was providing great entertainment for Karen as he tried to adjust the helmet so that it wouldn't be banging against the ceiling of the car, and as he situated the sword at his side and the shield on his arm, but when he looked at her, instead of having a heyday with his predicament she was looking out the passenger window and he could tell that she was having second thoughts. "Karen," he began, "is everything okay?"

"Not really," she responded. How could everything be okay when their world had been turned upside down? "But I know this is what God wants, and I will be submissive to Him and make the best of it." A tear trickled down her cheek. Josh wiped it with his finger, not knowing if she would allow him to or not, but she did. "I know . . . I know. Somehow this will all turn out for our best in the end. What do you say we pray before we take off?"

"I was hoping you would suggest that," responded Karen. They bowed their heads and even though Josh began, they each prayed their own prayer. It was important that they work together but it was equally important that they knew for themselves that they were acting in the will of the Lord. After prayer Josh started the car and pulled out on the road. Although their hearts were heavy, somehow, they both knew that a whole new life awaited them.

Following the pre-planned route, not knowing when or where they would be rerouted, every so often Josh would glance over at Karen, curious to know if she was getting any direction from the Lord. She couldn't help but notice and, in her heart, she knew what Josh was doing. It started to get on her nerves. Finally, she spoke, "Nope; nothing yet. Don't worry Josh. If I feel something you'll be the first to know."

"I'm sorry," apologized Josh, "It's just that I want to make certain that my male instincts aren't over-riding your God-given intuition. You know us guys," he joked, "we want to get there as quickly as possible, using the least amount of gasoline as possible. It's sort of a bragging thing, you know?"

"I've never understood that," responded Karen. "My father used to do it all the time. When we'd go for a visit, the first thing he'd do was brag about how quickly he had made the trip and how much mileage he got." That broke the ice of silence and they engaged in conversation that basically caught them up on each other's lives since high school. After a couple of hours, they needed a restroom break and a snack, so they found the first place off the road where they could take care of those needs.

Stretching their legs felt good. Their bodies had become stiff from sitting in one place for so long. When they returned to the car Josh noticed that Karen seemed a little pale, "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine; just feel a bit queasy is all. I'll be alright." So, they continued on their trip.

Just west of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania was where they were to pick up Interstate 76 which would run into Interstate 70. The lanes were splitting off for the turn and Josh had already put on his signal when Karen, who had drifted off into a nap, bolted straight up in her seat. "No!" she screamed, "We can't go that way, Josh! Don't turn, don't turn!"

Josh quickly looked into the rear-view mirror to see what was behind him, cancelled the turn signal and nearly cut off another motorist getting back into the lane that continued on Interstate 81. The other driver lay heavy on his horn

as he passed Josh. He could see the frustration on the face of the other driver as he sped by, and then cut back in nearly clipping Josh's front bumper. Normally this would have mad Josh very angry but he understood that he had caused it, so as the driver went by, he sheepishly shrugged his shoulders. "That was close," Joshua said. He knew that at some point they would be taken from their course but it was still aggravating. He looked over at Karen and could see that she was nauseated, "Do you need to stop?" he asked.

"Pull ... pull over now!" she commanded. Knowing that she was getting sick he quickly signaled and pulled to the side of the interstate. He had not quite stopped when Karen flung open the passenger door and spilled the contents of her stomach alongside the road. Josh stepped out of the car and went around to her side trying to comfort her. He would have suggested they find a doctor but he knew that this was the effect of the extra sense given Karen by the Lord.

Karen began to pull herself together once again. Though she was still pale she didn't look as sickly as she had before and finally, she spoke, "I'll be okay now. Let's go on."

"Your wish is my command," Josh said in attempt to lighten the situation some, "Where to?"

Karen wasn't amused. She still wasn't feeling well, although she tried to hold back her comments, "Not sure; just drive," she said.

He couldn't help feeling frustrated. Josh liked knowing where he was going. These quick, last-minute turns were difficult to deal with. Still, he held back from saying anything justifying that the change was due to the mission. They continued southwest on Interstate 81 which would eventually drop into West Virginia. Josh remembered the words of Jerimeil about how Dicronifer basically stayed on a straight path to his destination. They were definitely not traveling in a straight path with all the crooks and winds in the road, and this latest detour didn't make sense to him. Going south was not a straight path. But he had to trust the spiritual sense that had been given Karen; otherwise, he wouldn't be displaying his trust in her as his partner.

After about forty-five minutes, Karen, who had been completely silent up to this point spoke up, "Here, Josh; this is where we need to stop." The sign read 'Chambersburg.' It looked to be a medium sized town, not quite a city but certainly bigger than a small town, and so Josh signaled and they left the interstate.

Still not sure of exactly where they were going or who they'd be meeting, they stopped at a motel and rented two rooms for the night. They made sure

that the rooms were adjacent in case they needed to get to each other quickly but they would not compromise their Christian values. They were slowly falling in love even though the trip so far had seemed more like that taken by a couple who had been married for several years.

After checking in, they unpacked their bags and even though in different rooms they both fell on their beds nearly in simultaneous harmony. It had only been a little more than four hours but they were both exhausted. They had agreed to freshen up and meet for dinner while they waited on further direction from the Lord.

As they ate, they were both unusually quiet and conversation was kept to a minimum. Actually, both of them were in hopes that the night would prove to be an uneventful one so they could get some much-needed sleep. Josh, not wanting to be obvious like he had been in the car earlier, kept stealing glances at Karen as they finished their meal, wondering what God might be speaking to her in thought. Her complexion was normal meaning that her God-given sense wasn't kicking in right now. After dinner they returned to the motel, said their "good nights" and settled in their respective beds for what they hoped would be a good night's rest.

It was nearly one o'clock in the morning as Karen began to toss and turn in her sleep. As she dreamed the face of a young woman appeared. She reminded Karen of a zombie as her cold, glassy eyes stared at her. Looking deeper, past the glazed eyes, it seemed she could feel a rush of emotions from the woman. Love, hate, fear and regret all raced like bolts of lightning as Karen slowly became her. Then there was a man, cruel and abusive, coming in at all hours of the night in a drunken stupor screaming, yelling at her as if all his troubles were her fault. The man became louder and louder, waking the children who were all too familiar with the dreadful sounds of the darkness. They began to cry. Karen felt the pain as a fist punched her in the face, then another and another. Her face, cut and bleeding, became numb from the blows as the man flung her on the bed and raped her until he fell asleep. She couldn't move even though she wanted to get up and go to her children. But if she did, she knew he would wake up and it would all begin again.

The scenes of her dream changed and she saw the young woman now hurt, crying and angry as the day arrived when the man – her husband, found another woman, one that had no children. With a bag in his hand, he cursed at her as he walked out the door. What would she do now? Though she had grown to hate him for his constant abuse she had also grown dependant on him. What would she do now? How could she pay the bills and the house payment? Both relief and panic flooded her soul.

A final scene unfolded as Karen experienced the most terrible fear she had ever felt in her life. It was if she stood back, no, was held back by some unseen chain; her feet felt as heavy as anchors and she could not move forward to stop what she was witnessing. The young mother, distraught, feeling that there was nowhere to turn, no one to help, slowly lifted a bloodied knife from the bodies of her children then turned it toward her and just before the cruel steel, dripping with the crimson blood of her own son and daughter could slide through her body, Karen bolted straight up in the bed. It wasn't clear if the screaming was echoing in her mind from the horrible scene or if it was coming from her own mouth. She was more nauseated than she had ever been before as she fled to the bathroom relieving her body as she wretched into the toilet. Slowly she lifted her head and looked into the mirror. Her head throbbed as she grabbed a robe and bolted barefoot out the door.

Josh stirred from sleep as the pounding on the door grew louder and louder. Clearing his head, he could hear Karen shouting his name from the other side. He slipped on his pants and opened the door to a panicked and terrified woman. "Karen, what's the matter," he asked.

"E Point Avenue!" she cried as if Josh should know what she was talking about.

"What? Is that an address?" he questioned.

"E Point Avenue – Now!" she screamed.

Chapter 23

Josh hastily finished dressing and grabbed his shoes intending to put them on in the car as Karen slid behind the steering wheel. He knew from her tone that this was urgent. He tossed her the keys as he climbed into the passenger seat. Instinctively she threw the car into drive barely allowing him time to get his door closed. Josh thought of asking where they were going then remembered E Point Avenue. Karen sped down the road as if she knew exactly where she was going and with her God-given gift of perception, he didn't doubt that she did.

"What's going on?" he cautiously asked.

Karen shot him an aggravated glance then remembered that Josh really had no idea of what she had seen and felt in her dream. "Josh, it's the most terrible experience I've ever had," she began, and then told him the entire story as she made turns that would take them to E Point Avenue. While telling Josh what had happened, she was amazed as to how she knew where to go and where to turn in a city in which she had never been.

Josh listened, fascinated as Karen spoke with great detail as if it had happened to her. Her emotions convinced him that she was sharing her own experience. When she finished, he was horrified by the description of the mother with the bloodied knife, dead children and her hopelessness as she prepared to take her own life.

Tears were flowing freely down Karen's face. She wiped them with her hands, and then looked up to see the street sign for E Point Avenue. Making the turn, she wondered exactly where they needed to stop.

Josh interrupted her thoughts by saying, "There!"

"How did he know that," she reasoned, nearly jealous, thinking that maybe God had given him some of her own gift. But before she could begin feeling guilty, she looked in the direction Josh was pointing and saw the small yellow house on the right. It wasn't a particularly fine house, though it was neat and well kept for the quaint place that it was.

It wasn't the house that had obviously made it stand out to Joshua but the flames of fire licking skyward from the roof. Even though first glance made one to think that it was engulfed and about to burn to the ground, a more careful examination revealed that the flames weren't actually coming from the house but danced nearly six feet above.

"Dicronifer!" shouted Joshua.

"Naturally," responded Karen.

Without a second thought Josh pulled his sword after stepping from the car. With a God-given instinct he raised his shield just as the evil, black serpent struck with a force that nearly knocked him off his feet.

From the top of the house Dicronifer echoed a hideous laugh. "You check on ..." began Josh but was cut off when Karen interrupted, "The woman and children, I know," she said as she ran for the front door, dodging a fiery arrow on her way, "Geeze, Josh; a little help here please?"

"On it," he responded, as he ran out on the lawn.

"You!" screamed Dicronifer turning his attention to Joshua. He leaped from the roof hurling a handful of flaming arrows while still in mid-air. Raising his shield as he made his way toward the demon, several of those fiery objects thudded into it. In the fractional second it took for the two enemies to meet, he once again remembered David's courage stemming from his confidence in the Lord as he faced his own powerful foe. The giant, Goliath, was also certain that he could effortlessly crush his pitifully small opponent. He boasted of how he would quickly make an end of the youthful David. But David knew that he had an unseen, but all-powerful partner in God Almighty.

Again, as in his very first encounter with Dicronifer, he was encouraged, knowing that this same God was even now with him as he prepared to face his enemy. At the top of his lunges he screamed, "You come to me with the polluted power of Satan and burning arrows. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel!" (1 Samuel 17:45).

Dicronifer snarled as the two ran towards each other. Josh had witnessed the evil demon several times now, but never this close. He became nauseated from the evil smell of the creature. It wasn't like body odor or any other scent his nose had come into contact with, but must have been the smell of pure evil. The demon raised his bony hand and swung at Josh hitting his shield and knocking him off his feet and nearly ten feet backwards. For the moment he had forgotten the blacksnake which now struck at him with as much force as the blow he had just been dealt by Dicronifer, and he struggled to get back on his feet and regain his composure. Once again, his shield took the blunt force of the striking serpent. The blow knocked the now smoking arrows from the shield and scattered them on the ground.

As he stood to his feet a glance to his left revealed Dicronifer leaping towards him. To his right the hissing serpent towered over him, appearing larger than he had ever seen it. He experienced the same odor of evil as he had moments earlier when close to the demon. He could see fangs that would probably have measured two inches in length and the forked tongue darted from its mouth extending at least a foot.

Fear attempted to overcome him and he felt like a man dangling one handed from a terrifyingly high precipice. He knew he had to beat it down, also knowing that it was but another weapon being flung at him by the approaching demon, Dicronifer. He didn't know if he had the strength to battle both creatures in close encounter. In this precarious predicament he searched his mind, praying "God show me what to do!" With his shield raised toward the face of the serpent and his sword pointed at the demon, now just feet away, he bowed his head.

Karen arrived at the door of the small yellow house as Josh was clashing with the creatures out on the lawn. Even though she knew the urgency of the situation the habit to knock first could not be escaped. Of course, there was no answer. She could feel the emotions of the young woman rushing upon her again as she cried out, "Sheila!" How had she known her name? Then again, she cried, "Sheila ... Sheila Spencer! I'm here to help you; please let me in!"

"Go away!" she heard the muffled scream. She could hear the children crying inside. Karen was relieved; she hadn't harmed them yet. "I'm coming in," she warned as she ignored another protest from the woman. She was

surprised that the door was not locked. Entering the darkness of the little house she was nearly overcome by the depression that seemed to hang like cobwebs from every corner. Stumbling around the room, searching for a light switch she finally found a lamp. When she turned it on, she could see the clutter of the petite living room. It wasn't dirty but was definitely what one would expect in a home with small children; scattered toys that hadn't been put away, and magazines were haphazardly strewn across the coffee table. A newspaper lay on the couch opened to the "help wanted" ads. A few of them had been circled and then marked out as if they had been contacted and then taken from her list.

Karen looked up to see the beam from a flashlight coming from what she reasoned to be the kitchen and a small dirty-blond haired woman emerged with a large butcher knife in her hand. She held it up in preparation to defend herself from her intruder. Her makeup was smeared down her face – a sign that she had been weeping for hours. Then, as if peering around a corner two small children, clinging to their mother's knee length dress, looked around at Karen. They appeared to be nearly the same age, though the girl may have been a year or two older than the boy, but she couldn't have been more than five years old. They too had been crying.

The woman looked down, only half facing her children as she spoke to them, "Shut up Sherry; be quiet Ritchie," then to Karen she screamed, "Get out of my house lady! This is none of your business!" She gripped the knife like her fist was going to explode as she raised it higher.

Karen took a hard swallow. She too was fighting with fear just as much as Joshua was at that moment. Under her breath she prayed, "God help me." She fought for words. What could she say to this distraught and desperate mother? How could she let her know that everything was going to be okay?

Josh raised his head. With a new determination he planted his feet firmly on the ground. He was ready. He had no idea what he was going to do or how he would defend himself but he was ready. Dicronifer stopped in his tracks and slowly reached to his back retrieving a single arrow. Always before he had flung the arrows from his hand but this time, he also pulled a black rugged bow from the bag hanging from his side. Before placing it in the bow he held the tip to his lips, gently blew and instantly it burst into flames. Then placing it in the bow he drew back hard. A grin crossed the demon's face – a grin that let Josh know that Dicronifer was confident that he held him in "checkmate."

In a single sweeping move Josh turned his sword from Dicronifer, and swung it at the serpent. He saw a small object hit the ground and immediately become engulfed in flames. A glance at the snake revealed that he had

succeeded in cutting off one of the forks of its tongue and the serpent crawled off as if in intense pain.

In the same motion he spun completely around and leaped directly at the demon who was preparing to let go the fiery arrow firmly aimed at Joshua. The sword struck the arrow mid-shaft and the burning end fell to the ground. At the same exact moment Dicronifer let go of the string holding the back end of the arrow and the force with which he had drawn it allowed the bow to push back toward the string, slapping hard against the demon's knuckles. He howled with a blood-curdling scream and Joshua knew that for the first time he had succeeded in hurting the evil creature.

Inside, Karen looked Sheila straight in the eyes. With a confidence like she had never felt before she spoke, "Look, Sheila, I know I'm a total stranger. But I've got to tell you something that is going to sound like it's straight from the Twilight Zone; I know what's going on. I know that your husband abused you and hurt you bad. I've seen it. He left you for another woman and even though you felt relieved you have also found yourself in a desperate situation. You have no money to buy food or pay the house payment. You feel the great responsibility for your children. You've looked for work, applied for welfare and it all seems like one big dead end. I know that even now you are preparing to take the lives of your children and then kill yourself. I know this because the Lord has shown it all to me in a dream. Sheila, I have felt your pain. I've experienced your hopelessness in my dream," tears began to flow down Karen's cheek as she continued, "and I know you've heard the whispers in the night to just bring it all to an end. But you can't, do you hear me? You can't!"

It looked as if Sheila would fling the knife directly at Karen as her face tightened in anger. But then her lower lip began to quiver and a frown broke across her face as she too began to weep. She let the knife fall to the floor and then she also fell, right into the secure arms of Karen. Her children ran to their mother and hugged around her legs as the four of them tangled in an embrace.

Josh rolled across the ground as he quickly recovered from flinging himself at the beastly Dicronifer. His eyes were searching for the demon when he heard a new sound. He knew it from drawing his own sword and a quick look to his right revealed the demon pulling a sword. Josh had never seen it before although he had noticed the sheath hanging from Dicronifer's side. It seemed to be sliding from the sheath in slow motion as inch by inch the most evil-looking blade he had ever saw climbed into the air. The sword was nearly four feet in length and was probably four inches broad. A single glistening blade at the lower side of the breadth gave way to jagged teeth much like a saw only about an inch apart at the opposite side of the breadth.

Once out of the sheath Dicronifer swung it over his head in a circular pattern making a slow, deep swooshing sound as it traveled in its orbit. Then without warning it was descending upon Joshua who was still on the ground. In response he stuck his own two-edged sword into the air just in time to absorb the hard-hitting blow of Dicronifer's nasty blade. The clash of the two swords made a deafening clang as metal struck metal. Sparks leaped from the place where they had met. Even though Josh's sword was a magnificent double-edged weapon, it seemed dwarfed compared to the long blade of the demon.

Recovering from the first blow, as Dicronifer swung around he grabbed his sword with both hands and raised it over his head starring at Joshua who still lay on the ground, with a look that said, "This is it – this battle is over!"

"I don't know what else to do," Sheila's words flowed through her sobs. "There is nowhere to go and no help at all!" They had both sat down on the couch.

Karen knew the desperation of this young mother but she knew nothing of the welfare system and had been, up to this point, very successful in her own finances. She had wanted for nothing and only a couple of weeks before wouldn't have given a second thought to this situation. She had always felt compassion for those who were out of work or homeless; those who she described as "less fortunate." But other than contributing a few bills to help, it seldom entered her mind.

Now things were different. She had experienced in her dream what it was like to want to do better, to have a desire to provide, but to meet one dead end after another. Sheila was in a trap that had been cleverly designed by Dicronifer. He had pushed Sheila in her thinking and had all but successfully brought an end to the lives of this mother and her children. Karen spoke, "Don't worry Sheila, we'll help you. I don't know how but we will help you find a way, I promise."

"But there is nothing ... I've tried! I've called all the agencies and explained my situation! I've asked the bank to extend our loan and help me but they refuse! What am I to do? Where can I go?" Karen could feel Sheila's panic as it forced its way into her mind like a giant wave of a tsunami.

"Come with me," began Karen, "I want to show you what's blocking you and also influencing you to make such rash decisions." They rose from the couch and stepped out on the porch. There they could see the demon as he raised his sword to deal the final blow to Josh who was sprawled on the ground. "See, began Karen "can you see that horrible creature that's trying to kill my partner? He's the one who has influenced you to do this terrible thing; he's

responsible. You don't have to obey him. You don't have to take your life and those of your wonderful children."

Sheila seemed hesitant as she gazed in horror at Dicronifer. "I ... I've seen him before," she stuttered. "Just last night, in a dream; it was awful. I had been having trouble falling asleep at night, you know, worrying about where we were going to live, how we were going to pay the bills and buy food for the kids. I would toss and turn for hours. Then last night, after an hour or so, I did fall to sleep. But it wasn't a good sleep. I saw this creature in a ... a nightmare, I guess. I know I was doing a lot of tossing and turning in bed because when I woke up the sheets and covers were all turned around. Anyway, he started telling me things, like how we were not going to make it; how me and the kids were going to be homeless, wandering the streets, begging for food and living dirty and ragged. Then he told me that the only way I was going to make it was if I turned to prostitution. I spoke to him saying 'No way! I'll never do that!'

"Then he told me that there was another way. He said that I could kill the children and myself. He reasoned that death would be much more humane than allowing my kids to live like that. Karen, it sounded like the only way. I awoke sitting straight up in bed, sick at the thought of what I was even considering. I didn't sleep another wink last night and have been stewing about this all day. I would have done it too if it hadn't been for you. But ... but what are we to do now? Nothing has changed! Our situation is still just as hopeless!"

"No, it's not, Sheila. There really is another way. Don't believe the lies of this monster! Josh and I will help you."

It was then, just at that moment, as both Karen and Sheila were looking in the direction of Josh and Dicronifer that the creature paused before letting his sword fall. He looked up at the two ladies with a stare that spoke something different to each of them. To Sheila it was a look that said, "You will not survive! Finish what you started." To Karen it said, "Your man is about to meet his end! I will kill him now!"

Karen spoke again to Sheila, "Honey, we will help you. Don't believe whatever that evil being just spoke into your heart. But right now, I've got to help Josh." This being said, she pointed in their direction just as Dicronifer's jagged sword began its descent on Joshua.

Josh had not seen Karen and Sheila on the porch. All he saw was Dicronifer towering over him with that wicked sword high in the air. He grasped it firmly with both hands. He noticed him look up for only a moment. In that millisecond he prayed, "Lord, I don't believe this is how you intend for this to

end. But if allowing this beast to take my life will give you glory then I am ready to die. I am your servant and I give myself totally to you right now!"

He watched, confident that God held his very life in his hands. That confident look was met by an icy stare from Dicronifer who, peering down at Joshua, almost felt cheated, because even though he had the upper hand, it was as if the expression on Joshua's face robbed him of his victory. He so enjoyed the fear coming from the faces of his victims. But he wasn't getting that satisfaction from his foe.

Nonetheless he would finish off this enemy and deal with the woman later. With more strength than he had ever conjured up before he pushed the sword down intending to cut the man in half. The women on the porch would see him hacked to pieces with his blood being splashed in all directions. The sword fell. But it never hit Joshua. Instead, it struck against an invisible object and with all the force that he had dropped the weapon it equally deflected back in his direction. It was as if he had taken a steel baseball bat and swung it with all his might against a brick building. The force of the blow, instead of falling into soft, pliable skin and tissue as he had expected, ricocheted back through his own wrists and arms, stinging as if he had run his hands up into a nest of hornets. Then it deflected back up. The sword was now returning in his direction. He dodged his head away from the impact but before he could get completely out of the way it sliced off a portion of his right ear. He howled in utter pain. Then with what resembled lava flowing down the side of his face he screamed the most blood curdling scream he had ever uttered. In confusion he looked down at his enemy, gritted his teeth and whirled around, engulfed in his own anger. He vanished leaving behind a green mist that dissipated in the air.

Then an unusual thing happened. Always before when Dicronifer disappeared, the blacksnake was gone as well. The children, during all the excitement had moved from behind their mother's skirt to the far edge of the porch to get a better look. They were terrified but also curious. From nowhere the serpent was speeding across the lawn in the direction of the children. They stood petrified - hypnotized by the gaze of the snake. Both Karen and Joshua heard the words, as if in one final effort the demon had spoken, "I will take the lives of these children one way or another!"

Josh caught a glimmer of light that reflected from the smooth, black body of the reptilian demonic force and instantly jumped to his feet, sword in hand. He flung himself at the snake and began swinging. He saw the head of the creature flying in the air and it slithered and coiled in all directions. He kept hacking with his sword until multiple pieces of the serpent were in flames all over the lawn. It was gone. The evil blacksnake was no more.

In the distance could be heard a howl, much like a lone wolf in the night. There was no mistake that it was Dicronifer who had now been separated from his evil cohort. Both Joshua and Karen knew that they had succeeded in dealing out serious wounds to the demon that night, but they also knew that he would be back with a force like never before.

Even so, not tonight; for now, it was over. Karen turned to Sheila. "You did the right thing honey. You may not feel like things are any different, but the decisions you just made have actually changed everything for you."

Josh slowly moved toward the porch and to Karen. She could tell from the way he walked that he was exhausted. But their work was not finished yet. She had made promises to this young mother and she fully intended to keep them. They all went back inside and Karen made a few phone calls to local shelters. She was able to secure a food donation from a local food bank that was run by the Salvation Army. Also, a late-night call to an emergency number of the Chambersburg Trustee's office yielded help with her house payment and late utility bills.

"This is all temporary, Sheila, but it will give you some time to get back on your feet."

"Thank you ... thank you so much!" the young mother responded, "How can I ever repay you?"

"Don't even think about it," retorted Joshua. "We are doing what God has told us to do. You don't owe us anything. We do ask one thing of you. Tomorrow, you need to call a pastor. He will help you."

"Here," said Karen who had even then been looking up another phone number. She had felt drawn to the congregation of a building they had passed on their way to Sheila's home, "this church will help you." And indeed, when Sheila called the next day, they helped her in a way she never expected. They were willing to grant her some charity but they also found her a job and extend free temporary daycare for her children in their own school.

"We've got to do one more thing," started Josh, and after saying this both he and Karen talked to Sheila about the plan of salvation, carefully reading the passages from the Bible. Sheila was so interested that she retrieved her own Bible, a dusty old book that had been buried for sometime in a magazine rack beside the couch. That night she gave her life to God.

"You have saved my life and that of my kids," she said through tears.

"No," spoke Karen, "The Lord Jesus Christ has saved you and now we have a new sister."

Karen and Josh waved at Sheila and her children as they stood on the porch watching as they pulled away. Once down the street Josh looked at Karen and said, "Thanks, babe."

"What?" she questioned, a little shocked at this new nickname.

"Thanks for saving my life once again. I need you as my partner. No one else could have ever filled your shoes, and I for one am happy to have you on my side."

Arriving back at the motel Josh walked Karen to her door, paused then kissed her. Instinctively she resisted at first, but then she gave in to her heart and melted in his arms. Afterwards, without another word, she slipped into her room as Josh walked to his own, grateful to God for many things that night, but mostly for reuniting him with his soul mate.

Chapter 24

Back on the road, Joshua and Karen sat once again in silence. So much had happened in the last couple of weeks that it seemed their past lives had belonged to someone else. As he drove Josh glanced over at Karen from time to time, longing to say something but not finding the right words. He had fallen in love with his old flame and he knew that it was mutual. But, like any man who is expected to take the lead in romance, every time he thought he had worked up enough courage to say something, a lump the size of a basketball formed in his throat. Since their goodnight kiss the evening before, he felt a little freer to express himself, so he reached through the silence and touched Karen on the hand. She would either slap him away or take his; it was just a risk he had to make.

Karen looked down, feeling the gentle but strong hand lay on hers. She hesitated for a moment then turning her own hand palm up, firmly grasped Joshua's. She too was falling in love with the man she had grown to nearly despise due to his success and ignorance of her existence.

However, she hadn't been thinking about him. She questioned if she would ever be a nurse again. She missed it. From earliest memories she had always wanted to be in the medical profession and she was good at it. But being fired for the accusation of treating a patient without doctor's orders was a serious charge. It could well mean that she would never practice her coveted occupation again and this depressed her.

She looked up to a big grin across Josh's face, signaling that he was happy she had taken his hand. It reminded her of high school.

Now on Interstate 70 nearing the Pennsylvania-West Virginia State line, they would cross the Western leg of the State, by Wheeling, and then a few short miles more would find them in Ohio. It had taken two days to get this far with the stop in Chambersburg. Josh broke the silence, "We'll soon be in Ohio. My stomach's telling me it's about time to get some lunch."

"Sounds good to me; I could use a break and stretch my legs a little," responded Karen. She pulled out her cell phone and checked the map looking for a good place to stop. "How about Cambridge?" she asked.

"If it isn't more than an hour away that should be perfect," responded Josh. It would really be good to get out of the car for a while. "Karen may even consent to drive a few miles giving me a break of my own," he thought.

They crossed the few miles of West Virginia and both were eager when they saw the Ohio State sign. It wouldn't be long now.

After a while the exit signs for Cambridge could be seen along the highway. "Those aren't popping up anytime too soon," Josh once again attempted to break the silence. "Hey, there's a sign for Bob Evans. What do you think? Sound good to you?" But there was no response from Karen. When he looked at her, she sat with a blank stare as if she were looking miles down the highway. "Karen ... Karen ... you alright? Karen!" he raised his voice to get her attention.

"Huh? What ..." she was startled.

"You're getting something aren't you?"

"I think so, Josh."

"I wasn't sure; you didn't seem sick."

"I think I'm getting more used to it is all," she replied.

"Okay, sweetheart; you're the boss; where to?"

"I'm not sure ... a bank, I think, I'm just not sure," she seemed desperate. "There's a man ... he's in big trouble ... Josh, I think he's trying to rob it!"

Beginning to feel the urgency himself Josh accelerated to five miles over the speed limit. Knowing absolutely nothing about Cambridge other than it was on the map, he would have to totally rely on Karen's direction from the Lord.

"Josh, come on! Something isn't right; we've got to get there now!" screamed Karen. It was as if she had left the confines of the car and was already there in spirit. She was having a vision but neither of them knew if it was taking place as they drove or if the urgency was to get there before it happened.

Pulling off the interstate, they raced up the main drag traveling as fast as they could without attracting too much attention. The highway went through an area of restaurants and motels, as you would expect to find along the interstate, then led into a more open area giving the impression that they were already leaving town.

Josh glanced toward Karen with a look that said, "Are you sure this is the right way?" Karen in response, and as if she could read his thoughts returned, "Just keep going!"

After about a mile and a half they arrived into the main drag of town. They drove several blocks until they came to Wheeling Avenue. "Turn left here!" Karen screamed, nearly too late, as Josh flipped on his turn signal and cut off another driver with his left swing.

"There ... up there," Karen pointed straight ahead. Police cars had the street blocked off.

"I see it," responded Josh. The police cars in front of them sat sideways in the street stopping the flow of traffic. Officers knelt behind open car doors, some lying under trucks and standing behind street poles, all with drawn guns. "What's this all about?" wondered Josh.

Karen tightly closed her eyes, "He's in there ... no money ... three kids and a wife ... no job ... unemployment ran out ... desperate ... no hope."

The sign read 845 Wheeling Avenue - The People's Bank. Joshua sighed, "What can we do? How are we going to get in there?"

Karen opened her eyes and looked around, searching for an answer to Joshua's question. "There," she pointed again, this time down an alley, "Go down there and turn left. It will take us to the back of the bank."

As they neared the cross street, they could see a couple more police cars sitting in the alley just behind the bank. Josh stopped the car and carefully pulled into the driveway of what looked to be an abandoned building, hoping the police officers hadn't spotted them. They didn't want to break the law, but a spiritual battle was raging that the law knew nothing about. It seemed there was no way past the police.

Just then Karen pointed to the roof of the bank and said, "Look!"

Joshua followed her finger upward and there, atop the bank, stood Dicronifer. With the blacksnake destroyed it would seem that he would not be as much of a threat, but as the demon stood to full height it was obvious that he had grown by several feet. He loomed in the skyline and appeared to be taunting them to come up to him. Joshua was reminded of the incident when Jonathan, the son of King Saul, had faced a similar situation with his armor bearer. The pair had ventured away from their own army looking for the Philistines. They discovered a garrison on a hill. Jonathan had told his armor bearer that if the Philistines said that they would come down to them, then they would take it as a sign that God didn't want them to fight. But if the Philistines said, "Come up to us," then that would be their signal that God was going to give them a victory.

Joshua thought that to be a strange tactic because climbing a hill to the enemy was definitely not the vantage point. But then, in the Bible, God seldom worked in ways that would give man the impression that he didn't need the Almighty. More often than not their victories happened in such a way that they had to acknowledge God's intervention. Although he would never identify Karen as his armor bearer (she would have taken that as an insult), he felt inspiration in remembering this incident. "Come on Karen. We're going up there."

"How do you think we're going to get past those police officers?" In natural thinking, his suggestion was ludicrous. But they were working for the Divine and not the natural. "I don't know how we're going to pull it off, but, okay, let's go," she finished.

They walked across the street then down the alley to the back of the bank. It seemed that the police officers hardly noticed them. As they walked past the first officer, he looked right through them. Then they walked past several more who were engaged in conversation, "How do you propose getting in there, Frank?" they heard one ask. Karen and Josh were nearly in their faces but it was as if they weren't even there.

"Come on," Josh spoke out loud. "I guess the Lord has granted us invisibility for the moment. I see the fire escape right over there. Let's go while

we can.” The bank was only a single-story building and Josh spotted an access ladder to one side. He walked over to the rusty ladder, jumped up grabbing the last rung and pulled it down with a loud, noisy squeak. He wondered if it had ever been used. Karen glanced back at the group of police officers who were still oblivious to their presence. If this wasn’t a miracle then she wasn’t sure what the definition of one would be.

Arriving at the top, just as Josh expected, when he held his shield in front of his face it was met with an onslaught of fiery arrows. He rolled over the edge and positioned his shield for Karen to get up as well. Once on their feet, Dicronifer loomed before them; since losing his “blacksnake presence” he stood nearly fifteen feet tall.

That hideous laugh bellowed from his lungs with even more depth as he looked down on Joshua and Karen. “YOU!” he screamed, “YOU can never defeat me! I’ve been waiting on YOU!” and with that another handful of flaming arrows were flung in their direction. The small shield on Joshua’s arm deflected most of them but one whizzed past Karen’s ear, and she felt the heat as it went by. “Wheh; that was close!”

Josh pulled his sword, “Don’t worry Karen; God is with us,” and he flung himself at the giant Dicronifer. With another of those bellowing laughs Dicronifer pulled his own jagged edged sword and the two met, sparks flying in all directions. Josh stood his ground although it was difficult swinging over his head in order to deflect the powerful blows from the demon.

Karen looked for a way to get inside the bank. She assumed the responsibility of talking with the victims of Dicronifer’s temptations, leading them in spiritual battle, while Josh physically fought with the demon.

She found the door but it was locked from the inside. Not quite sure of what to do, a tingling sense crept up her spine and she dropped to her knees as Dicronifer managed to grab another handful of flaming arrows, flinging them in her direction. They bounced off the metal door landing all around her like a fiery rain. Another blood curdling laugh from the beastly Dicronifer followed; “You will not win this time!” he screamed.

Her attention was captured by the ferocity of the clashing swords. Karen watched as Dicronifer raised one bony hand in the air while swinging his sword with the other. The sword dropped with a powerful force towards Joshua. In nearly the same motion he brought his other hand down. Josh was able to deflect the blow of the sword but not that of Dicronifer’s enlarged fist and the demon succeeded in striking Josh across the face. The blow knocked him nearly five feet into the air and ten feet to the left of the demon. He landed on his

back skidding across the roof. She could see blood oozing from his face from the sharp edges of those bony knuckles. But Dicronifer wasn't through, for then he walked to where Joshua lay and Karen could see that he intended to either finish him with his sword or kick him off the roof. She pointed at Joshua as the demon swung his sword for what he thought would be the final blow and once again it was deflected by an invisible shield. As before, the sword of the demon bounced into the air. She could see the scar from the previous battle when she had done this exact thing causing the sword to come back up into Dicronifer's face cutting off a part of his earlobe.

Looking now at her, his red, angry eyes reflected the burning inferno inside of him. He turned from Joshua toward her and she fought hard against the fear welling up inside. As he swung, she could hear each swoop as it cut through the air. Her only defense was to point in rhythm with the demon's swings, deflecting the sword as it struck against her invisible shield. But the demon was not letting up. If anything, each swing became swifter and harder. She began to pray out loud, "Lord, help me!"

But as she fought and prayed, she realized that she was taking a step backwards with each blow. She had no idea how close she was to the edge of the roof but neither could she afford to take her eyes from the creature.

Josh was regaining his wits when he saw what was taking place. He watched for a split second as Karen came closer and closer to the edge of the roof. He quickly rose to his feet, wiping his bloodied face on his shirt sleeve, and then bounded toward Dicronifer. He was nearly there when a gunshot resounded from inside the building.

Dicronifer stopped in his tracks, looked straight up into the air giving yet another of his wicked laughs, and then disappeared. As he did Josh reached out to Karen, grabbing her by the arm just as she was taking her final step backwards which would have been into thin air.

There was no time for "thank-you's" from either of them as Karen asked, "What was that?"

"It sounded like a gunshot from inside the bank," responded Joshua. Karen got a very sick feeling from the pit of her stomach. She doubled over and dropped to her knees in pain. Joshua put his hand on her back in effort to comfort her. He too had a bad feeling that something had gone wrong; that somehow, they were too late and had failed.

Just then the massive demon reappeared as if he were rising through the roof. He was still laughing as he continued up into the air. He proudly

displayed his prize making certain that Josh and Karen could see what he was holding – a pair of black tennis shoes dangled from his fingers. “I have won!” he said as he continued higher. Then whirling around like a small tornado, he completely disappeared.

Knowing now what had happened, without words they found the ladder they had used to climb up onto the rooftop and made their way back down. Only one police officer stood next to the opened back door that led inside the bank but he didn’t see them as they climbed down. Making their way back down the alley to their car Josh put his arm around Karen’s shoulders, blood still trickling down his face.

“Hey, who are you?” questioned the officer.

Josh turned in his direction and answered, “Just a couple of people passing through.” From the look of their clothing the officer must have thought that they were homeless, yet another set of victims from the worsening economy. He decided to stand his post and he let them go their way.

Once back inside the car, Karen pulled the first aid kit from the glove box and cleaned up Joshua’s face. He was fortunate that it wasn’t a deep cut and once the bleeding stopped, she smeared on some anti-bacterial cream.

Then she buried her face into her hands and began weeping uncontrollably. “We’ve failed, Joshua! We failed!”

Chapter 25

Bent over the steering wheel, Joshua felt helpless as he watched Karen weep uncontrollably. Tears were streaming down his own face as he too felt the overwhelming sense of failure. Even after several victories, it all seemed erased by this one defeat.

His thoughts were driven back in time as he watched poor old Tom Stanberry swing from a rope in his barn. The same fear from that episode in his life flooded him like a torrential river as he fell helplessly back against the seat.

His thoughts were redirected to Jim Sprague whom he had defended only weeks before, even though it seemed a lifetime ago. Mr. Sprague didn't deserve to die at the hand of Dicronifer. Nor did the accused man he had helped put behind bars. Franklin Trombaugh, the homeless man, was convicted of the murder of Jim Sprague only because he had found a pair of shoes that matched Sprague's. Though he had successfully won the case, which caused Trombaugh to be placed in jail, he regretted what he had done. That very night they found Franklin Trombaugh hanging in his cell, with his shoes missing.

But all these things had happened before his experience with Christ and before his commission to fight and defeat Dicronifer. He desperately felt the need to see Jerimeil right now. He reckoned that with the assignment of Karen as his partner, contact with Jerimeil would be out of the picture. But he was as

helpless right now as he had been as a kid, terrified of the terrible demon. Where was that angel when he needed him?

"I'm right here," came the familiar voice from the backseat of the car. Karen stopped crying when she heard it, and both of them were startled for a moment.

"Oh, Jerimeil," cried Karen, "we failed! We failed God in helping that poor man in the bank!"

"Now, now child; I'm glad for your compassion and desire to defeat Dicronifer, but it could not be avoided this time. God is not angry at you. You did your best."

"But, Jerimeil," began Joshua, "our mission is to stop Dicronifer from destroying lives and committing people to eternal damnation, isn't it? How can we be excused from failure?"

"My boy, my boy," answered Jerimeil, "you cannot compare the spiritual with the natural in this case. Man's definition of success and failure always is measured by winning. Jehovah does not use the same measuring stick as man. The true definition of success is not what man thinks but obedience to God. Both of you have done that. You defended yourselves well against Dicronifer. You did everything you could to save the man. But while you were doing physical battle with him, Dicronifer was also doing spiritual battle with the man in the bank – Joe Stidham.

"Joe was desperate you know. He had lost his job. His unemployment had run out and he could not pay his obligations. He was facing foreclosure on his home and he could not live with the thought of his wife and three boys being homeless.

"That's when Dicronifer showed up. He tempted Joe to rob the bank. I will never completely understand human reasoning because, unless there had been no witnesses and he could have gotten completely away with it, still your government has ways of tracking bills. There was no way it would have worked. The day he made the decision to yield to Dicronifer's temptation was the day he decided his fate in life. It's all a matter of the choices we make."

"But, Jerimeil," interrupted Karen, "why did he have to die? He could have just realized his mistake and given up. He may have spent several years in prison but wouldn't that be better than dying?"

"Of course, my dear, of course, but as I started to say, while you were doing battle with Dicronifer there on the rooftop, still his evil influence was working on Stidham in the bank. Even while he was bellowing his laughter at you, he was whispering in Joe's ear, telling him that all was hopeless. He reminded him of what he would look like in the eyes of his family after committing such a crime. Then he suggested suicide. That's Dicronifer's favorite method you remember. He told the man that he could never face his family and friends again, and that part was true. But that is Satan's way ... it is how he trains his demons ... teaching them to tell just enough truth to make his lies sound plausible.

"Joe believed Dicronifer. He could have given up. Instead, at Dicronifer's suggestion, he turned the pistol to his head and pulled the trigger. That was when the demon disappeared from the roof and retrieved his twisted prize – the shoes of the now dead, Joe Stidham."

Josh looked down towards the floor of the automobile and said, "Defeat is hard, Jerimeil. We were so encouraged because of the great successes we achieved with God's help. Lives have been changed because Karen and I defended people against Dicronifer. She is so good with words and her advice and counsel has helped others not only to make the right choices but also to come to Christ instead of being eternally doomed. Is there anything else we could have done for Joe Stidham?"

"It is choices my boy, choices people make. It happens every day in countless lives all around the world. You are merely human. You cannot be everywhere to save everyone. You can only do what you can do.

"But I also want to tell you that what you and Miss Karen are doing not only affects those you have helped but all those who now come into contact with them. Many will be saved because you fulfilled your God-given mission."

"Thank you for that encouragement Jerimeil, but it doesn't relieve me of failing Mr. Stidham in the bank," returned Karen.

"Let me tell you something else Karen and Joshua; what you are doing – physically facing and battling with the evil Dicronifer – represents so much more. You see what you are doing in the physical is representative of what takes place in the lives of each and every person on the face of this small planet in a spiritual sense. Every day many people are tempted by the devil by way of his evil angels – demons. They whisper in the ears of both Christians and non-Christians. Of course, those who are not believers are much easier to influence. Even those who are morally good pass off small things as nothing, like what you call 'little white lies.'

“Satan does not want anyone to enter into the blessed kingdom of God. He is constantly sending forth his hoard to tempt people to do wrong, to worship false gods, to teach against the Bible and to hurt and harm others. Those who have not accepted the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ succumb to these temptations very easily. And as we rapidly approach the day when our Lord will return it gets worse and worse. Even in the fallen animal kingdom you do not see the cruelty to others that you see from the heart of man. Oh, they will do what they must in their own fallen state to survive. They will hunt and kill other animals for food. They will defend themselves when cornered and confronted. But they don’t devise wickedness against the other animals and against their own kind.

“But man; man is different. The greed for wealth, lust and power over others rules in his heart. He devises wicked ways to fulfill the mission of the enemy – to steal, kill and destroy. Mankind wages wars and uses all manners of torture to bring pain and ultimately death to other men and women.

“Our enemy even tempts believers. In fact, these temptations may be greater than those brought against non-believers because he desperately wants them to fall and sin against God. You can see it in the history of the nation of Israel, God’s chosen people. In the Bible they were constantly sinning against God. He would bring punishment upon them, they would repent, He would graciously forgive them, then within a generation or two they went right back to their sinful ways.

“It is no different for those who have accepted Jesus Christ into their lives. By way of these demons, the devil is constantly bringing temptation to destroy their love for one another. More often than not, these believers haven’t lost their salvation, but they have lost their victory. They would be so much better off if they could learn to resist the enemy. Remember, by love for each other is how Jesus said that others will know that men and women are His disciples. Many have tried other ways of proving that they are believers, but the great trademark cannot be substituted. It is only by this great love – preferring our brothers and sisters over ourselves, loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves, and even showing love and kindness to our enemies – that people are truly marked as disciples of Jesus Christ.

“You see it each and every day. Congregations fuss and argue over the least little things like how their building looks, what their pastor should be teaching, how the music should sound and the list goes on and on. All of these things serve as detriments in showing the world that the love-bond Christ commanded exists. In fact, the exact opposite is shown in many cases. Christians have divided themselves up each claiming to know the right way.

These divisions speak the opposite of love. Christians are even suing each other over slander, book and music rights, and so forth. It has become 'big business' I am afraid and it does not bring glory to God."

"I never thought about it like that," answered Joshua. "We have sinned greater than those who have not claimed Christ as their Savior when you put it like that."

"But how can we change it?" questioned Karen, "How can we get back to our first love?"

"That is the question each and every believer must ask himself," returned Jerimeil. "It can only happen one believer at a time. Each one must realize their own failure to fulfill Christ's commandment, and only then can they repent and begin to love one another. When they do, one by one, that first love that our Lord desires from us can be realized once again.

"But your battles are like those spiritual battles. As you fight against Dicronifer you are fighting his temptations, not only for yourselves but also in behalf of his victims. Your passion for these people drives you to fight harder to not only gain victory over the enemy but also to save their souls and their lives. If each and every believer would labor has hard in their spiritual battles, not just for themselves but also in behalf of fellow believers, feeling their pain, their temptation and placing themselves in their position instead of standing back in judgment, then you would begin to see the great love adhesive that binds the true Church that belongs to Jesus Christ, restored and fulfilled.

"It is right for you to grieve when you lose a battle to Dicronifer. It is a sign that you really care and you want to serve God by coming to the aid of others. But you cannot win every battle because ultimately it is not up to you, but up to the one you are defending. If they refuse to listen, instead listening to the lies of Dicronifer, there is nothing you can do about it.

"It is the same in the spiritual battles against the devil. When people choose to listen to him and put the warning from the Holy Spirit aside, then no one can change that. It is because of the free-will God has given to each human in His creation. Each man, woman, boy and girl has the right to choose for themselves. The wrong choices will ultimately cause their destruction, but even the great Jehovah will not alter this. He wants all men and women to come to Him, but He also wants them to come to Him by their own choice because that my friends, is the true measure of real love."

"Thanks, Jerimeil. We really appreciate you coming to us. Failure just plain jerks the rug right out from in under you. We needed your encouragement," spoke Joshua.

"You are very welcome. That is my job and I love doing it. But be warned. From here on in the battles will be harder and much more difficult. Dicronifer has nearly completed his trek around the world. He will be making his mark in the small town of Crothersville soon. It is there you will stop him. You cannot kill him and you cannot destroy him as you were able to do with the blacksnake. It was only an extension, a figment representing his power if you will. He is a spiritual being, evil though he is. He cannot die.

"But you will stop him. You will be given the tool to do so when the time is right. Until then, keep your faith and stand strong."

With these words Jerimeil began, as he had done before, to fade into nothing, then he was gone.

"Wow!" was all that Karen said.

"You are exactly right, Babe. Wow!" Joshua repeated.

"Do you think we can get something to eat now?" asked Karen, "I'm hungry and exhausted."

"Yeah, me too. Why don't we call it a day, find a motel and get some rest before going on? What do you think?"

"Sounds like a winner; I'm all for it."

So, the pair did get to eat at their Bob Evans, found a couple of rooms at a motel near the Interstate, and nearly passed out from exhaustion before they took the next leg of the road in their journey to defeat the evil demon, Dicronifer.

Chapter 26

Lester Adkins had spent his entire life in the ministry. From his earliest memories he recalled how he had admired his grandfather, Abraham Adkins. He too had been a minister. Lester remembered how his grandfather stood in the pulpit, fiery sermons issuing from his mouth, yet at home, was as kind and gentle as a kitten. He had always wanted to be like Grandpa.

He spent his adolescent years preparing for nothing else. After school and during the summer he volunteered for everything he could possibly do in Grandpa Adkins's church. Sometimes his volunteer work would find him cleaning the sanctuary. During those times when no one was around he would stand in the pulpit and "practice" his own sermons, being careful to pitch his voice at just the right moment much like Grandpa did. But he was also careful to never let anyone hear him or know what he was doing. He kept his secret deep in his heart, but nearly all the people of the congregation knew that one day he would fill the shoes of Abraham Adkins.

After high school it was no surprise to his parents, teachers or his fellow classmates, when he enrolled in Bible College. He chose a small school, now closed, but then located a few miles north of Columbus, Ohio in the small town of Mount Vernon. The school was like the town, small, but unique and friendly. Those days were the best years of his life as he poured himself into his studies, and made lifetime friendships with many of the other students. Those

friendships had carried him through the years of ministry because many were the times when he would call or write one of them for advice, and vice versa.

He had grown up in Springfield, Ohio, another small town located just off Interstate 70 about twenty-five miles east of Dayton and forty miles west of Columbus. Like most young folks he dreamed of what it must be like living in a large city like Dayton or Columbus. In a way it was scary but it also intrigued him. Little did he know where his path would take him.

After Bible College he attended Asbury Seminary, located southeast of Louisville, Kentucky and nearly due south of Cincinnati. Here he spent his next four years earning his Master of Divinity degree.

Emerging from Seminary, he felt that he was more than qualified to fulfill his life-long dream as a pastor. He spent the next several years moving from one small congregation to another, where he soon discovered that all the preparation and education he had acquired over the past eight years made him very knowledgeable as far as doctrine and psychology were concerned, but there were many new lessons to be learned from actual life experiences. He found that dealing with people was much harder than learning about it in school and he came to know a whole lot more about common sense and practicality in life than he could have learned in twenty years of education. Still, with every new experience, he never gave a second thought to changing occupations.

After a few years of bouncing around he was given his first major pastoral assignment in a prestigious and large congregation located in Cincinnati. He found the excitement and challenges of city life to be much different than he had ever dreamed. The Greater Cincinnati Community Church was located right in the heart of the city and presented not only many opportunities but also many new challenges. For instance, he felt a great need to open their doors to the poor and the homeless. He was successful in setting up several good programs that not only helped with the physical needs of these people but also presented many opportunities to share the Bible with them.

But it did not go without opposition. In a large congregation there are not only those who are community minded and want to help others, but there are also many "stuffed-shirts," as he had secretly called them. This group of people didn't want the "filth" of the city in their nice, elaborately decorated building. After all, they had spent literally millions of dollars on a church they were proud to enter. But who knew what this rag-tag bunch would do? Besides, it wasn't good for their public image to be associated with life-losers like these. But the votes of those who supported the pastor's desire outweighed those of the "stuffed-shirts," and so for now Lester got his way.

It was a constant battle dealing with all the different personalities. Not only did he have to defend himself on a daily basis with the "stuffed-shirts," but he also found that working with the poverty-stricken and the homeless presented numerous other challenges. He spent countless hours in counseling those people and many had changed their ways, and were actually becoming fruitful and hard-working members of the congregation. The program had been so successful that a few of the "stuffed-shirts" were slowly migrating to his side.

He was always exhausted after spending ten to twelve hours each day at his office, many times to be called to someone's home or the hospital for emergencies and more counseling afterwards. But this is what he had decided to do with his life and so he suppressed the temptation to complain and regardless his personal feelings, pasted a smile on his face.

However, being in the lime-light as he was, also presented many temptations. There were numerous times when he would find himself in his office with a woman from the church. Sometimes married, sometimes single. Often, he had felt that some of these women were secretly propositioning him. It was hard for Lester to understand this, seeing that he had a beautiful wife, Nicole, and that they had two wonderful children. He was happily married and wasn't looking for another woman. He had always been faithful to her and had no intention of doing otherwise.

Still, Lester felt a little flattered that these women were drawn to him. But he always managed to suppress those feelings. He had taken to asking his secretary, Janet Russell, to stay when these women would come in for counseling, and he always left the door cracked open so that he was not entirely behind closed doors.

Janet was a very attractive woman about the same age as Lester. She was a dedicated parishioner and always seemed eager to jump on board in support of the Pastor's ideas and agenda. She had spent countless hours typing and helping on projects with the needy. She was everything a pastor could ask for in a secretary, but their relationship had been carefully kept professional.

Her husband and family were very understanding of this arrangement. They had become fast friends and often they would get together for dinner, sometimes at the Adkins' home, sometimes at the Russell's home, and sometimes at a local restaurant. Lester liked Janet's husband, Leroy, very much. They had often enjoyed a game of golf together, bonding into a close friendship. Lester had reasoned that even pastor's needed good friends, and he was right.

It should have been a tell-tale sign to Lester. It began on a Monday after a weekend in which he and Nicole had exchanged words in a very strong

argument. She felt he was working too hard and it was time for the family to take a vacation. Lester knew that she was right. It had been nearly two years since he had taken time off from his pastoral duties and in fact, he also knew that it was beginning to wear on him. His job had kept him away much of the time, even at night. He was often late for dinner in the evening because another parishioner would happen in right about time to close the office, in need of immediate counseling. In his heart he knew that he had been neglecting his family.

But he reasoned that this was what he had chosen to do with his life. He was a pastor and he needed to fulfill what he thought was the definition of a pastor. He had sacrificially given to his congregation and he thought Nicole understood the necessity of this when they were married. Instead of agreeing with her he took the defensive, one thing leading to another until words had made their deep cuts.

On Tuesday morning he felt very strongly that he should have taken the day off and worked this out with Nicole after the kids had gone to school. But in his heart, he wanted to share with someone he felt would understand – Janet. She actually spent more time with him than his own wife. She knew the pressures he was under, the deadlines he faced, and he knew she would understand. Red flags arose all morning as he readied himself for work, but he passed them off and ignored them. He justified his thoughts as being “the professional thing to do.”

With a quick good-bye kiss, Lester and Nicole coldly parted that morning. He continued ignoring a drawing in his mind to turn around on the sidewalk and run back to his wife, asking for her forgiveness and taking some special time to work this out. But he didn't. It was raining and he had not taken an umbrella so instead of turning around he ran to the car and quickly jumped in.

Because of the rain, it was an unusually slow Tuesday. Only a couple of people dropped by the office and strangely there were no appointments scheduled. As he sat at his desk, supposed to be working on the next Sunday's sermon, his thoughts turned to the incident with Nicole. “She just didn't understand,” he reasoned in his mind. He thought of Janet. She would understand. It made sense to talk to her about it, even though he knew from all his training in marriage counseling that things like this should never be shared with anyone besides his wife. It was, in a way, cheating on her.

However, Lester reasoned that with Janet being so close to Nicole that perhaps she could share some insights from a woman's point of view that would help him understand. It sounded like a good idea. So, he stepped to the door that separated his office from the outer-office where she worked.

It was dark and wet outside, but the light from the office fixtures made her reddish-brown hair glisten in its rays. Though it was mid-July, the damp morning had been a bit cool and she had worn a sweater which she had removed, and it was draped over the back of her office chair. The sleeveless white blouse and olive-green skirt was an appropriate outfit and matched not only the dreariness of the outside, but also that of his heart. Strangely he was suddenly attracted to this admirable woman. That should have made him change his mind and immediately return to his office, or better, since it was a slow day, close up shop and go home to his wife. But he didn't.

"Janet," he began, clearing his throat, "when you're finished could you come into my office for a moment? I've got something I need to talk to you about."

"Certainly, Pastor." She always addressed him with this title when in the office, even though during off hours and outside of the church the two couples were on a first name basis.

Seated at his desk he felt a strange guilt about his sudden attraction to Janet and wished he hadn't invited her into his office. At one point he had made up his mind to step back to the doorway and tell her to never mind; that he had worked it out; but when he went to the doorway, she had her back to him and was standing at the filing cabinet. He could see the outline of her bra under her white blouse and he took a long gaze at her shapely body, and then returned to his desk, Janet being oblivious of his presence.

He bent over his desk and ran his fingers through his hair, "What am I doing?" he asked himself. At that moment she entered his office, "Is everything alright Pastor?" she asked.

He walked back around his desk and sat down. "No, Janet; it really isn't. I'm sorry, would you care to have a seat?" he asked her and she sat down in one of the chairs normally used by those he was counseling. "It's about Nicole," he began, and before he took another thought, he had spilled his guts about the whole conversation that should have been private between husband and wife.

She listened with attentive ears as he spoke. She knew that she should be taking the side of her friend, Nicole, but instead found herself agreeing with Lester, softening with every word. She too knew that her advice should have been for him to go home to Nicole and work it out. She began feeling a strange attraction like she had never felt towards him. She was no dummy. She had been trained to expect things like counselees "hitting on" the pastor and she realized the dangers and pitfalls. Often, she had blocked situations that she

knew were only attempts to get to Lester, telling the other lady that she would have to make an appointment because the pastor was busy, or something like that. She also knew that she should immediately excuse herself and return to her desk. But she didn't.

"He's a good-looking guy you know," came a whisper in her ear. "No one will ever know. Just one time won't hurt anything or anyone."

"She understands you," was the whisper in the ear of Lester as he continued to talk. "She's a beautiful woman and you know that you want her."

As Lester allowed a couple of tears to trickle down his face, Janet stood, walked behind him and began to rub his shoulders. One thing led to another until they found themselves on the couch in the Pastor's office.

"Uh-hmmm" came a firm and objective clear of a throat. "I can see that I'm interrupting something here."

Lester looked up. There in the doorway stood Mick Foster, head deacon of the congregation. Now caught Lester nervously defended, "Mick, Mick, let me explain," He found himself begging as the man turned and walked out of the office.

"No need Pastor, no need." And with that Mick left. Both Lester and Janet quickly straightened their clothing and each sat at on opposite ends of the couch as far away from each other as they possibly could. Guilt flooded them like water from a broken dam. A cold, laugh was heard by each, nearly as if it had been done out loud. They looked at one other as if to ask, "Did you hear that?" but neither posed the question.

"What now?" timidly asked Janet.

"I have no idea," replied Lester.

The end of the week found Lester called on the carpet before the board of deacons. There was no mercy. He was immediately relieved of his pastoral duties. Janet and Leroy never returned to the church again. Another week found Nicole and their children leaving for her parents. He was given ten days to vacate the parsonage. What now? What had he done? Answering his own question, he realized that for that brief moment he had sacrificed his entire life. Nicole, whom he loved deeply, was gone. His two children couldn't understand why daddy had made mommy leave. Would he ever see them again? What he had lived to do his entire life was now thrown to the dogs. What congregation would ever have him as pastor with this on his record?

There seemed to be only one answer. He had always kept a rifle, because during his earlier days, he enjoyed hunting. It had been buried in the closet because, frankly his busied schedule hadn't permitted it for quite some time. He dug through his dresser drawer and found a box of shells, loaded the gun and sat with the rifle, butt on the floor, barrel tucked under his chin. A soft whisper spoke, "This is your only way now..."

Chapter 27

Just before Lester could pull the trigger he was startled by a knock at the door. A terrifying thought ran through his mind, "Wow! That could have caused me to nervously pull the trigger before I was ready!" which also proved to him that he really didn't want to end his life this way. Carefully sliding his rifle under the sofa, he got up and opened the door; on the other side stood an attractive, but very distraught looking young lady. It was as if she had been in a hurry, was panting, and spoke between breaths, "Pastor Adkins?"

"Yes," he responded, and then corrected himself, "Well, I was Pastor Adkins. I guess now I'm simply Lester Adkins."

Ignoring his comment she continued, "Pastor, I'm Karen Lacey. My partner, Joshua Smithson is a little busy right now out in your yard."

Lester took a peek over Karen's shoulder and he could see a young man swinging his arms like he wielded a sword trying to cut the air. Not quite sure what to make of the situation he spoke, "Young lady, this is not a good time right now, if you don't mind."

"Pastor, I know what's going on. Please let me in, please," Karen insisted, nearly shoving her way past him right into his living room. Lester began to protest but then, he felt in his heart that something very important was taking place, so he stopped. Karen continued, "Pastor, Joshua and I are believers in

Christ. I know this may sound strange, but God has assigned us a mission to do battle with and stop an evil demon who calls himself Dicronifer. He is the one at work in your situation. He is the evil force that influenced both you and your secretary to commit adultery and he's the one who is telling you that your life's hopes and dreams are over. He's trying right now to influence you to commit suicide. Oh Pastor, please understand! We are only trying to help you."

Lester thought deeply as Karen spoke. He had read of the miracles of Jesus and the Apostles. He knew the Bible spoke of visions, dreams and revelations. But he had never actually witnessed a miracle. He had never experienced any of these supernatural experiences. Frankly, in his mind those who had professed of experiencing such things in their lives he had dismissed as tricksters and schemers. Certainly, many television evangelists had been caught up in such trickery and he had carefully tried to disassociate himself with them. He was immediately suspicious of Karen and her seemingly half-crazed partner out in the front yard.

She could have seen his story in the newspaper. His face had been plastered all over the papers of Cincinnati – They read "PASTOR OF A LARGE PROMINENT CHURCH FALLS." This couple was possibly up to some sort of extortion, or attempt to take advantage of his predicament to find their own fame and fortune in some twisted way.

Then he remembered the voice he had heard in his office. He had heard it again just before this young woman showed up at his door. It had told him how much he had messed up his life, and that there was no hope. Maybe she was right. Perhaps he should listen some more to what this woman had to say. He allowed Karen to continue, intrigued by her words but not lowering his guard. She was telling his story as if he were telling it himself. Still, she hadn't said anything that had not been in the news.

"Pastor," Karen spoke, "God saw your heart and knew the battle that was going on when you stepped to your door and almost told Mrs. Russell that you no longer needed her. But you lingered and watched her with lust in your heart." There; that got Lester's attention. He hadn't told anyone about that, not even Janet. Now he was keenly aware that something more was going on. He sensed a presence in the room that he had never felt before. He wondered if this might be the Holy Spirit of God he had read of in the Bible. He knew all about it for he had study the word in detail. But he had always thought it to be just an allegory of life.

The voice that had been telling him of his worthlessness was forced out and it felt like a warm, soothing presence had embraced him. He began to weep uncontrollably. "Young lady ... Karen, I understand. You are right; there is hope.

I don't know how I will ever make amends for what I have done but you have stopped me from giving the devil complete victory," and with that he buried his face into the sofa and began to cry out to God, not just in cold, memorized prayers as he had always done, but now from deep within his heart. He suddenly realized that, although he had spent his life in the work of the church, he had never actually made a commitment to God for his own personal life. He had never been saved!

Joshua was fighting for his life. Exhausted, soaked in perspiration and feeling like he was all alone, the demon's blows became heavier and heavier, each with a force that made him feel that he could hold on no longer. Still, with everything in him he fought, deflecting Dicronifer's attack.

Just then the demon stopped. He took a long hard look toward the house. Josh didn't know exactly what was going on but he was glad for the second or two to catch his breath. Then Dicronifer's face grew hard. He grimaced in anger showing his ugly, yellowed teeth. With a stomp of his foot he cried, "NO-O-O-O!" then turned his evil gaze back on Joshua. He began to whirl his body around, sword stuck straight out. He twirled faster and faster until he nearly looked like a mini-tornado. His sword was getting closer and closer to Joshua, and he felt like he was literally being pulled into a giant saw.

The demon was now close enough that Josh had to hold his own sword up to deflect the blade of Dicronifer. Sparks were flying from the place where their swords met and the force of the blows pushed his wrists from side to side, harder with each revolution. Then, instantly the demonic tornado stopped. Dicronifer quickly raised his own jagged edged sword over his head and immediately brought it down with a cutting swoosh.

Joshua felt a tingle, then severe pain in his right shoulder. He moved to lift his sword towards Dicronifer once again, but nothing was there. Looking over he saw that his arm had been severed from his shoulder. He could see his twitching right hand, still clasping the sword laying a couple of feet beside him. Blood pumped from his shoulder like a newly opened oil well. Dicronifer screamed in glee, "I've beaten you. I told you I would beat you! You are a weak-minded fool, Joshua Bayne Smithson! YOU! YOU! YOU! I have defeated YOU!" he laughed.

Inside Karen and Lester heard the scream that had issued from Joshua's lips. This was not the defiant scream of Dicronifer but one of excruciating pain. They ran to the living room window that looked out over the front yard. Lester saw him now. Before, when he had peered over Karen's shoulder it looked as if Joshua was just swinging his sword into thin air in an imaginary battle. But now, standing nearly fifteen feet tall, Lester saw the evil beast that was Dicronifer.

Karen stared at the blood gushing from Joshua's shoulder. As a nurse she knew that if something wasn't done immediately that he would very quickly bleed to death. Without another word she bolted out the front door. Feeling that he had won, she watched as Dicronifer vanished into thin air. At least she wouldn't have to deal with him. That was the grace of God because she had to do something for Josh now!

Inside Lester searched for the cordless telephone to call 911. Where had he put it? Oh yes, he had last used it to try to call Nicole and had left it upstairs in the bedroom. He raced up the steps to retrieve it. Once in hand, he jumped the steps back down two at a time. Standing at the window he watched as Karen calmly walked over to Joshua who was now lying on the ground in terrible pain. But before he could dial the numbers, he saw something amazing take place.

Karen felt the nausea begin from her lower abdomen, but quickly pushed past the cramping and weakness it normally caused. She didn't have time for this now. She saw the life draining from Joshua as their eyes met. He was dying. There were no words but she could feel his cries for help. Then she looked away from him and locked her gaze on his right arm twitching in the grass. Nearly in a trance she walked over, picked it up ignoring the bloody mess that it was. Then she turned back to Joshua. Kneeling down beside him she put her hand under his upper back and gently raised him up. Then she placed his severed arm against his right shoulder, still pumping blood and pushed it together.

Joshua looked at her, and he could see the faith and confidence in her eyes. They were beautiful, loving, and filled with care and concern. For the moment he forgot his pain and shared the spiritual exchange in their gaze. Then he noticed that the pain simply stopped. He was weak from the loss of blood but he looked down at the sword still clenched in his right hand. He relaxed his grip and let the sword fall.

Karen picked up the sword and slid it into the sheath at Joshua's side, then helped him up from the ground. Simultaneously they both looked at his shoulder. It was still bloody but looking past the blood it appeared that his arm was normal again.

Lester stepped out the door, gawking as the couple made their way to his house. He couldn't believe his eyes. He had personally witnessed a miracle. His thoughts immediately fell on the incident in Gethsemane when the soldiers had come with Judas to take Jesus. Peter had pulled a sword and had cut off the ear of one of the servants named Malchius. Jesus had calmly bent down, picked up

the man's severed ear and placed it back on the side of his head. He could never again say that he had not experienced a miracle.

Suddenly he felt conviction like never before and where he stood, he once again began to weep and begged God for forgiveness for his terrible sin. When Karen and Joshua reached the door, he stepped aside and let them in, then ran to the bathroom retrieving wet washcloths and towels. Together Lester and Karen cleaned the blood from Joshua's shoulder. Once they did there was not so much as even a scar where his arm had been cut off by the demon. It was completely healed.

Karen went back out to their car and got a change of clothing for both her and Joshua. Afterward Joshua lay back on the sofa, still weak from the loss of blood but feeling much better now. Under his breath he thanked God for giving him such a partner as Karen. She was the most caring woman he had ever met, and on top of it she loved the Lord. He not only admired her, but knew that he was now head-over-heels in love with her.

Lester broke the silence, "I'm going to fix us a bite to eat. Joshua certainly needs something to help build up his strength." With that he disappeared into the kitchen and began to pull some hamburger from the refrigerator.

"Karen," began Joshua, "What a woman you are!"

"I'm nothing," she returned, "I was just being obedient to the Spirit of God."

"I know, I know. But that's just it. I don't know of another lady on this planet that would have remained calm and done what you did. You are strong; a good woman and I love you for it."

Karen thought of protesting. She had been hesitant to speak of her own feelings for Joshua. But before she could say something smart, the words fell from her lips, "I love you too Joshua," and they embraced.

They talked for a few minutes then was interrupted by Lester, "Soups on," he said, "or I guess I should say the burgers are done. I know it isn't the healthiest meal, but I'm not very good at this cooking thing yet." He set up a tray for Joshua then brought colas, burgers and fries into the living room.

After their meal, Joshua felt much better. The three talked for nearly two hours, beginning with what had happened that day, then moving on to Lester's life. They shared their own experiences with him, feeling freely that they could

openly talk about their mission with this man. He had messed his life up badly but now he had actually given himself to the Lord. He was now a Christian and for the first time in his life he was really in love with the Lord.

It was time for Karen and Joshua to go but before leaving Joshua turned to Lester, "What now brother?"

"I'm not sure," Lester began hesitatingly. "I'm not sure, but I know that God isn't finished with me yet."

"No, I know that He isn't," agreed Karen. "Hang in there. Things will never be the same, we all know that. God has a work for you Pastor." She thought about what Jerimeil had told them before they left New York, and then said, "He is the Master at turning lemons into lemonade when we get back into His will. You'll see."

After Karen and Joshua had left, Lester sat down on the floor with his back to the door. He felt clean, like a freshly swept house. Then he jolted to his feet. "A freshly swept house," he thought. He remembered the story Jesus had told of the demon that had been cast from a man. The demon had returned and found the man swept clean and empty, and he brought with him more demons. "I can't let that happen," reasoned Lester, startled at his discovery. He thanked God for giving him this revelation. It was his first but it was not to be his last.

He grabbed his rifle from in under the sofa, unloaded it and carefully returned it to where it had been for the past several years. Then he spent the next few hours reading his Bible and praying. It was as if it were his first time, even though he had lost count of how many times he had read it from cover to cover. The scriptures opened up like fresh flowers in a beautiful garden.

Lester was never restored to Nicole. She went on with her life. He had no choice but to do the same. But just as Karen had shared with him about lemons and lemonade with God, the Lord did open things up for him. He never pastored another church. Given the circumstances he didn't feel comfortable doing that anyway. But he had always harbored a passion for the needy and the homeless.

He found a job downtown. It wasn't the most glorious job, as he worked by the sweat of his brow in a local foundry. But he managed to earn enough to pay his bills and save enough money to rent an old building downtown. There he opened a soup kitchen and shelter. The Lord graced him with several converts who volunteered to help, and he found himself once again able to preach to these folks and counsel them in their needs. It wasn't the glorious life he had before, but he was more fulfilled than ever.

Chapter 28

From Cincinnati Josh and Karen picked up Interstate 74. Their travels over the freeways would soon be finished. Picking up Indiana State Highway 101, they would travel south to US Highway 50 and follow that west all the way to Seymour Indiana. From there they would once again turn south, this time on US Highway 31, until they reached Crothersville. They were within an hour of home.

About a mile from their exit onto 101, they were visited one more time by Jerimeil who appeared to them from the backseat of the car. With his normal greeting, he successfully startled the pair yet again. With a laugh Josh remarked, "Hi Jerimeil. We should have packed you a bag!"

A smirk of a smile crossed the angel's lips which contagiously made Karen smile as well. She pulled down the sun visor and adjusted it so she could see his face through the mirror. She smiled again as she watched the eight-foot figure fidgeting in the back seat, trying to get comfortable.

"My young soldiers, I see, with the great victory won back in Cincinnati that your sense of humor has returned. That's very good," began Jerimeil. "I have news for you and information that you must consider before arriving in your hometown of Crothersville. This could be my last appearance to you so please listen carefully. Your mission, for now, will soon be over.

"You are about to face the fiercest battle you have ever faced."

Joshua interrupted, "I can't imagine anything harder than the last one," and he reached up and rubbed his shoulder as he spoke. "I now know how folks who've lost a limb feel. But I am thankful that God allowed Karen to be obedient, and that God restored my arm."

"Yes, yes, but even that great miracle, young man, is a type of what the Lord wants to do for others. He physically restored your arm but in the spiritual kingdom both of you have been obedient, restoring precious loss to the spirits of others. But the journey is not yet finished. I cannot tell you much because too much information could hinder your victory over Dicronifer.

"But I will share with you what I am allowed. You are going to meet a man in Crothersville who is going through great difficulty. This will be your final battle and if you continue to be obedient to Jehovah you will win. But it will come with much sacrifice. You will be tested like you have never been before; both of you. You must be strong in your faith not just in the Great Jehovah, but also in each other and in yourselves. God has instilled mighty gifts in you but you must be always aware that they come from Him and even though you have been given liberty to use them they are not yours.

"Do you remember the story from the Bible of what happened when Jesus, Peter, James and John came down from the mountain where He had been transfigured?" Both Joshua and Karen nodded their heads. "The man with the demon possessed son had brought his boy to the disciples for deliverance. But they could not help him. No matter what they did the demon would not leave him. Of course, Jesus easily cast the demon out. But it was the words that he spoke to His disciples afterwards that I want to remind you of. Even though these disciples had recently returned from an assignment by Jesus to go out by twos into the cities and villages to preach the Gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons, still in this incident they could not. Do you remember the words of Jesus in answer to their question as to why they couldn't do it?"

"Jesus told them that this kind would not come out except by prayer and fasting," quickly answered Karen.

"Yes, that's exactly right!" Jerimeil was just as happy at her answer as would have been a Sunday school teacher drilling a student to see if they remembered their lesson. "But His answer told more than just that they should have been praying and going without food in order to cast out the demon. The main lesson was that they had become accustomed to the power of God in their lives. They felt the gifts were theirs and had resorted to relying on their own abilities rather than God. Prayer and fasting remind us of how dependence on

the Mighty Jehovah, and that any special gifts He may grant us, are only loaned to us to use in His behalf. That isn't to take any importance away from prayer and fasting. Again, these things cause you to place your focus on God and not yourself. I suggest that you do some of this during the next few days before your final encounter with Dicronifer. You will need the strength you will receive from it to face him."

Josh and Karen were silent for a moment and it was so quiet in the car that they both looked back, Karen from the visor mirror and Joshua through the rearview mirror, just to make sure that Jerimeil was still there. He was. "Jerimeil, you mentioned the other day that the weapons we now have were not the ones that we would use to deal the final blow to Dicronifer. If we aren't to see you again, are you going to grant them to us now?" asked Joshua.

"Be patient my boy, be patient. When the time is right you will be given what you need. I can't say that you will never see me again, but if Jehovah decides that my service is once more required, it will not be during your victory time over Dicronifer. Only He knows and I cannot say. But now is not the time to be concerned with that. Now you must be focused on what is facing you in that small town down the road."

"We'll miss you my wonderful angel," sighed Karen with a tear trickling down her cheek.

"Now, now child; don't cry. Rather rejoice because Jehovah has brought you so far. You have not only found a new relationship with God but as a by-product He has given you each other." Karen and Josh sheepishly glanced at one another. "Don't be shy about it children. This too is a gift of God and a strong advantage. For where two or three are gathered together, He is also present. That not only goes for believers assembled for worship, but also for individual believers. Don't be ashamed but stand strong in the gift of love. It is of God."

"We will miss you my friend," spoke Joshua. "You have given us so much. Our lives are different now. We're stronger not only in our own character but in our relationship with the Lord. You have been a good friend."

"Yes, and I am enriched by our relationship as well. But I am nothing. I am only the messenger. That's what the word 'angel' means you know. I have served my Master just as you are doing.

"Now go in the power, might and the name of the Lord. Be strong and encouraged and be assured that God will give you the victory," and with those words Jerimeil disappeared.

Joshua reached over and took Karen's hand. They looked at each other and smiled, then turned from US Highway 50, south onto US Highway 31. Within twenty minutes they would be there.

They rode in silence for the next few miles. Karen's thoughts turned to home. It would be good to see her parents again. It had been Christmas since she had last seen them. Since neither of them had thought to call home and let their families know they were coming, it was also going to be a surprise. But she knew that they would receive her with loving arms. It would be good to see her sister again too. She and Tammy had always been very close.

Tammy had married a man from Seymour only a year before, and Karen had served as her maid of honor. They had gone through the usual teenage squabbles over boys and so forth during their years at home, but mostly they got along. Honestly, they were good friends. It was like the old saying goes that "blood is thicker than water." It was okay for them to fight and bicker; but let someone outside their household attack one and then they had both sisters to contend with.

Tammy's husband, George, was a good man. He didn't work in an office or a factory but was a contractor. He wasn't rich but he managed to make a good living and had provided well for her sister.

Joshua also thought of home. It had actually been Thanksgiving since he had seen his mother and brother. His father had passed away a year and a half prior. He missed his dad. He had a great strength that had helped develop Joshua's character.

His mother, Susan, had married Gerald Smithson just after their high school days. They had been sweethearts during all four years of high school and it seemed natural for them to marry afterwards. His father had worked all his life in the local Shoe Factory. It wasn't big money but enough to raise a family. Their home, near the end of Central Avenue wasn't an enormous one but it was good enough for them. They had been a happy and satisfied family.

His mother still lived there along with his older brother, Bert. His full name was Herbert but he had so hated that name that he refused to let anyone use it. He went by Bert. Of course, their mother would use his full name anytime he got into trouble, "Herbert Anthony Smithson!" she would say. If Joshua was around, he would cover his mouth and giggle. Bert would give him that look and Joshua knew that if he didn't disappear for a while, that as soon as Bert got him alone, he was in trouble too. But he always managed to cool off.

Bert had not been one to have much to do with God. Their parents always insisted that both of them attend church services with the family. But Bert never really took interest. He had other things on his mind. During their teen years he had gotten in trouble more than once over girls. Joshua had never even had the desire to try drugs, but Bert was caught several times with pot. He'd be taken to the county jail for an over-nighter, and had his hands basically "slapped" by the local police. But he never got into dealing or anything like that, at least as far as Joshua knew.

Just before Josh had left for his first year of college Bert had gotten married. It was kind of a shot-gun wedding you might say. His wife, Rachel Knowles, was a few months pregnant at the wedding. The marriage had only lasted a little over a year and Rachel had left the state with her parents taking Bert's son, Bradley with them. He never really got to know his son and at least pretended not to care.

After that Bert took up drinking. He didn't stay drunk all the time but often enough that it plagued their mother. She always had to come up with the money to bail him out of jail. It wasn't a good situation. Still, Josh loved his family and he felt warmth in his heart about seeing them again.

Finally arriving in Crothersville, they cruised through town to the only traffic light. Things had not changed all that much. A few of the homes along the way looked a bit more run down than they had before, and a new shop had been built along the highway, but other than that it was still the same. Karen and Josh smiled at each other as they arrived. Not only were their parents going to be surprised regarding their coming, but also with the news of their newfound relationship with each other.

Josh dropped Karen off at her parent's house and helped her unpack what she needed. They had decided to leave what they could do without in the car for now. Both her mom and dad were retired so when they saw their daughter getting out of the car they came running out on to the porch. At first, they thought something might be wrong. Where was Karen's sleek Mustang that she had been so proud of? And who was this guy she was with? In as few words as possible she quickly explained carefully leaving out the fact that she had lost her job and sold her car. For the moment they only wanted them to believe that they were here for a visit. With that her parents scooped her up in their arms and her father shook Joshua's hand.

After their greetings Joshua took Karen in his arms and kissed her. "I'll leave you to catch up with your folks. I've got some surprising to do myself."

"I'll miss you," she told Joshua.

"I'll miss you too," he told her. He kissed her again and watched as she disappeared into the house, her mother's arm around her waist and her father's around her shoulders.

He made the short journey of only blocks to his own home. The house looked a bit run down. He assumed that Bert hadn't done much in way of fixing things up and he knew that, even though it probably bothered his mother greatly, she was unable to do it herself. He'd see if he could find the time while he was in to help out.

On the porch now he knocked at the door. Even though he had a key he didn't want to just barge in causing someone to have a heart attack or anything. He also knew Bert all too well, and he didn't want to take a chance of getting his head blown off by his brother's old shotgun either.

His mother answered the door. Her face seemed worn and tattered from the years and probably the worry over Bert hadn't helped. At first her expression didn't change. It was like she hadn't recognized him.

"Hi Mom," he spoke.

In that same instant her face lit up. A big smile replaced her frown and with tears she said, "Well, if it isn't my long-lost boy come home!" She hugged him until he felt like this small, frail woman was going to squeeze him to death. Glancing over her shoulder he saw Bert coming down the stairs, curious as to who was at their door.

"Hi brother," Josh spoke.

"Oh, hello; good to see you; what's the occasion?" There was no emotion from his brother. In fact, Joshua felt a chill in his brother's voice. This wasn't entirely the greeting he had hoped for, at least not from his brother.

Chapter 29

The three of them, Josh, Bert, and their mother, sat down in the living room after she had retrieved a cold glass of good old-fashioned homemade lemonade for each. They sipped and talked for more than an hour, catching up on what had been going on in their lives. Well, at least Joshua and his mother did. Bert was strangely quiet except for an occasional “yes” or “no” when their mother would ask for his confirmation on a subject.

Josh carefully guarded his words to make sure he didn’t say anything of their mission. He knew that they wouldn’t understand and would most likely believe that he had finally gone overboard if he told them - especially Bert. He wanted to. It was at the front of his every thought. He couldn’t help but feel anxious knowing that this would be the place of the final battle with Dicronifer.

He shifted his weight on the couch often in effort to get comfortable with all that invisible armor on. “My, Josh, are you uncomfortable?” asked his mother.

What could he say? “Naa, just shifting my weight from the long ride from New York is all,” he responded. It was what we would call a white lie, but he couldn’t blurt out that it was difficult sitting down with a sword hanging from his side and a shield over his arm.

They talked about the changes in town. Most of them weren’t visible unless you really lived there and witnessed them take place from day to day; like

the coat of new paint that had recently adorned the city building and the new grocery store at the corner of Main Street and Armstrong (which was also U.S. Highway 31). It was the same old building with a bit of a face lift, so unless one knew the town history, it would be hardly noticeable. A new bicycle rack had been put up at the library and the school had finally gotten air-conditioning - a much needed improvement.

Their discussion turned to the boy's father. Of course, they all missed him. He had been the strength of the family and they all admitted to it – even Bert.

Mrs. Smithson talked about their church. The old Presbyterian Church had finally closed and had been purchased by the town for a gathering place for special events. She was glad that it was going to be persevered because, after all, it was one of the oldest structures in town. But she missed it. She had begun attending services at the First Baptist Church. But she admitted that there were many Sundays when she didn't feel like getting out. Bert, of course, refused to go to any church with her and so her attendance was sporadic at best.

When the conversation turned to personal things like their father and church, Bert grew very uncomfortable. After a few minutes of this he spoke up, "Well, it's good seeing you again brother but I've got things to do. Are you in for very long?"

"That's a good question. Actually, I'm not planning on returning to New York, at least for a while, so I don't really know."

He hadn't told them that he had lost his job and he thought that this comment would spur an onslaught of questions. Instead, Bert simply shrugged his shoulders and grunted something that wasn't understandable, and then said, "Okay, well, I guess I'll be seeing more of you for a while. Got to go ... see you later," and with that he turned and walked out the door. His exit was followed by a time of awkward silence. When she was certain that Bert was gone and out of hearing range Joshua's mother bowed her head and began to weep.

"Mom, what's the matter," asked Joshua wanting to comfort her but not really knowing what to say. He knew Bert had been in trouble and that his life seemed to be going nowhere but he had no idea what might have transpired since his last visit at Thanksgiving.

She attempted to dry her eyes, "Oh, its Bert. Son I just don't know what I'm going to do with him. He's always getting into trouble; he won't work a job for more than a week at a time, when he can find one that is. I love both my boys," she continued, "but Heaven knows I don't know what to do. I try to support him in everything he attempts and, frankly, he's about to put me in the

poor house, but he just won't stick with anything. He's always disappearing for hours and sometimes days without a word of explanation. If I try to ask him where he's been or what he's been doing he gets angry and I just can't take that. I need help with him son. He needs a friend, or at least someone who can be a better influence on him than those men he normally runs around with. They've all got the same reputation. Sometimes they'll spend half the night just standing around on the street corners. I don't know what they're doing or what they're into but it doesn't seem like they're up to any good."

"There, there, Mom. It looks like I might be here a while. I'll see what I can do to help, if he'll let me. You know that we've never been really close. He was always sidestepping me when we were growing up. But he is my brother and if there's anything I can do you know that I'll do it."

"You're a good boy, Joshua. The only thing I can see wrong with you is that you didn't stay in church. Why, I always thought that if you had you'd turn out to be a preacher or something. But you're still a good son."

That comment made Josh remember his conversion to Christ. "Well, Mom, I've got a bit of news for you. I have made a commitment to the Lord. He has come into my life in a fantastic way. That's part of why I'm here actually." It made him glow inside to tell her about how he had come to know Christ as his Savior. Of course, he was careful to leave out the parts about Jerimeil and the mission. But he was able to tell her enough to let her know that he had really changed. As he spoke, he saw a new, brighter look on his mother's face. It was a look of hope; a big smile and an occasional chuckle replaced her frown and tears.

When he had finished, she clapped her hands together and stood to her feet, "I knew you'd turn out alright!" she exclaimed, "This is reason to celebrate! I'm getting hungry so I'm going to go to the kitchen and whip you up something really good."

"You don't have to do that mom." Josh was concerned for her health and wasn't sure if she really felt like cooking a big meal. But in his heart, he longed for one of her home-cooked dinners.

"Oh yes I do," she responded, "It will do me good to stir around in the kitchen. You just make yourself comfortable son. You're home you know."

She disappeared in the kitchen and Josh leaned back. It was good to be home. His heart felt warm in the possibility of being able to help his mother. But Bert was another problem. He knew something was going on but he just couldn't quite put his finger on it. He really needed to talk with Karen about this.

God had given her the special gift of insight and perhaps she could shed some light on Bert's situation.

His thoughts drifted to her. Even though he had sported a crush on her back in his school days, he never ever dreamed he would actually be in love with her. She was indeed a prize. He longed to be with her; feel her head on his shoulder and just curl up and relax a while. They hadn't gotten to do anything like that since their relationship had begun. They had never really had a date. Even when they had their first meeting in the restaurant back in New York it turned into another phase of the mission. Other than an occasional kiss and holding hands they had been given no time to just sit down and discuss their lives, their plans and their future.

Perhaps that would come when all of this was over and according to Jerimeil that would happen in a matter of days. So much had taken place. He was a different man than he had been before. Of course, coming to the Lord made a big difference, but his life as a city lawyer seemed as if it had happened to someone else. That was all gone now. What would he do after this was finished, assuming of course he survived? He rubbed his right shoulder, remembering how much pain he had felt when Dicronifer had severed his arm. What would life have been like had God not allowed Karen to put it back into place? He hoped that he'd never know.

After a bit he heard his mother call out, "Soup's on son. Let's eat." They sat down at the table and enjoyed a wonderful meal of homemade chicken and dumplings, green beans and mashed potatoes. She had always been a wonderful cook but it amazed him how she could fix something up like that so quickly.

Karen sat in her old room. Even though she too was glad to be home she wondered about things; where life had taken her and what it would be like after all of this was over. She and her sister had shared this room up until they both got to be teenagers. At that time, all their squabbling made their parents realize that it was time to give each of them their own space. Her father gave up his den and converted it into a bedroom for Tammy. After all, she was the oldest so she got first pick. Migrating to a new room seemed more exciting than staying in the old one so that was her choice. Her father had cleaned up a corner in the garage and moved his things out there. But after the girls had left home, he had reclaimed his den.

Her mother was also fixing a special dinner. They had called her sister and her husband inviting them over since Karen had come in. Her heart filled with warmth at the thought of seeing her sister again.

Home felt safe. Since the mission had begun, she was constantly looking over her shoulder, never knowing when an encounter with the demon, Dicronifer was going to take place. Her sleep had been filled with dreams, nightmares mostly, about things that had happened or things that were about to happen. Having this gift at times seemed more of a curse than a blessing. Still, she was thankful to be used of God. She wasn't complaining but she did feel like she was in store for the first really good night's sleep in days.

After a bit Tammy and George arrived. Her mother called, "Karen, Tammy's here," which sent her racing downstairs like a schoolgirl again. She took one look at her sister and her first startled words were, "You're pregnant!"

Tammy laughed, "Yeah that does seem to be the case." The sisters embraced for a tight hug and Karen, Tammy, George and their father sat down for greeting-conversation while their mother disappeared again into the kitchen to put the finishing touches on her meal. In a while the announcement was made that dinner was ready and they all sat down at the table. Her mom had gone all out. There was fried chicken, coleslaw, mashed potatoes and gravy, corn, and green beans. And for desert – a homemade apple pie was cooling in the kitchen to be topped off with a big scoop of vanilla ice cream.

"Mom," Karen started, "you didn't have to do all this for me!"

"Oh yes, I did. Besides, it isn't that often that Tammy and George get to join us for dinner, especially in the middle of the week, so this is a doubly special occasion." Their father gave thanks for the food and they all dived in, not only in the culinary delectables but also in wonderful conversation. It was a happy time and one that Karen knew that she would always treasure.

After dinner Tammy and Karen helped their mother clean up and then they joined George and their father in the living room. Everything was going great. About 9:00 Tammy said, "Well, folks it's been really good. Karen, I'm so glad that you're home for a while, but we've got to be going. George needs to be on a construction site around 6:30 in the morning so we've got to get him home."

Karen followed them out onto the porch to see them off and afterwards sat down on the swing by herself. She wasn't really thinking about anything special and her thoughts drifted from one thing to another; the mission, the warmth and safety of home, and of course, Joshua. That man had changed her life that was for certain. In a way she was disappointed with herself for allowing it, but those feelings were quickly chased off by how she had fallen deeply in love with him. Strangely she was glad to be separated from him for awhile, but in the same thought wished for his company.

A voice spoke, "Thinking about anyone I know?" Looking down the sidewalk that led to their porch, there he stood. It was as if her thoughts had sort of conjured him up. "Josh, what are you doing here?"

"Do you think I could stay away from you for very long? I told Mom that I wanted to say goodnight. Of course, she suggested a phone call but I had to see you for a few minutes in person."

"I'm glad you came."

Josh sat beside her on the porch swing and she laid her head on his shoulder. It was just as he had pictured a few hours before. They sat there in the quiet of the evening, enjoying the slightly crisp night air and the peace they both felt in being home as the comforts and familiarity of the sleepy little town enveloped them.

Eventually they began to talk about their experiences since arriving. Karen told him all about Tammy being an expectant mother and so on. Josh shared that his mother was doing okay considering her aging condition.

Then he turned to Bert. He told Karen how he had acted when he arrived home. "I'm worried about him," he told her. "I was hoping that the Lord had given you some insight. I just can't quite put my finger on what his exact problem is. Have you felt anything?"

Karen was slow in starting. She really didn't want to interrupt the picture-perfect moment that coming home had been. She too had longed for some quiet time alone with Joshua and it was like having a business meeting in the middle of vacation. But she knew that Josh was concerned for his brother so she stopped herself from making any smart comments. "No, I can't say that I have. But I'll pray about it and see what the Lord brings."

"I appreciate it hon," it was the first time Joshua had called her that, and she liked it. But even then, in the distance, sirens were going off. That seemed to be an hourly occurrence in New York City. But in a town the size of Crotherville the sound sent everyone out on their lawns to see what was going on. Josh and Karen were no exceptions.

Chapter 30

"That can't be good," spoke Joshua, "I think I'll check it out. Want to come along?" Karen hesitated in giving an answer which let Joshua know that she really didn't. "Only if you want to Babe; I know you're tired. With sirens going off I don't believe it's Dicronifer so you're welcome to come but you don't have to."

"I was hoping you'd say that. There aren't any 'red flags' flying up about this so I think I'll just take you up on your offer this time."

With a quick "good night" kiss Karen went inside and Joshua headed in the direction of the sirens.

It sounded as if they had stopped right in the middle of town, which was only a few blocks away. It had been such a pleasant evening and was less than a mile from his house to Karen's, so he had decided to walk. Joshua was glad because if he had taken his car, he wasn't sure where he would have parked in town; all the vehicles with flashing lights were stopped right in the middle of Armstrong Street and the traffic had already started backing up. It appeared that the disturbance, whatever it was, was taking place in the alley behind the local businesses along the highway.

He walked up to an officer and as he approached, he turned and looked Joshua square in the eye. "Can I help you sir?" he asked.

"Yeah," began Joshua, "what's going on?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you anything; confidential you know. You'll have to either go on home or wait here sir."

Joshua starred at the officer. Though the man seemed familiar he hadn't recognized him at first because of the uniform and his official appearance. His haircut was short and close to his head but after a moment he determined his identity, "I can tell that you are a very professional policeman," he said, "not letting friendships get in the way of your duties and all."

As the officer returned Joshua's stare a stern countenance was plastered on his face as if he was ready to deal with this difficult stranger. Then his facial expression softened as he said, "Wait a minute ... I know you don't I. Why, Joshua; is that you, man? I thought I'd never lay eyes on you again. Come here," and with that he grabbed Josh in a bear hug.

"You're looking good, Billy," responded Josh. It was his old buddy, Billy Thormeyer. "Stepping up in the world, aren't you? Look at you, man; an important member of the community and all. Who would have thunk it?"

"That's Officer Billy to you sir," he joked back in return.

They engaged in a few minutes of catch-up conversation, and then Josh asked him, "So what's going on?"

"I'm really not supposed to talk about it, Josh but we've got some men back here in the alley caught with meth."

"Druggies - In Crothersville?" returned Josh.

"It's been a big problem the past couple of years. It seems that more and more of these guys have been targeting small towns where law enforcement is more relaxed. We've really had to step up to the plate lately and get serious about this. We've been trying to catch a ring that has recruited some of our local guys to do their pushing for them. So far, it's been really hard to get the big guys behind it. I'm afraid that they've eluded us again tonight because all we've got is local boys here."

"That's a shame," responded Joshua.

"There's more ..." Billy hung his head, "Josh, one of them is Bert."

Josh looked at Billy in astonishment. He knew that Bert had been in a lot of trouble but he hadn't given drugs a second thought. Bert had done some pot in times past but they had been brought up better than that and he would have placed bets that his brother would've been smart enough stay away from the hard stuff. Still, it explained a lot of his strange behavior. "So, Bert's a user, huh?"

"Not so much of a user. Most of these guys are aware of the serious issues of using meth. No, most of them aren't users but pushers ... selling the stuff to the kids around town."

That was worse. Anger at his brother crept up inside of Joshua. It would have been bad enough if his brother was experiencing an addiction; but to be exposing kids to this dangerous stuff, in his estimation, was below bad. His brother was actually making money selling this poison to kids! Back in New York one of his first cases was against a drug dealer. What he had felt then came rushing in, and his anger peaked in his spirit. It was all he could do to not say anymore in front of Billy. He successfully prosecuted the man back in New York and felt relieved when he was convicted and behind bars. But this was his own brother ... his own flesh and blood ... and he knew better ... way better.

His anger began to simmer as he prayed under his breath and his feelings were replaced with compassion. He knew that there was a reason Bert had chosen this lifestyle. He and his brother had never been really close, but Bert had always managed to keep a level head on his shoulders. Early in life Bert shied away from religion but put up with it for the rest of his family. Still, he had kept a form of morality in his life. What had happened to his brother? He had to talk to him. "Can I see him?" he asked of Billy.

"Sorry, man. I can't allow that. I wish I could. It would be great to get these guys straight but, well, again I'm not supposed to say anything so you've got to keep your mouth shut about this. One of the guys, not Bert, also had a gun. Several of them had switchblades, including Bert, and, well, it hasn't been an easy bust, let me put it that way. We're getting ready to run all five of them over to Brownstown to the county jail. They'll have to stay locked up for a week or so, but you could probably get in to see him Saturday morning." It was now Wednesday.

"Why Saturday; can't I get in tonight, or in the morning?"

Billy looked at Josh then hung his head, "It's policy, man. In a case like this you aren't allowed to see the prisoner until visiting hours the following Saturday."

It seemed harsh. Josh imagined the hate building up in Bert's heart. He thought about how he might think that his family didn't care by not seeing him for so many days. "That's going to be tough, buddy. I know you've got to do your job and frankly, I'm glad they finally got one of the good guys on the force. Look, I'm going to get home now and try to make sure Mom doesn't find out about this. I'll be at Brownstown on Saturday. What time are visiting hours?"

"Between 10:00 and 11:00 am," Billy replied.

"Thanks Billy. Hey man, I'm sorry for these circumstances but it's really good to see you again."

"You going to be around for a while?" his friend asked.

"Yeah," Josh hesitated a moment searching for the best answer, "I'll be around for a few days."

"Hey, great! Maybe we can get together while you're in. Here's my number," Billy handed Josh a card with his official information on it. "Give me a call. It'll be good to do some catching up."

"Okay, I will," responded Joshua, and with that he began his walk back home. He hoped his mother would already be in bed so he wouldn't have to try to explain anything tonight. He didn't have a good feeling about this.

As he had hoped his mother had gone to bed. He carefully made his entrance, locked up for the night and retired to his room as quietly as he could. After he had lain down, going to sleep became another chore. So much had happened. He was glad to be home. It was a peaceful place. But trouble labeled with evil seemed to be everywhere, even in Crothersville.

His door cracked open and he could see his mother peering in as the hallway light flooded as much of his room as the crack would allow. "You okay, honey?" she asked him quietly, hoping not to wake him if he were asleep.

"Oh, hi Mom; I hope I didn't disturb you coming in. I just had to see Karen for a little while before calling it a night."

She gave a little chuckle. "I understand," she said, "it's kind of nice to know my boy has found someone to care for, especially someone from home. I heard a noise and just thought I'd check to make sure you didn't need anything."

Then she turned more serious for a moment, "You didn't happen to see your brother out there, did you?"

Josh hesitated for a moment, "No, Mom. I didn't see him." He didn't lie. He knew where Bert was but he hadn't actually laid eyes on him.

"I don't know where in tarnation that boy gets off too. He's going to be my ruination." Then with a sigh she said, "Good night, Joshua. I know I've already said it but it sure is good to have you home." She closed the door and went back to bed.

Joshua wondered if she was going to get any more sleep than he was. He knew she was worried about Bert. He was too. He spent most of the night tossing from side to side, praying, and seeking God for wisdom in the situation. Finally, he fell asleep. A couple of hours would be better than none.

Chapter 31

The battle with Dicronifer became fiercer than ever and the demon struck with fury. With every ounce of strength left in his body he swung, diverting the blows from the jagged-edged sword. It was as if he could do no more than watch as the creature began spinning like a black, evil, and very deadly tornado, his own sword clanking rhythmically against Dicronifer's. Sparks were flying in all directions and one of the blows sent him to the ground. Lying on his back he looked up as the demon stopped, raised his own sword and let it fall with a deadly swoosh. It was headed directly toward his skull and instinctively he rolled to the side. But he wasn't fast enough. The agonizing pain rushed through his body as he helplessly looked over at his severed arm, watching as the blood pumped furiously from his shoulder.

He heard his name being called, "Josh! Josh!" It sounded like Karen and he wanted to stand up and run to her but he was hopelessly pinned to the ground.

"Joshua ... Joshua; are you going to sleep all day?" Why would Karen ask such a question at a time like this? He slowly opened his eyes. The green grass turned into a white sheet and the hard, cold ground was now a warm mattress as he looked up to see his mother standing in the doorway.

"Good morning, Mom," he managed to say as he rubbed his eyes, and then looked over to make sure that his right arm was still attached. He tried to not let the reality of his nightmare bleed into his words.

Looking over at the clock he saw that it was only 7:00 am. His mother had always been an early riser and even though he had only gotten a couple of hours sleep, he began to slowly, and with great effort, climb out of the bed.

"Breakfast is nearly ready, dear. I'll let you get dressed," and she disappeared down the hallway.

As he cleared his head from his dream his thoughts returned to the events of the prior evening. He wondered if Bert had slept at all. It was Thursday morning and he wouldn't be able to do anything about the situation until Saturday. Somehow, he felt as if he had to keep this from his mother, but it wasn't going to be an easy chore.

At the breakfast table he and his mother engaged only in minor chit-chat for which Josh was thankful. He could tell that she was worried about Bert and had even set a place for him, hoping that he would walk through the door safe and sound. But of course, he didn't and Josh looked over at the clean plate and empty glass she had set out for him.

After breakfast Josh helped his mother clean up from the meal then said, "Mom, I'm going to be out for a while. I'd like to check on Karen and then maybe try to meet up with some old friends. But I'll have my cell phone on if you need to call me. Do you need anything while I'm out?"

"Thanks for asking, son; yes, I do," and she retrieved a grocery list. Josh was more than happy to be able to be of help to her.

Out in the car he thought it best to call Karen first. After all, it was only 8:30 now and he didn't want to intrude. Her mother answered, "Hello Mrs. Lacy, and how are you this fine morning?"

"Oh, you can just call me Beth," she answered, "We're all fine."

"I was wondering if I might speak with Karen," he asked.

"You mean you didn't call just to talk with me?" Beth Lacy asked. Now he knew where Karen had gotten her sense of humor.

Josh laughed, "Well of course I did, ma'am, but while we were talking, I just thought I might ask about her."

"We both know better than that Joshua Smithson. She's getting ready right now but if it's important ..."

"No, that's okay. I wouldn't want to disturb her. If you wouldn't mind, just let her know that I'd like to drop by about 10:00 if she doesn't have other plans. If she does, she can just call me back and let me know."

"Okay; I'll give her the message but her calendar is so full and there are so many other available young men here that I can't promise you anything," she joked.

With another laugh Josh finished by saying, "I know ... I know. I'll give her a shout anyway. Thanks a lot Beth."

Having some time to kill, he thought about the restaurant over on Howard Street by the railroad tracks. It was the one his father had often brought him to on Saturday mornings – where all the locals met for coffee and to shoot the breeze. It brought back a lot of fond memories and he wondered how many of the regulars would still be around.

But it also conjured up the memory of Tom Stanberry. This was the place where he first heard his story about the creature throwing shoes up in a tree. The whole incident flashed in his mind once again and he tried to push it away.

As he pulled up in front of the restaurant a sign by the old church just a block over demanded his attention. It read, "Keep Your Eyes Open – For He Is Even Now at Work." What did it mean? It wasn't the normal message you would see displayed on a church sign. A tingle raced up his spine. This meant something, and he suspected that it had to do with their mission; he would have to think about it.

Once inside a quick surveillance of the dining room revealed that most of the old gang was still around, though displaying many more wrinkles, and those who still had hair had either dyed it or proudly let the gray and white reflect their years of wisdom. He recognized several right off; Mr. Toppe, Bill Black, and Bill Wright were all sitting together. With them sat Chief Dooley, now retired. He walked over to their table and they all grew quiet, amazed at the audacity of this young stranger interrupting their conversation.

"You fellows don't remember me, do you?" Josh boldly asked.

"Can't say as we do young fella'" said, Dooley.

"I'm disappointed. I'm Joshua; you know, Gerald Smithson's son?"

With that they all whooped and hollered welcomes. A couple of them stood and slapped him on the back and they scooted their chairs around to make room for him. "Old Gerald was a good guy," spoke Bill Wright. "We shore miss him around here."

They talked for half an hour or so and Josh frequently looked down at his watch. He didn't want to miss his time with Karen. "You in a hurry, son?" spoke Bill Black.

"Well, kind of; I'm supposed to meet with Karen Lacy at 10:00."

"She's back in town too?" asked Toppe, "I thought she was some sort of nurse in New York City."

"She came home with me," reported Joshua.

"Oh, okay; now we understand ... you got somethin' going with her, huh?" All the men hopped on that one for a few jokes and laughs, but Joshua didn't mind. He knew the nature of this crowd and had also learned early in life that it was better to join in with them than to get defensive, "Yeah, something like that," he responded.

"Before I go, though, I did want to ask about that message on the display of the church up the street ... what do they mean by that?" Josh asked.

"Beats the heck outa me," returned Black. "You know they haven't changed that sign in nearly a year. And then they put that up. We've been tryin' to figure it out for days now. If you get it, we'd appreciate it if you'd let us in on it."

Josh dismissed himself with a few "good-byes" and "don't stay gone so longs" and he let them know that he would be around for a while. The other men told him that it was good to see him again, and then he headed over to Karen's.

Once there, they took their place on the front porch swing as they had the evening before. Josh told her about the message on the church sign and they both had suspicions that it was directed at them. Of course, the people of the congregation could have no idea of their mission in Crothersville. It had to be a warning from the Lord concerning Dicronifer. Neither of them had received any revelations from God as of yet.

"Well, are you going to keep me in suspense or what?" Karen asked.

"What do you mean," questioned Josh.

"You know ... the sirens last night? What was that all about?"

"Oh yeah; well, yes, I did want to talk to you about it. It isn't good. The police had arrested a group of men for pushing meth. Karen, one of them was Bert."

"Oh no!"

"Yeah, oh no is right. He's into some big things here and frankly I'm worried. I don't have a good feeling about this."

"How is your mother taking it?" she asked.

"She doesn't know yet. I suspect that it has happened before because she told me that often he'd disappear for days at a time. I just wonder if maybe this isn't the first time, and some of his bad-influence friends got him out on bail. I don't know but somehow, I've got to keep it from her until Saturday."

"Why Saturday?" Karen asked.

"The jail policy is that in an arrest like this, the prisoner can't be visited until the next coming Saturday morning during regular visiting hours. I'm going to try to keep it from Mom until I can get there to see him. I don't have to tell you that the next day and a half is going to be very long. It isn't going to be easy."

They talked a while longer and Josh thought it best that he pick up the groceries his mother needed and get on home. They kissed goodbye and Josh began his descent from the porch, "Keep praying Karen. I completely trust the gift God has put in you. If you see or feel anything please let me know as soon as possible."

"You know I will," she promised.

Just as Josh had figured, the next day and a half crept by, moment by moment. It couldn't have been any longer if the clock had decided to make each minute equivalent to two, and it sure seemed that was the case. Josh managed to keep Bert's situation from his mother, although he suspected that she had an idea. He could tell that each day she became more and more concerned.

It was finally Saturday morning and Josh made certain that he had set his alarm clock to give him plenty of time to get to the county jail in Brownstown. He was careful not to tell his mother where he was going. If she knew she'd want to go too and he needed to find out some things from Bert first.

He went through all the proper procedures and checks required prior to making the visit. Finally, it was his turn and he stepped into the cell-like room where Bert would be on the opposite side of a glass. A microphone and a small well-barred hole through the glass would allow them to talk. He watched as they brought Bert out. He was handcuffed wearing an orange jail uniform. His stubbly face revealed that he hadn't shaved since Wednesday night. From the looks of his messed-up hair Josh wondered if he had even showered since then.

"Hi Bert," Josh began the conversation. It was very awkward, and he really didn't know how to get his brother talking. Bert just sat there sometimes looking left, right or just down. He never made eye contact with Josh. "Listen brother, I'm going to be frank. You're in a lot of trouble. How on God's green earth did you ever get into pushing drugs? You know we weren't raised like that!" He stopped when Bert gave him an angry glance. He had to watch himself. This wasn't the time to get preachy.

"I'm sorry Bert; you know all of that already. Look, I just want to help you if I can. I'm a lawyer and while it wouldn't be in your best interest for your brother to defend you, I can give you a lot of good legal advice. I want to help."

Bert slowly lifted his head until for the first time his eyes met Joshua's. The look in his eyes scared Josh. He had never seen an icy stare like this coming from his brother. There was something strangely familiar in Bert's glare. He had seen it before. "Look Josh, you don't care about me. You may be my brother but I can't say that I love you or have ever loved you. You were always in my way as a kid and you coming back here is no different now than it was then. Why did you have to come poking back into my life anyway? This is none of your business. You left me here alone to take care of Mom and frankly we don't need you. Go on back to your big city life in New York. I don't need your fancy lawyer help. I've got friends that know all about this stuff. I'll be out of here in a day or two, so I don't need you and I don't want you."

Josh swallowed hard. He knew that it wasn't Bert that was taking care of Mom but the other way around. Still, it wouldn't be wise to bring that up now. He and his brother had never been close, but he never dreamed Bert felt this way. He fought hurt and anger. He had seen this type of reaction before from the incarcerated; it wasn't anything new. It was just different coming from his own brother. "Bert, look man, you've got to let me help you."

"I don't got to do nothing, man! Go on; get out of here! I don't need you ... you ... YOU! YOU! YOU!"

Now Joshua was afraid. Those words had come from the mouth of his brother. But his voice had changed. For the first time he realized who he was really talking to. It was Dicronifer. He knew he had recognized those eyes. At that moment he felt helpless and there was nothing he could do. "I'll be back," he told his brother as he stood. Turning to leave the room he glanced back and he could see that his brother's eyes had now turned fiery red, and though no sound was coming from his mouth Bert was still lipping, "YOU! YOU! YOU!"

Chapter 32

Joshua sat in his car, horrified at what he had just witnessed. He hadn't thought that anything would shock him, given all that had taken place since his first meeting with Jerimeil. But remembering the voice of Dicronifer coming from his brother sent a new chill up his spine.

He had read about demonic possession when he had gone through his Bible just weeks before. He had done physical battle with the demon, Dicronifer. But he had not encountered an individual that was actually possessed by him. "Great," he thought, "my first encounter with a demon possessed person, and it has to be my own brother!"

Joshua had to talk to Karen. He called her cell phone but got her answering service. He left a message just in case, and then called her parents home phone. Being Saturday, Karen's father, Randall Lacy, answered. "Hello Mr. Lacy," Joshua began.

"Is this Josh? Hey buddy, everyone just calls me 'Randy' and I don't have any reason for it to be any different with you."

"Mr. ... uh, Randy, is Karen home?" He figured that she probably wasn't since he got the answering service on her cell, but he had to ask.

"Why no, son, she isn't. Is this important?"

Joshua knew that Karen's father had picked up on his concern from the tone of his voice. It was important but he couldn't explain it to Mr. Lacy right now. He answered, "Well, it can wait a bit I suppose; do you know when she'll be back?"

With a chuckle, Randy responded, "That's a tough one. She went shopping with her mother and sister, and when that happens, I never know what to expect. All I do know is that the tent is still in the garage so that means that they should be back sometime before the day is over."

Josh managed a forced laugh at Randy's joke and finished, "Could you let her know that I called when she gets back?"

"Shore thing, son; I'll write it down to make certain I don't forget it. Hey, maybe while you're in, you, George and I can get together for something. What do you think? Maybe get some fishin' in? You got anything going the rest of the afternoon?"

Things were pretty serious right now, but then Josh remembered that he hadn't been fishing since he had last gone back when he was a kid with his buddies, Billy and Hank. It might just do him some good, and it would be an opportunity to think without having to explain anything to his mother right away. "If I can get them, would you object to a couple more?"

"Who ya got in mind?" Randy asked.

"I was thinking that maybe Billy and Hank might like to get together. I haven't had a chance to do much catching up with them since we've been back."

"Hey, not a problem. If they can go, well, the more the merrier I always say. See you in a couple of hours then?" He asked.

"Yeah, that sounds great." They hung up and Josh dug for the card Billy had given him a few days back. When he called, Billy answered very formally. He was still on duty but was expecting to get off in an hour, so he was all for it. Josh got Hank's number from Billy and dialed it. As the phone was ringing the incident when Peter had gone fishing after Jesus had been resurrected, flashed through his mind. He always felt like Peter needed to get away and do some thinking on his own. But he also felt guilty about it because, well, his brother was in jail, possessed by a demon, and here he was about to go fishing. He justified the situation with the fact that he had committed himself now.

A voice picked up at the other end of the line, "Hello," though much deeper he recognized Hank's voice right off.

"Hank? Is that you?" Josh asked.

"Yeah, this is Hank. Who might you be?"

"Well old buddy, I thought you might like to meet me in front of the fire house for a bit of fishing this afternoon."

The wheels began turning in Hank's head as he remembered as a kid, he, Billy and Joshua used to meet there often during the summer months. "Joshua Smithson? Is this really you?" he answered.

"Yep, at least it was the last time I looked in the mirror."

"How you doing man? I was just thinkin' about you the other day, but had no idea you were in town. Are you serious about the fishin'?"

"You bet. I'm meeting up with Randy Lacy, his son-in-law, George Grantline, and Billy Thormeyer at 2:00. You want to come along?"

"Man, I've just been lookin' for an excuse to get out of mowing the yard today and you just gave it to me. You know I'll be there. Randy Lacy's huh? Count me in."

It would really be good to see Hank Rider again. Since graduating high school, Hank had taken a job at a factory in Seymour. It fit him really well. His only true ambition was to be able to make a living, raise a family and have time to go fishing every now and then. He was just a good ole' home boy.

At 2:00 they all met at Randy Lacy's, packed their gear in Billy's 4x4 extended cab and headed out to Bill Black's. Randy had called Bill to make sure that it was okay, and it was. In fact, Bill was going to meet them out at the lake. This trip was starting to get a bit crowded. The men all made boasts, telling one fishing story after another, each getting more unbelievable. After meeting at the lake, Joshua, Billy and Hank did some catching up and then they all marked their spots and threw their lines into the water. After that, things quieted down for a while. After all, they didn't want to scare all the fish away.

Joshua began to think. They had certainly had a lot of great times out here on Bill Black's lake. But it was also the last place he had fished so many years ago. That was when Dicronifer's blacksnake had come slinking up his line and poked his head out of the water. It was the same day that Tom Stanberry

had taken his life by hanging himself in his barn. He half expected the snake to come slithering up again but knew that he had destroyed it only days ago.

Karen, Tammy and their mother, Beth, had headed south that morning to Clarksville, Indiana where a wealth of shops, department stores and malls of every sort could be found. It was a shopper's paradise. And, with so many people attracted to the stores there, you could find about any kind of eating establishment you wanted. The ladies had always favored Red Lobster and after a few hours of shopping, decided to stop for a mid-afternoon lunch. They were thoroughly enjoying their day together. It was just like old times and conjured up many good memories.

They were nearly finished with their meal when from out of nowhere Karen began to get that nauseated feeling. She thought that she had finally managed to get this under control, but this time she had no choice but to excuse herself and make for the lady's room. Fortunately, no one else was there as she bowed her head over the sink. This was something new. Sure, she had experienced several occurrences of nausea but none of them was like this one.

Still standing over one of the sinks she closed her eyes. In her mind she began to see Joshua's brother, Bert, still in jail but furiously insane. He ranted and raved but she couldn't hear exactly what he was saying. She could nearly feel his rage inside her own mind as it filled with wild anger and hatred.

Then, Bert turned as if he were looking right at her – as if he could see her just like she was seeing him. She saw those reddish-yellow eyes. A smirky grin found its way across his face and then he began to speak, this time loudly enough for her to hear what he was saying. "You," he began. "You, YOU, YOU!" he continued to scream. Shaking her head she opened her eyes, expecting to see him in the mirror in front of her. Thankfully she was met with her own reflection. But the words still echoed in her head.

She had to call Joshua ... now! Not wanting to have their shopping excursion interrupted she had turned off her cell phone. When she turned it on, she saw that there was already a message from Joshua. She quickly listened to it then dialed his number. This was important.

Joshua's thoughts and memories were interrupted when his cell phone began to ring. Looking at the number he saw that it was Karen, "Babe? What's up?" he was so deep in thought and was having so much fun that he had forgotten that he had called her first.

"Josh, we've got to get together right away. I've seen a vision. I know what's going on. It's Bert!"

"Yeah, I know. Listen, I can't talk about this right now," he said. Billy had laid down his pole and was walking toward him. He couldn't risk saying anything that could be overheard and he would have to attempt to explain.

"I'm coming home. Can you meet me there?" she asked.

"Well, right now I'm at Bill Black's lake. I'm here with your dad, George, Billy, and Hank. I hate to interrupt their fun because I rode with them and don't have any way back. Listen, Mom's got a spare set of keys to my car. Why don't you have them drop you off there and drive out and get me?"

"Sounds good; give us time to get home and I'll be right out." They hung up and Karen returned to the table. "Mom, Tammy, I'm feeling a little sick. I hate to be the one to throw a monkey wrench into our shopping trip but I've got to get home."

They were concerned about her and quickly finished their lunch. After paying the bill they began their trip back home. Karen waited until they were at the Crothersville exit before she asked, "Could you just drop me off at the Smithson's?"

"Okay, now I know what's made you sick," teased Tammy, "I think the love bug has bitten you!"

It was true that she had fallen deeply in love with Joshua but she couldn't risk letting them know that this wasn't the reason for cutting their trip short or for dropping her off at Joshua's house. Biting her lower lip, she allowed herself to turn red to cover up the real reason. Her instincts told her to lash back with something smart but she just couldn't take that chance.

Within minutes she was on her way to the lake. She had to do some fancy talking and take more jesting from Joshua's mother, Susan Smithson, but she'd settle up with Joshua on this later.

Now it was Joshua's turn to take the humorous licks from the guys when Karen showed up. Just as she had done, he let them have their fun as he climbed into the passenger seat of the car. As they drove back towards town, they each told the other of their experiences.

"What are we going to do?" Karen asked, and then continued, "Josh, we can't let Dicronifer take Bert."

"I know, I know. I've been praying non-stop about it."

“Oh yeah, it looked like you were praying back there at the lake.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean, but sometimes a guy just has got to get away to let his head clear,” he defended.

Karen didn't pretend to understand but she let it go. “We've got to get to Bert.”

“I know, Babe, I know. But the jail won't allow us back again until 10:00 next Saturday morning!”

Chapter 33

"*Come* on, Mom – We're going to church this morning," Josh suggested after they had finished a nice, hot breakfast. It was Sunday morning. She still hadn't asked about Bert, and he knew that it was going to be a long week waiting for Saturday to roll around.

Susan Smithson was ecstatic about having her son attend services with her. She would finally get a chance to show off one of her sons. Besides, it had been several weeks since she had felt like going and this would be good for her.

When they arrived at First Baptist, Karen and her family was there and had already laid stake to a pew. Josh slid in beside her and his mother began talking with Beth Lacy. They had known each other casually; living for so many years in a small town it was nearly impossible not to know everyone and what rumors regarding them might be floating around town. But with this new-found relationship between their children, well they had a lot to talk about so Beth made room for Susan to sit beside her. The two ladies busied themselves in conversation, glancing over at Josh and Karen every once in a while. They both knew what the topic of discussion was, at least until the service began.

After church, the two ladies made plans for their families to get together for dinner the following weekend. With everything that was going on, that might prove to be interesting, still Joshua welcomed the time with Karen and to get to

know her family better. He knew that, short of a miracle, Bert wouldn't be joining them.

Karen and Joshua made plans of their own for that afternoon, excusing themselves to have lunch together at the local Subway. It was about the only restaurant open on Sunday so there weren't many options to pick from. The dining room wasn't large but not many dined in, so they had a lot of privacy to talk, at least quietly so the workers wouldn't be eavesdropping.

Karen began by retelling Josh the vision she had experienced the afternoon before. "Are you sure that there's no way we can get in to see Bert before Saturday?" she asked.

"I don't think so," replied Joshua, "They are pretty rigid on their policies. I guess they have to be. After all, they are guarding criminals, even though it's hard to think of Bert in that category. But let's see what we can find out, and spend a lot of time in prayer about it."

After their lunch Josh took Karen home and then returned to his own home. "Mom," he began after arriving, "do you have anything you'd especially want us to do this afternoon?"

"Well, honey, no I don't. As a matter of fact, I've got some chores I'd like to get done. I love you and all, but this entertaining a guest begins to wear on a body."

Josh laughed, "I'm sorry, Mom. I shouldn't expect the royal carpet. I am home you know. Besides, I've got some things I'd like to get done myself. If you need my help just let me know."

Susan Smithson sighed in relief, "I'm sure glad you understand Joshua," and they both went about their business.

Josh retrieved his notebook computer along with a printer and some other components from the car. Fortunately, he had invested in a wireless modem from his still active internet provider. He set it all up in the bedroom. He wanted to do some research regarding Bert. He began by beefing up on jail policies, and actually learned a lot.

Then it was time for the more serious problem. He needed to find out all he could on modern day demon-possession. He found that there was a lot of conflicting information on the internet so he had to compare everything he found with the Bible, not only to keep it real but also to be assured that he was getting accurate facts. There was a lot of stuff to sift through but one thing he found in

common with all the opinions, teachings, myths and legends was that the thing had to come out.

He remembered Jerimeil's last conversation with them regarding demon possession and the man's son who Jesus encountered after coming down from the mount of transfiguration. He had said that this kind doesn't come out without prayer and fasting. There it was. This was their answer. He quickly called Karen. "Sorry to bother you, Babe, but I've been doing some research on Bert's situation. Is it a good time to talk?"

"Let me call you right back," answered Karen, "Tammy and George were over this afternoon but they're just leaving. I'll call you as soon as they go."

In about ten minutes Josh's phone rang, "Hi Karen. I hope I didn't rush your visit."

"No, like I said, they were just getting ready to leave anyway. What's up?"

"Do you remember the last conversation we had with Jerimeil?"

"How could I forget? I really hated to see him go. We could use his help about now."

"Well, I think he gave it to us during that last conversation. Remember, he was talking about demon-possession and the boy that Jesus healed right after He came down from the mount of transfiguration? Well, Jerimeil emphasized that Jesus had told His disciples that this kind didn't come out except by prayer and fasting. I think that's what we've got to do this week. The wait until Saturday may be a blessing in disguise. I've done a lot of research today on the subject and even though there are many opinions out there, they all seem to agree that the bottom line is to get the demon out. We've got to cast Dicronifer out of Bert."

"That sounds a lot easier than I think it's going to be," she replied.

"No doubt, Babe, no doubt; but I think that's what we're going to have to do, at least that's what I've got to do. I'd welcome your support but since fasting is supposed to be a private thing you do what's in your heart and I'll follow my own leading. But whatever we do we've got to be prepared. Remember, Jerimeil also told us that this was going to be the hardest and fiercest battle of them all. It's already complicated with Bert involved but somehow, I think that's only going to be a part of it."

"Okay," she responded, "but let's at least keep in contact by phone everyday so we also have each other's support and can know that we are on the same page here."

"Sounds like a plan to me. It isn't going to be easy getting out of eating with Mom, but I'll manage somehow." Karen agreed. It wasn't going to be easy with her family either.

As it turned out, when each approached their parents about the fast, both Karen's mother and father, and Josh's mother thought that the big important decision was probably an engagement between the pair, so they agreed to give them space as far as their fasting was concerned. Little did they realize how much was really at stake.

Fasting wasn't easy. Before going to bed that first evening Josh was tempted to make a refrigerator raid. With prayer he managed to control his hunger, and determined that it was mostly out of habit anyway. He began pouring through his Bible once again, searching for clues and guidance as to what they could do to help Bert. There wasn't a single minute that was easy on this fast. But talking and praying with Karen each evening seemed to help both of them.

About Wednesday Susan could not hold back any longer. Bert had never been gone more than three days. It had now been seven. She lightly knocked on Joshua's door, "Son," she began, "I really hate to disturb you but I can't keep it in any more. I am worried about your brother, Bert. He's never been gone this long before. Something is wrong and I'm afraid it could be very serious."

Josh could tell that she had been crying. He didn't want to have to tell her about his brother, but now he had no choice. But how could he explain the demon-possession? How could he keep her from insisting on going with them on Saturday? Then it dawned on him. He could tell her that he and Karen had been praying and fasting to know how to talk to Bert about Christ. That would not be a lie and they wouldn't have to tell her about Dicronifer.

She, of course, did a lot of weeping as Josh explained to her how Bert had been selling meth to the local kids and young adults in the community. He knew that he was breaking her heart with this information, but she also did not defend her oldest son. She didn't know much about meth and drugs but she knew that what her son had been doing was terribly wrong and wicked. "Josh, I've got to see him ... I've got to see Bert. I know he's wrong, son, but he's my son too. I've got to get to him!" She was nearly panicked.

Joshua explained to his mother how that in cases like Bert's he could only be visited for an hour on Saturday mornings. He explained how that he and Karen had been fasting for Bert – seeking the Lord as to how they could present salvation to him and free him from his bondage. He was careful not to reveal anything about Dicronifer.

It seemed to calm her down, "Lord knows if anyone on this planet needs Him it's Bert," she started. "I love him with all my heart, son, and I've tried to get him to come to the Lord, but he's always dismissed it as a mother's nagging. Often, he's gotten up in a fit of anger and stormed out of the house. I hadn't told you about it, but just the day before you came, he got so angry at me - He stood and I could see evil in his eyes. It was almost as if they changed color, but I figured it was my silly imagination. Still, what he said to me, well I won't even repeat it, but it didn't seem like Bert anymore. It was like he was entirely someone else."

Joshua knew then that Dicronifer had entered Bert before they arrived. "Mom, I know this is hard, but I'm begging you; let me and Karen go this time by ourselves. I promise that the very next opportunity we have to see Bert, we'll take you with us. Please understand."

Susan Smithson looked deeply into her son's eyes. She could see his own hurt and how sincere he was in his words. He had been gone most of the time for the past two years and she wondered how much he really loved them. He had managed to get home for the major holidays and he wrote her often. But there had never been much exchange of words between him and Bert. She could see now that he did love his brother dearly. It was one of the hardest things she had ever done in her life. It seemed like an eternity before she was able to say, "Okay ... son. I trust you in this. It tears my heart out. I want to go down there and bring him home and every bone in my body is fighting to not get up and get to him right now. But I'm going to trust you - No, I'm going to trust God in you." She didn't say another word but stood to her feet, took one long, hopeful gaze at Josh, then left the room.

"Thank you, Lord," Joshua breathed silently, "Thank you for giving me wisdom."

The rest of the week went by uneventfully, even though the fasting never got any easier. Josh and Karen had agreed that they would need as much strength and wit as they could muster on Saturday morning so they prayerfully decided to end their fast on Friday evening.

That was the day when Susan and Beth had planned their dinner and both of them were relieved when Josh and Karen announced that they would

end their fast for the event. It was a great evening. The food never tasted so good. They both emphasized to their mother's how their cooking, though it had always been great, tasted as if they had graduated to that of gourmet chiefs. It was the perfect evening, and was certainly the calm before a terrible storm. Little did they know.

Saturday morning found the couple in the waiting room of the county jail exactly at 10:00 am. Though they had spent about half an hour out in the car in prayer before going in, conversation had been sparse. They were really surprised that Bert had even agreed to see them and after going through the usual and customary security routine, they were allowed to enter the small cell where they would meet with Bert on the other side of that very thick glass. "Hi Bert," Joshua began. "This is Karen Lacy, my, well, my partner and girlfriend."

Bert looked down at the empty shelf-like table in front of him. He nervously rocked back and forth as Joshua spoke. Only Heaven knew what he must have been going through – what things his body must be experiencing. He not only had the evil presence of Dicronifer to deal with but he was probably going through withdrawals from using some of the drugs he sold. It must have been a horrible experience and Joshua felt nothing but compassion for his brother.

Karen silently prayed as Joshua spoke. Slowly Bert began to raise his head as Joshua continued. Finally, his eyes met Joshua's. He could see that reddish-yellow glow that could only be the presence of Dicronifer. Karen stared as Joshua grew silent.

"I know who she is," it wasn't Bert's voice. "You cannot beat me," came the spine-tingling words from his brother's lips. "Both of you together are no match for me. If you don't leave right now Bert's going to die. I will kill him, then I will kill you! Did you hear me? You! You! YOU! Both of YOU!"

Karen resumed her prayers. Words escaped her. Josh looked at her in such a way that she knew he really needed her prayers right now. "No, YOU!" Returned Joshua. "It is you that is going to leave, not us. By the authority of God, paid for with the spilled blood of Jesus Christ, it is you that is going to come out of my brother, not later, not tomorrow but right now."

The demon laughed loudly and with a more wicked accent than Josh and Karen had ever heard before. Karen glanced back at the guard who, by policy stood about ten feet behind Bert. It was as if he hadn't heard a thing. They were now in a spiritual battle, one like they had never experienced. "I will not come out until I have finished my task!" screamed the demon.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," continued Joshua. "You have no choice. You will come out."

"I will not come out. Not now, not ever!"

"Yes, you will. You have too. It is not me that is telling you to do this. It is none other than Jesus Christ. He defeated you at Calvary. He died for Bert and He did not do it in vain. He arose from the grave making what your master thought to be a victory turn into the final defeat. You see I am speaking for Jesus. And He says that you will come out!" Josh spoke the words but they were not from him. It was as if the Holy Spirit was now speaking through him.

The demon screamed again. Bert's head began to shake violently. "I will not come out!"

"I told you – you have no choice. YOU WILL COME OUT!"

With that the demon once again screamed a blood-curdling cry and then they could see something rising above Bert. At first it seemed like a hazy mist but then the form of Dicronifer began to take shape. Still the guard had not seen a thing.

Now, fully out of Bert's body, he slumped down against the shelf. Dicronifer stood full form above Bert. Another scream and then he was silent. A grin fell across his evil face. Looking straight at Joshua he taunted, "Care to take this outside?"

Chapter 34

Joshua looked at Karen, "I've got this," she said. He nodded and looking to Dicronifer he was about to give his answer of confirmation but the demon was no longer there. Leaving the chamber, he went outside drawing his sword. He had no idea of what to expect. It was about then that his God-given instinct kicked in and he raised his shield just in time to deflect a flaming arrow. Looking in the direction from which it came, he saw an open field just south and next to the jail. Standing in the middle of the field was Dicronifer. "At least he had the decency to take this away from any spectators," he thought.

He raced for the open piece of land, carefully looking for anyone who might report someone running away from the jail. He didn't want to look too suspicious. At the field's edge he had to stop to defend himself from another handful of burning arrows Dicronifer had flung in his direction. The demon was taunting him now. It was almost as if he were trying to lure Joshua away, "What's he got in mind," Joshua said out loud.

Just as Jerimeil had predicted when he finally made his way to Dicronifer, the battle was fierce. Several times Joshua was nearly overcome as he not only physically fought with the demon but also fought mentally and spiritually to beat down his own fears and feelings of inadequacy. He knew that these were also onslaughts just as much as were the blows from the wicked sword. It was as if Dicronifer repeated every move he had made since Josh's first encounter with him. But he was also adding new ones.

He did not give up. He knew that too much was at stake. He was fighting for his brother but also for every victim of Dicronifer. He could not afford to lose.

The demon spoke, "I will have the shoes of your brother and not only him but you and that miserable girl in there too!"

"Not as long as I have breath," replied Joshua. He repeated scripture after scripture and some of them made Dicronifer howl and take a step back, but then he would recover and lash out with even more fury.

Inside Karen talked with Bert. "Are you going to be okay?" she asked. His head shook and weakly he rose up. The hatred and evil in his eyes were gone now. Karen knew nothing about Bert except for what Joshua had shared with her. In fact, she had only met him in the hallway of the high school a couple of times several years before. He was a couple of grades higher than her and so even though she knew who he was she didn't know him.

"I I've ruined everything," he began. "How could I have done this to those I love?" He started to weep.

"Bert, your brother is fighting with the thing that was inside of you right now. He won't give up you know. He loves you. He always has, but now even more than ever. You've got to believe that people care about you and want the best for you."

"How can that be," he interrupted. "The way I've always treated Josh; the way I've treated Mom ... there's no hope for me. I might as well end it all and get out of everybody's way."

"Don't talk like that. You will be missed. Even with all that you have done people still care, and care deeply for you Bert. You've got to believe that."

"I can't," he said. "I've failed everyone, not just Josh and Mom but my ex-wife, Rachel and my own son – my flesh and blood! God, I wish I could see them right now."

"But if you take your life, Bert, you will never see them again."

"Doesn't matter," he replied, "They've probably forgotten about me by now anyway. I treated Rachel awful and wasn't much better to Brad. Little Brad ... even though I was nearly abusive to him I did love the little squirt. I couldn't even face them, Karen."

"Then let's just take this one step at a time. Bert, you know that things have to change. But it isn't going to happen overnight. Here you are facing some pretty serious charges. I know that things seem impossible to fix, but they can be mended, just not all at once. The very first step you've got to make is to get right with God."

"God," he nearly laughed. "God won't have anything to do with me. I've cursed God. I've used His name in vain so many times there probably isn't enough sand on the beach to count them. God gave up on me a long time ago because I gave up on Him."

"You're wrong, Bert. God never gives up. You may have felt like He was a million miles away from you but every day of your life He has been with you. Don't you see that even the fact that Josh and I are here today prove to you that God hasn't given up? We are here to help you, no strings attached. God has sent us all the way from New York to help you today. But no one can do anything about it except you. Your decision is the only one that counts right now."

Bert softened a bit. He gave Karen a very puzzled look. He couldn't really argue with her words, even though he still doubted that God wanted anything to do with him.

Karen glanced at her watch. It was nearly a quarter to eleven now. Soon she too would have to leave. Silently, while she waited for Bert's response, she prayed, "Lord, give me the words to say. Let Your Holy Spirit do His work even now."

"How can you be so sure?" Bert broke the silence. That was good. He was thinking ... searching. It reflected a glimmer of hope. One by one Karen began to share the passages of scripture from the book of Romans about salvation. Even though Bert had heard many of them a hundred times, he listened intently. For some reason they were beginning to make sense. He could see the compassion flowing from this young woman, and he realized that she really did care. If she, being a total stranger, could care that much, maybe Josh and his mother did too.

When Karen finished, he slammed his face once again down on the shelf in front of him. "Are you okay?" Karen asked for a second time.

He looked up but this time he was weeping furiously. "What must I do to be saved?" he asked. Karen had gotten through. With only five minutes remaining until visiting hours were over, she led Bert in the sinner's prayer

careful to make it very personal to Bert's situation. It would not do to give him any reason to think this was just another formality. It was birthing day for him. He was coming into the Kingdom of God.

One more time, Joshua found himself in a very awkward and precarious position. He had fought with every ounce of strength he could muster. Dicronifer had managed to knock the sword from his hand and he lay helplessly on the ground with only his shield to hopefully deflect the blow that he knew was coming. The demon raised his sword over his head. This blow would be with all the rage and strength the creature had.

"Now you die boy!" Josh braced himself and was prepared to roll in the direction of his own sword. He waited until Dicronifer started the downward motion of his swing. Could he manage to get out of the way in time?

As the sword descended his roll went as planned. Dicronifer's weapon struck the edge of his shield with such force that it rattled Josh's entire body but he couldn't think about that. He only had a fraction of a second to act and his window of opportunity would be over. Grabbing his sword he flung it in Dicronifer's direction. It struck him squarely in the stomach and imbedded itself deep into his body.

A look of horror crossed the demon's face. He stood there for a moment and it seemed as if Joshua had finally defeated him. Dicronifer grabbed Josh's sword at the handle protruding from his body. It appeared that he was going to try to pull it out. But then another emotion twisted into his face. His gaze turned toward the jail. In a very brief moment of silence, it almost seemed that he was about to admit defeat but then, turning his icy, cold stare back to Joshua he screamed, "You fool! Look what you have done!" Joshua thought he was referring to the sword still imbedded into the demon's stomach. "You will not win!" Dicronifer continued, "You will not defeat me! You! You! YOU!"

In a greenish mist he began to fade into the air and in another instant, he was gone. Joshua's sword fell to the ground. But there were no flames. Had he been successful in defeating the demon? He couldn't believe that it could be that easy, even though it hadn't been easy at all.

Picking himself from up from the ground and wiping his sword in the long grass of the field he saw Karen emerging from the jail. He slowly walked toward her, exhausted from the battle.

When he met her, he could see the glow of accomplishment on her face. "Josh, Bert gave his heart to Jesus today." Josh fell to a bench just off the

sidewalk of the jail, relieved for his brother. It would be wonderful to tell his mother the good news.

"Thanks Karen. You're the best, sweetheart. My family owes you a great debt of gratitude for leading Bert to Christ."

"Don't thank me honey," she spoke. It was the first time she had referred to Joshua with an affectionate name. "The Lord did all the work. I was just His instrument."

"Still, you were playing your instrument beautifully, just as beautiful as you are."

They embraced and kissed, then made their way to the car. A great victory had been won that day, but both of them knew that the battle wasn't finished yet. Dicronifer was still out there, somewhere; and there was no telling what he was going to do next.

Back in Crothersville Josh dropped Karen off and headed home to tell his mother the good news. As he expected she was filled with emotion. Since his birth, Susan had longed for her son, Bert, to come to know Jesus Christ. Things had changed and now she wept more, but this time they were tears of joy. "How could we have ever gotten through this if you and Karen hadn't come home?" she asked.

"God knows all things," replied Joshua, "and He sent us here for this moment. But, Mom, we can't take credit for it. It was God's plan and His will."

"But you had to be obedient, son. You were and thank God for it!" She was happier than he had ever seen her. Her prodigal son had come home. There was a lot of work yet to do of course; this was only the beginning. But at least it was a beginning. Josh knew that had God not granted them success that most likely before the end of the next week they would be attending a funeral. But now they were rejoicing in a miracle.

All through the rest of the day they continued to rejoice and celebrate. Bert had been allowed a phone call and when their mother answered it was like she was hearing the news again for the first time. The report from Joshua had been wonderful but hearing it come from Bert's own lips confirmed it like it had just happened.

Later that evening a funny feeling came over Joshua. It wasn't a pain but more of a deep discomfort. He listened as his mother hummed and sang downstairs. That was a sound he hadn't heard for a long time. He knew that she

was happier than she had been in years. But he couldn't shake this, whatever it was. He called Karen. "Hey babe," she detected weakness in his voice.

"Hey yourself ... you don't sound so good; what's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he responded. "I've just got this feeling ... I can't explain it but it's like something is drawing me ... beckoning me to, well, to the old shoe tree." As of yet it hadn't dawned on either of them to go out to see it. They weren't even certain that it was still there.

"Do you think that's wise?" Karen asked.

With a bit of a chuckle Josh responded, "With Dicronifer involved has any of this been wise? But I've got to go. I don't think this is going away until I do."

"Want some company?" she asked.

"Yeah, I do. I have no idea what to expect. Do you need me to pick you up?"

"No, I'll borrow Dad's car and meet you there."

As they hung up the phone Josh told his mother that he needed to step out for a while. She naturally thought that he was going over to Karen's, "Tell her I said 'hi'" she responded Josh walked out of the house.

He reached for the door handle of his car and instinctively drew back. Turning toward the backyard, for some reason he was drawn to take his old pathway through what used to be woods. Most of the trees had been cut down – logged out and of course the path was no longer there. But he knew the way and carefully waded into the weeds.

Walking the old, familiar route he had taken so many times as a boy, the first encounter he had experienced with Dicronifer came vividly to his memory. How could he ever forget the first time he had laid eyes on the creature tossing shoes up into the tree? That's also where he had first seen the blacksnake. He shuddered a bit hoping not to ever come across anything like that again.

He could see the tree, looming ahead in the moonlight. "Am I going on a wild goose chase?" He asked himself. Everything was calm, not even a breeze was blowing. The mid-September air felt good against his cheek. He drew in a fresh breath of air. It looked like nothing was going on at all. Maybe he had misread his feelings. He'd just get a closer look at the tree then meet with Karen and go back home.

It was amazing to him that the tree was still there and that all those pairs of shoes were still hanging in it. They had fascinated him as a boy. He had conjured up many stories about those shoes. He wondered how his stories of fantasy would have changed had he known the tragic circumstance and the real tales of pain and agony behind each pair.

Now within a hundred feet of the tree, he saw that Karen hadn't arrived yet, though there were headlights coming down the highway. It might have been Karen but he wouldn't really know until she pulled over to the side of the road.

Then, in the shadow of those same headlights he caught a movement. Could it be? He searched in the darkness and then spotted the evil shape of Dicronifer. He had in his hand that same sack that Josh had seen as a boy. The demon was preparing to complete his dastardly ceremony of throwing the shoes of his victims up into the tree, proudly displaying the trophies he had won.

Disgust filled his head, and nausea like he had never felt twisted at his stomach. He could not allow Dicronifer to complete his task for if he did, he knew that the creature would only begin another of his around-the-world trips taking more trophies – tempting more people to end their lives and eternally seal their fate. He couldn't let that happen. Some way, somehow, he had to make this the last trip Dicronifer ever made.

"Not tonight demon!" His voice cut through the darkness, interrupting the silence of the night like he had broken some forbidden customary but unwritten law. Dicronifer turned to look in his direction. It was as if he had not expected Joshua and for the first time the human had brought a startled and unwelcomed encounter to the creature.

"You are right boy! Not tonight! You will not stop me tonight!" replied the cursed beast. Josh braced for yet another fierce battle. He had never experienced two in one day but if this had to be then he was ready. Strangely the demon hurled no flaming arrows in his direction and he didn't pull his jagged sword. Instead, he began to climb up into the tree with the bag of trophies around his neck.

Now standing directly underneath it, Joshua peered up into the dark branches. He couldn't see Dicronifer, although the rustling indicated his presence. The wind remained calm but the leaves moved like a gentle breeze was flowing through them. Then he saw a pair of shoes plop down across a branch. Dicronifer wasn't interested in battle tonight. He only wanted to finish

his job and get on with his next encirclement of the globe. Again, Josh thought, "I can't let this happen. Tonight, this ends – one way or another."

About that time Karen pulled up parking on the opposite side of the road. She rolled down her window and yelled, "Josh, what's up?"

"Dicronifer's up that's what," he answered.

Looking up, she saw another pair of shoes drop across a branch. It would have been funny had they not known what that pair of shoes represented. "What can I do?" she asked again.

"Pray!" was Joshua's only answer and he began his on ascent up the tree.

Karen, feeling otherwise helpless did just that. With her eyes firmly fixed on Joshua, her peripheral vision caught a movement near the top and she knew that it must be the demon. She prayed not only for the defeat of the creature but also for Joshua's safety. He was definitely at a disadvantage with the beast above him.

Joshua climbed until he caught a glimpse of Dicronifer in the tree. He didn't look so big now but then the creature seemed to have the ability to adjust his size for the occasion. Josh had to remember that even though he was filled with evil, still he was a spiritual creature not subject to the confines of a physical body. He only used his appearance for the sake of convenience. Now a flaming arrow did drop from near the top of the tree. Josh was able to fend it off with his shield but there was no way he could draw his sword and hang on to the branches.

Then, as if someone had flipped a switch flooding a room with light, it dawned on him that there was a weapon in his arsenal that he had not yet pulled. He had made a pouch for his Bible, and realized that it was hanging on the other side of his belt of truth. Though he had quoted scripture many times he had never pulled it out. He had no idea of how he was going to hold it open and hang on in the tree, nor how in the darkness he was going to be able to read it, but somehow just having it in his hand filled him with a confidence greater than any he had before known in his confrontations with the demon. Of course, he knew that his physical sword was called in the scripture "the sword of the spirit," and then defined as being "the word of God." Yet now it just felt right.

Looking up he began to spew forth scripture and it was firing out at Dicronifer like a holy rain. Passage after passage flowed from his lips. *"Resist*

the devil and he will flee from you," he spoke, remembering that it came from James 4:7. *"Don't give place to the devil,"* from Ephesians 4:27.

Dicronifer looked puzzled. With each verse of scripture, he grimaced. It was as if Joshua was now firing his own flaming arrows at the demon and each was accurately hitting him, accomplishing their intended purpose. *"Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil"* from Ephesians 6:11. He had done that. Even now the helmet of salvation was perched atop his head; he was wearing the shoes of the preparation of the gospel of peace. The belt of truth was tight around his waist and the breastplate of righteousness adorned his chest. The shield of faith was firmly on his arm, and the sword of the spirit hung from his side. As he remembered the words of the great Apostle, Paul, he realized that another part of the armor that was normally overlooked was prayer. He continued, *"Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit."* He breathed out to God, "Lord grant me the wisdom to do Your will."

But there was one more thing the passage said, *"Being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints."* He remembered that he wasn't just resisting this creature for himself, for Karen, for Bert or any of those they had encountered during their journey, but for all those who had come to the Lord and who were to come to the Lord around the world. One more scripture came to his mind. It was from 2 Peter 2:4. He quoted, *"For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment."*

The words started in his mind but began to spill from his mouth, "I bind you demon in the Name of and by the authority of Jesus Christ!" He continued saying this over and over as he slowly made his way higher in the tree and closer to Dicronifer.

Now the demon was climbing away from him. He wasn't tossing his fiery arrows anymore. In fact, he too was climbing higher into the tree in his effort to get away from Joshua. The words kept coming, "I bind you in chains of darkness you evil being from Satan!"

Karen continued to pray from the car. She watched as the demon moved higher into the tree and Josh continued to climb after him. Then a glimmer caught her eye. It was from further up, in the night sky. It looked as if lights, much like stars began to move, coming closer and closer together. As she watched they formed links like a chain and began to descend picking up momentum as they came together. Now they were coming down at a terrific speed and were heading straight for the shoe tree. Was this some sort of trick by the demon?

Then they hit the tree. More correctly they hit Dicronifer who was now in the top branches. Joshua stopped and both he and Karen watched as the chain of lights encircled Dicronifer. He let out an extremely loud and blood-curdling cry but this time it was not one of defiance but one that indicated he was in pain. The chain continued to weave its way around the demon until he was wrapped by it from his neck to his ankles. The next instant they turned fiery red, then cooled into the blackest black they had ever seen.

Karen heard Joshua command, "To the pit you evil creature, and there you will wait for your final judgment!" Another cry from the demon then in a great flash of light nearly as if an explosion had occurred in the top of the tree, he disappeared.

Joshua slowly began climbing down from the tree. He paused for a moment and both he and Karen looked skyward because they heard a noise like a thunderous applause but saw nothing.

When he was finally on the ground Karen got out of the car and rushed across the highway toward Josh. He looked more exhausted than she had ever seen him. With an embrace she asked, "Are you okay?"

With a loving gaze that spoke more than words he simply said, "It's finished."

Chapter 35

The next morning found Joshua waking from the best night's rest he had experienced in a month because his dreams had not been haunted with the demon, Dicronifer. It was the most wonderful peace he had felt in all his life. Going through his morning devotions, which included Bible reading and prayer, he prayed fervently for his brother Bert. It was a critical time for him. It would be so easy for him to slip right now. He prayed that these past few weeks in jail would force him to take his newfound experience for real.

It was much the same for Karen. Because of the nausea she had been experiencing, meals hadn't seemed the same. But this morning there was none of that, and even though she had thoroughly enjoyed her mother's cooking again, breakfast was more exquisite than ever.

The following Saturday Joshua and Karen took Susan to see Bert. God had honored their prayers for not only was Bert doing much better but he had joined a Bible study that was being conducted by a local pastor in the jail. You could tell from his conversation that he was already growing in the Lord. "I've got some news to tell you," He offered. From the expression on his face and the eagerness with which he told it, they all knew that it was close to his heart. "I called Rachel and believe it or not she didn't hang up on me. I shared with her what had happened to me – the good and the bad. Of course, she wasn't surprised with the bad but she was shocked when I explained the experience I had received from the Lord. She has been going to church herself, taking little

Bradley hoping to expose him to some good influence. She agreed that when I get out of here, we'd all go together. At least it's a start."

This was good news, especially to their mother, Susan. She hadn't been allowed to see her grandchild since Bert and Rachel had split up and that was agony to her soul. God was truly working miracles for her and the many prayers she had sent up for her children were finally being answered.

Later that week Josh and Karen made two very special announcements. The first everyone expected – their engagement. They had set a date for the following May. It was now October so Karen became very busy making all the wedding plans. Of course, she had a lot of help from her mother and sister.

The second announcement was more of a shock. They had agreed that they were going to stay in Crothersville, at least for a few years. Both families were glad to have them back home.

Two more weeks found Bert out of jail on bail. He had a trial set for mid-January but he was like a bird loosed from a cage for at least a few months. He did attend church with his ex-wife, Rachel and his son Bradley. All three of them went forward that Sunday to publicly make their commitments to the Lord. They began talk of getting back together.

However, Bert was sentenced to three years for his crimes. It was a test of his faith for certain. He resolved that, even though he had become a new man, he still owed a debt to society for all that he had done. During his trial he confessed everything while on the stand, making certain that the jury knew he had made a complete change in his life. Rachel knew that he was a new man from the inside out. She made the commitment to wait for him.

After his three-year hitch they did get back together. Jobs weren't easy to find, especially for an ex-con. But God has ways past finding out to man and Bert managed to land a job at a factory in Seymour. It wasn't a glamorous job but it was a steady income and he was thankful for it. They remarried and started over. They fell deeply in love so it was not just good for their son, Bradley, but brought happiness to their whole family.

Susan was like a new woman. Many of her ailments completely disappeared once Bert had gotten his life back together and little Bradley brought a smile to her face adding years to her life.

Tammy and George had their baby – a little boy they named Bruce. Karen was now an aunt and she couldn't wait to babysit for her sister. Her mother, Beth had a whole new reason to shop and she did everything she could

to spoil her first grandchild. Though he tried to be more discreet about it, Grandpa did his share of spoiling too.

When May finally arrived Joshua and Karen were married. It was a beautiful wedding and they were deeply in love. Karen had managed to land a job with a local doctor as his office nurse. It didn't pay nearly as well as her position with the hospital back in New York but it was an income. Somehow the small-town atmosphere made up for the lack of pay. She might never drive a canary yellow Mustang again, but she decided that there were better things in life.

Joshua opened his own practice in Crothersville. Again, a small town doesn't make one rich but he managed to make a living. He was happy to be near his mother and family and he knew that Karen was too.

By the time Bert was released from prison Karen and Joshua were expecting their own first child. It seemed life couldn't be better and they realized how blessed they were of God.

Josh had removed his invisible suit of armor, carefully hanging it in his closet. In a way he missed the adventure but then, he also hoped that it would stay in there for a long time.

One day, just after their little girl, Beth-Anne (one guess who she was named after) had been born and Karen had managed to get her to take a nap, she and Joshua were sitting on their own porch swing simply enjoying a cool breeze on a hot summer's day. They began reminiscing about their experiences. "Just think," started Josh, "if Jerimeil and Dicronifer had never come into our lives we might not be enjoying all that God has given us. We may never have met and I would still be pushing my way to the top at that law office."

"Yeah," answered Karen, "look what you would have missed out on!"

"Oh, you think you're something special now don't you Babe."

With a twinkle in her eye she responded, "Well, am I?" That was a loaded question but Josh knew it demanded an immediate answer so he responded with a wolf growl and a little howl. Karen knew he was teasing but she also felt secure in knowing that she hadn't lost her appeal to him.

As they talked, the entire experience seemed like another life ago. But it was real alright, his suit of armor was hanging in the closet to prove it. God had most certainly brought them through miracle after miracle that found them sitting idly on a front porch swing on a summer's afternoon.

Josh ventured, "I wonder how Jerimeil has been doing?"

"Oh, I'm doing just fine." Both Karen and Josh were startled at that answer. It hadn't come for either of them. Then, looking out on the lawn they saw the angel making his way towards their house. This could only mean one thing.

After thoughts ...

This book, though fictional, describes the spiritual battles we all face each and every day of our Christian experience. Some readers may be going through encounters with the devil that are just as life-threatening as the battles fought with Dicronifer by Joshua and Karen. The way they overcame their enemy is the way we all must overcome our own.

Each day presents us with not only a battle, but also the chance for victory. You can have victory in your life but only by and through the grace of Jesus Christ. If you don't know Him as your personal Savior, you can, right now, even today. Ask Him into your life. Read the Bible and know it as your own guide in your daily war with the devil. You can win ... yes you can, because when you have Christ on your side, know that the war is won and this battle can be too.

To find out more you are welcome to visit us at www.spiritbread.com. There you will find articles and more free e-books to help you grow in your faith.

God bless you as you fight. We are praying with you.



"The stillness of the pre-dawn can make secret thoughts blossom in the mind like the moon flower when those silvery beams of twilight touch its petals. Alongside the night lonely highway a passerby, unless specifically looking for someone, most likely would have missed the silhouette of a man standing in a field scattered with the skeletal-like remnants of a wood that had long since been logged out. He silently gazed up into an old maple tree."

Jerry D. Ousley, Author of "Soul Challenge," "Soul Journey," "Ordeal," and "The Spirit Bread Daily Devotional," begins a new challenge and journey with his first novel. This fictional story will make you laugh, cry and keep you wondering what will happen next as you turn each page.

A modern allegory of our spiritual walk, the characters, Joshua and Karen face battles and new experiences that represent those we all face each and every day.

Come with us as we follow this pair in their quest to defeat the evil Dicronifer in a spiritual adventure depicted in physical conflict and share their experience and the mystery of the old "Shoe Tree."