

ABBA'S
APOCALYPSE

CHARLES E BUTLER

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this story to the women in my life:
Betty Ann, Gloria Patri, Tiffany Michele, Kristie Dawn,
Clover Lynn, Isabel Rose, & my wife Sandra Lynne.
And, to all my Joeys'

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Prelude

There is a time in every life when we are faced with broken pieces. It's that extraordinary keepsake plate meant for display purposes only. It possesses the ability to link very special memories to our heart. It may be an anniversary gift, or just a souvenir. It's that object of our affection. It bridges time and even death. Special rules and laws guard it. It is bound within a fortress of wood and glass. This cherished possession is kept clean by faithful hands longing to hold that loved one again. But, a careless bump jars it free from its polished prison of protection. Helplessly you watch it roll down a path towards its destruction. Just then, you may experience a second death.

You cannot face another funeral. Your heart will not let the trash can claim its final epitaph. So, you rescue it and fight to revive it back to life. You cry out to God for help. Finally, you come to the realization it's time to give up and accept all those pieces. All you are left with are broken pieces.

Chapter 1: Dungeon of Damnation

I am forever cloaked in this despairing cold night as I peer through this inescapable looming damp dark fog. I hide myself and watch it restlessly devour its submissive shadowy subjects. I am afraid and cold-oh so cold. All my senses tingle with a heightened awareness I've not felt before. Nervous perspiration tingles on my neck as the current of this moist chill eerily moves over me. I reverently remain motionless, hoping to go unnoticed. I dread evil lurks here and will discover me. Its malevolence must be savoring my growing dripping fear. I sense its wicked spirit lurking in the freezing flow that churns this ocean of depression. Waves of empty loneliness crash over me. I observe its terrible essence gobble these night silhouettes so gracefully; as a ballerina skirting across this eternal night stage. It swirls effortlessly and carelessly, brushing its shades of gray strained through the fog. How I pity these wretched tortured souls. Each lonely subject patiently awaits the beast, praying it will make an end to their never ending misery. All welcome this murderer's hands by bending their fleshly necks back. They invite death to squeeze the life out of their very existence. But, there is no mercy here. Peace never comes. Oh, the pain of this place. Oh, the loneliness.

Etched in the distance is a tunnel the fog reveals through its

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ebbs and flows. I race to it before it evaporates my escape route. My hasty retreat is slowed by the weighty atmosphere pressing upon me. It pushes and pulls me off course. I struggle with all my might as the coldness cuts me through to the bone. I shake my head repeatedly, shaking lose its choke hold. My heart panics and cries out, "You must continue!" The futility of this place is brutal. I must not stop. For if I do, I'll be swallowed up and forever rooted in this bastion of the eternal unending rest. Something strange comes and comforts me.

An invisible presence hastily pushes me towards my objective. I see a way out-although I do not see my helper. Its touch is an all encompassing beacon of hope. The entity draws me out, as this deep heavy worrisome ocean continues to smashes me on its sea floor. I know without this helper I would be another permanent petrified fixture in this palace of depression within its dungeon of damnation. Invisible hands brush aside the cloak of this concealed menace waiting to pounce upon me. These hands clutch and carry me past this hideous attacker. In a brief moment, there is hope, but this new place brings me no relief.

Time here is a forgotten thought. It's nothing more than a reminder of the constant unending pain. I taste a different agony, but its blessed curse has followed me from the prior essence. Eternity's measurement here forever fans the flames whipping each soul with its perpetual burning stings. I stare through the flames that burn alive these screaming souls, while searching out the prince of pain. I watch their flesh melt, as the roaring blaze tears tender pieces off each suffering victim. This inferno does not consume its captive, but the surrounding darkness does swallow the flames. This is a dark hideous place. I wish no more than to just die. A revolting stench of sulfur precedes Perdition. His poisonous fragrance causes me to convulse. Concealed in the shadows of this dark abyss, he taunts and teases each soul mercilessly. I hear his laughing voice, mocking them on their choice to come here. He reveals glimpses of overwhelming joy that could be, if they'd only chosen differently. His hateful presence is overwhelmingly unbearable. I know he watches over

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his dominion, savoring this treasure they stole from God. I feel his sadistic pleasure, as his Relentless festively feast on each of their screams and miseries. They enjoy straining every morsel of every agonizing scream through their gnashing teeth. Great sorrow wars with unbearable loneliness that competes with the eternal fire. Selfishness drips and oozes a despairing rain everywhere; fueling this undying inferno.

The weight of my fear balances the crushing pain, precisely trapping me. I think about a father's compassion or mother's love, neither comforting these dear babes cries ever again. My eyes suffer through my tears as I notice a gate. I sense it is the entrance, and the only way out.

Hung on this ancient hinged gate is a rusted decrepit sign. It hangs and swings in the current of screams these tortured souls exhaustively exhale. I realize this is the only thing ever leaving this place. The sign holds what looks like a warning that slowly creaks and squeals the true name of this place. But, it's rather a final futile insulting gesture to its new eternal inhabitants. This one word plunges a dagger deep into the reader's heart, and then twists its horrifying message. For once this sign is read, it's too late. Roars of shouts repeat the only agonizing thing agreed upon here. The multitude knows this place as totally and eternally "Hopeless!" I scream out in one final attempt, "God, dear Jesus!," but my tortured soul knows it is past the time of rescuing. For, I know inside my spirit it is hopeless.

Suddenly, I am awoken and feeling great relief. His wonderful glory blasts my eyes with brightness and rescues my restless spirit. As His presence departs, streams of consciousness begin pouring through the cracks in my bedroom window the protective plywood fails to cover. Its illuminating power thrusts me up to a golden shower bathed in warmth. I feel I've drowned, but am now being revived with that first life giving gulp of air. As I gasp, my racing heart realizes I am being given the greatest gift-another chance. I sit motionless for a moment, enjoying this pardon from the prior doom as my pounding heart subsides. My hands proceed to rub the remnant of tear made crust and this night away. I

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continue massaging relief into my opening eyes that gradually restores the realization of this world.

As I compose myself, I convince myself this past night's experience was nothing more than a nightmare. Or, was it?

Every night I travel through this hell; living out a new section, a new chamber, and a new sensation. Each night is vividly written in my soul's diary. Each experience ends with a rescue from that damned place. I don't know why I am being tortured so. For, I am one of God's elect.

My name is Joseph, but known by all my friends as Joey. I've been having these dark dreams since shortly after New California left the former United States of America. It's been over four years since the first nightmare. This one is by far the worst. I'm afraid to sleep because of this constant terror torturing me. Maybe, just maybe, that's what's keeping me alive. I retain the heightened sense coming from this hellish fear keeping me alert to the slightest chance of approaching danger.

I leave my bedroom and quietly descend to my dim kitchen. My coffee cup trembles as I stare into the hypnotizing waves my nervous hands create. Gradually my mind settles. It drifts off and reminisces about my previous life. That's when I lived in the greatest country the world has ever known. How does this happen? How did it come to this; just surviving day to day? I am an Army vet and a college educated man who had such dreams. I owned my own trucking company. Now, nothing makes sense. I notice the lumps of rubble filling the shelves in my display hutch and feel its pain. Each distinct pile holds such memories. Each lump is someone I love. Every one of their mementos broke the day they disappeared. For three days after, I just sat and stared at those broken plates remembering each of them with my broken heart.

All of a sudden, I hear the sound of pressure bending my rear entrance door. I dare not make the slightest noise till I find out who or what's causing it. Every part of me becomes sentient, preparing for what may happen next. "Is it Demons?"

Quickly, I use my hand to cover my cup and muffle its

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swishing. I scoot down hiding my possible silhouette from being broadcast to the intruder(s). I slide my feet perfectly and methodically away from the noise encroaching on my home.

My strategy is to exit out the front of my house undetected. I'm careful not to make a sound. Just now, the rear door pops open, but I hear it snap. I realize the security chain is restraining the hell following behind it. My front door is the closest exit, but its reinforced barricade will take too long to open. I slide a little further to the master window. I hear the wooden rear door slowly being crushed by the choking security chain. Gently, so gently, I unlatch the plywood panel which helps keep the evil out. I slide it down with the careful caress of a new born babe. Hurriedly, but attentively, I quietly slide the window up. The stretching door cracks under the extreme pressure squeezing the life out of it. I rise quickly knowing I have seconds before these Demons erupt. Half way outside I hear its wooden spine snap. Frantically, I lean then roll into the front yard. All the while, I intensely listen to the noise following, and to the noise I must not make. I begin leaping away as fast as I possibly can in my crouched position. My heightened sense of fear releases an earthquake of nervous perspiration that rumbles out all my pores. I'm so scared, but so alive.

I hear a yelling whisper repeating the same word twice. I find temporary cover behind a rubble pile a few feet from the side of my house, and then I listen. I remain motionless dedicating all my senses to the perpetrators demand. "Joey, Joey," comes from inside my house, "It's me." Then there is a slight pause followed by the words, "Dave! Where are you Joey?" I swallow my heart as it decides whether to kill or hug him. I cup my hands creating a mini megaphone directing my "Psss, out here." I see the top half of his head peer through the open window. He slides it up so slowly revealing his face an inch at a time. I focus on the shape of his mouth as it whispers, "Are you coming in, or am I coming out?" His eyes shift back and forth like a radar scoping for enemy while waiting for my command. My Army experience decides it best if we abandon this area temporarily. All the noise and

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commotion could have alerted the Demons who lurk day and night.

Just now, a squadron of New California Guard jets screams over. They just miss the tops of the neighboring houses. The commotion gives us the perfect chance diversion we need to escape. I quietly shout, "Rendezvous, 'Project T'." Dave hurries and crawls out the window. We move out using our system of "leap frog" to repeatedly run, duck, cover, and observe along our retreat route. This is the safest way to travel, but is very time consuming. The "point man" running ahead acts basically as bait, while the trailing man observes for any hidden enemy waiting to attack. This system also helps prevent both of us from being captured. The enemy would have to spend valuable time deciding which one of us to chase as we escape in opposite directions. We proceed precariously along alert to the possible perils the next alley may hold.

My mind drifts as we journey. I think about our situation and how we got here. I know the New California Guard's mission. They fly low to avoid detection by the Fed's while playing a "cat and mouse" game with the neighboring country of Liberty. The jets repeat this maneuver almost daily, racing from Edward's Air Force Base towards New California's eastern border. The main reason is to demonstrate New California's sovereign air power. It's a warning to the Fed's and Liberty what they can expect if they try anything. The Guard's other reason is to look for illegal immigrants avoiding New California border check points. Only those with the proper passports are allowed in. And, only those with the "Trinity" brand get passports. Illegal's sneak across for the slightest chance at gaining access to one of the last remaining food baskets in the world. It seems food and clean water is all that drives people any more. Oh, and fear! Food has become the most important type of currency. It is used mostly for deposit in your own food bank.

My heart goes out to these intruders. These people were my American brothers and sisters, but there're now enemies towards my new country's survival. These people refused "Trinity's"

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identification brand and are left to starve. They've been named the Irreverent by "Trinity," and classified as enemies of the world. Now they're desperate enough to chance certain death in the desert with their families. They'll brave the extreme heat of the day and intense cold of the night while risking military marshal attack. They'll do all of this just to get some food. Almost all are caught, destroyed, or die in the miles and miles of desolate badlands. Their goal is to try and get to central New California's fertile farm land. They don't stand a chance though. Some think it's their inherent former American pride keeping them going. I know it's something more. It's that hope inherent in each of our soul's to the belief that there must be something more and something better. I know where this divine yearning comes from, and why it urges each one of us to continue on. I am blessed to live in New California, and I am Irreverent.

My heart bleeds for these abandoned souls. Most of the infiltrating Irreverent come to New California from the former United States. They attempt to sneak in via the sovereign country of Liberty (which is the combined former states of Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, and most of Utah). These states were some of the first to succeed from the union. There are several reasons why this happened. The first reason was all three branches of the federal government battled over power while trashing the people's constitutional rights. New tyrannical leaders were appointed by the executive branch bypassing the checks and balance system of congress. These leaders introduced their own laws and rules to govern the people according to their ideological beliefs. This is not what their forefathers believed in, but just the opposite. Their idea of justice lacks mercy and is cruel. Well, government grew too big and bureaucratic for its citizens to fight back. The Judicial branch decided to take its bite out of the people's contract, further disabling its citizens. The U.S. Supreme Court savored every chance to chew off the last dangling shreds holding the holy document together.

"Tolerance" drooled down their foolish faces as they legislated to what they thought was right. Their ruling wisdom

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constantly opposed the majority of the people. In the end, these judges' wicked hearts redefined what was good and godly. What was traditionally regarded as good became intolerable and against the law. Those with power shouted "Victory," while true liberty drowned under their thunderous applause.

The next reason came through moral decay leading to ignorance and want. People did what was right in their own eyes, proudly justifying their actions through the pulpit of the media. Pleasure and pride were their two major commandments. They worshiped themselves and the lustful things of this world. Hearts grew cold and selfish as ambition turned into laziness. Over half the country decided it was better to have fun and let others supply their needs. The politicians used this as their tool to get elected and reelected. The government bankrolled these unproductive patrons in exchange for their entitled votes. Every candidate protected their voting bloc under the liberal law of tolerance for those less fortunate. The infestation of division festered over the land. Hard working people were punished while the mostly lazy and covetous were rewarded. I learned one thing about greed; it has a self destruct mechanism built in to it. Once it starts eating it never knows when to stop. Eventually, it will lead to its own demise. Taxes shot up along with government regulations. The protected poor demanded more entitlement, but the national debt and workers couldn't handle any more load.

The last straw came as our President began selling portions of the country to those foreign countries holding our enormous debt. Little sovereign countries were allowed to form inside the states without any legal recourse. More than half the states decided this was enough! The states started subsidizing from the United States before the growing debt crushed them, and before the President destroyed each states sovereign right. The states also realized the federal government was looking for any excuse to use marshal law and bury their last chance of true democracy. The destructive catalyst came right after "Harpazô Day." That day all blessing fell away from the United States, and chaos began its reign. It happened a little over fours ago.

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California was the first former state to close its borders. The governor declared one day after the catastrophic event to enact all military guard to defend against the fear of more mass disappearances. A third of its population vanished in a second on "Harpazô Day." A week later California's leadership decided to succeed from the former United States. It did this while proclaiming its sovereign right under "New California." It was a feeble attempt to protect its assets and limited natural resources. Next, marshal law followed. It governed the state until "Trinity," its LD, and Demons took over power. They are the law now!

Many come from the remaining alliance of the U.S. known now as the Fed's. Some professional experts and laborers are allowed passports to come in. This new country needs help replacing the workforce needed to harvest its resources and maintain military stability. Only those with the brand-that is.

Others try coming from around the world to sneak in. They make attempts at entry through abandoned sea ports and airports. New California hides many of these through its sheer size, vast deserts, and inability to monitor them all. There are two categories of culprits. The first are those whom have taken the brand, but denied pass ports. These caught are "Demonized" by permanently relinquishing their bodies to the will of these unholy hosts. Not all LD sporting the brand has a Demon, but they do give them the right of passage to occasionally occupy their body. The demonic occupation process seems to cause extreme pain, which the LD overwhelmingly enjoy. I still have not figured out why brothers of the brand would turn on each other. I guess it is their evil selfish nature to enjoy pain no matter what its source.

The infiltrating Irreverent are a different story. They do not have the brand. They have either evaded the branding process, or refused it and ran from the brand. If caught, they are given one last chance to accept the brand and sacrifice their souls and be slaves to these spirits of evil. Refusing souls are usually kept alive and fed a constant staple of torture. Hideous Demon spirits enjoy swirling around their scared prisoners' just for the pleasure of their pain. They get great satisfaction devouring Irreverent cries

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for “mercy.” They’ll promise them possible release from their anguish if they’ll reveal the location of other Irreverent. The best you can hope for from these laughing liars is a slow death. I’ve seen this firsthand.

I see “Project T,” or “T” for short. It is nothing more than a burned-out pile of rubble with a secret. I visually command Dave to “Move out,” as we begin circling the perimeter of “T”. We take turns observing and looking for signs of Demons or LD. They would love to destroy this place and torture us. I move back to the forest to find temporary cover. I conceal myself by squatting down behind a bush. We wait motionless for several minutes while intensely listening for any unusual sounds. We take one last look for anything out of place. I motion Dave to proceed cautiously to enter as I continue observing. If I detect any evil I’ll whistle to Dave to run for it. This is part of our early detection system; one observes while one plays the part of bait.

Just to the side of the pile of debris, where a church once stood, is a rectangle stone with a cross cut in it. It lays flat like a grave marker. On it is a verse chiseled. The stone simply reads “2 Timothy 2:11-13.” The “T” in “Timothy” gives this place its name. The verse itself details our mission. Dave moves out and stops just short of the stone, and then pans over to me for a final confirmation. I view a quick 360 degrees observation, and then affirm with my hand gesture, “It’s safe.”

Dave first pounce’s the stone down to unlock its hidden locking mechanism. Then, he moves the stone by sliding it away along its concealed rolling track. This reveals the hidden compartment just under its surface. He leaps in and motions to me to, “Move out.” He continues checking the surroundings as I “head out.” I keep my profile low as I run. I leap to where Dave is. We quickly grab the stone’s under side handle and slide it back to its original resting place. Lights’ lining the tunnel turn on as the stone jolts forward, and then mechanically locks in place. We descend into the refuge of its musky depths.

I grab Dave and firmly slam him against the corridor wall. I look him square in the eyes and shout, “What the heck were you

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thinking by breaking in my house?" The grimmest look takes over Dave's face, and then begins turning gently into a smile. The only thing I can do is hug him. I repeat, "What were you thinking you crazy fool?" He replies "Demons, Demons forced me!" He remembers something so terrible it causes him to tremble and shake loose our embrace. Dave is the closest thing I call family now. I murmur, "We'll talk about this later buddy."

The man who created this labyrinth must have been divinely inspired. It seems it is supernaturally protected and prophetically supplied. I think to myself the Demons and agents of "Trinity" surely should know about this refuge. They have the resources to see everything and everyone. Demons have the ability to jump from victim to victim sporting "Trinity's" seal of damnation. They learn all their host's memories and use them as soldiers and spies in this dark war. I've seen the power the brand gives mortal bodies. The possessed body is given super strength. I saw an old lady lift a truck off a car to get to the Irreverent trapped inside.

"Trinity" titles its members as Eternal Vestures in the Legion (E.V.I.L.). They choose "Trinity's" mark for the power to buy, eat, and survive. They are also promised unnatural extended life spans. "Trinity" requires all its followers without question to obey its every command and worship its leaders. We are called Irreverent, because we refuse to worship this evil institution. We Irreverent, title the bunch as "Members of EVIL," for short. They sold their souls and worship its "Trinity." We refer to these living damned as LD. We call all who ran from the brand, "Brothers of LIVE." We are also referred to as the Irreverent for violating acceptance of "Trinity's" worship.

This place is a fortress. One of our members discovered it shortly after "Harpazô Day." That day a bright flash of light penetrated everything everywhere. All the news that day was reporting disaster after disaster. Their scientific experts stated the light came from some type of gamma ray burst from what must have been from a nearby star explosion. Then, the news noticed people just evaporated. Last count was about one in ten Americans vanished. About 350 million others were reported

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vaporized throughout the rest of the world. I didn't believe the lie, because I knew the truth.

I remember my liberal professors denying any legitimate Christian teaching. One stated, "These 'wing nuts' believe one day their God will come back from Heaven and snatch them all away. They call this event the 'rapture'. This word is not even found in their Bible." They were wrong like so many of us. That's exactly what happened. That word is found in the scriptures by a different name. "Harpazô" means to quickly and suddenly snatch away. It's like pulling a child from the path of a speeding vehicle.

My idiot professors failed to perform any real digging before making such claims. I knew many intelligent fools teaching their unempirical views, damning those who'd trust their opinion. They're all dead or LD now. I found out the term does exist. It is found in the 1,600 years old "Latin Vulgate Bible." Harpazô translates into the Latin word for rapture. 1 Thessalonians 4:17 explains this event in detail. I believed all my tolerant liberal professors, with their tons of quick wit, but not a drop of real wisdom. I am learning a lot now while sorting through all the learning materials the former pastor left. There is a library of information down here.

Chapter 2: The Chamber's Secret

We reach the end of the door-less corridor. There are only three things here. At eye level is a chiseled cinderblock. A cross and scripture reference to "2 Timothy 2:11-13" were carefully dug into it; in the same design as the entrance stone. Just below it, sits a bulging cloth atop a plain rustic altar. Lifting the cloth reveals a much worn Bible. A red string marks the page to that prolific passage. The words are: "If we have died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He will also deny us; if we are faithless, He remains faithful." I realize these words to be the key to everything.

This passage from "Timothy" is intended to touch the very soul. The safeguard to this system is a series of things that must be done to reveal its hidden treasures. "EVIL" could not and would not ever do the following. It seems the pastor knew this. Only a repentant response will start the unlocking procedure. And, only a truly repentant heart will find the hidden chamber. It starts by kneeling in repentance. Pressing the attached knee rest down moves the unlocking device. A truly repentant heart will then lean forward while clasping their hands in prayer on the altar's table top. The combined continuous pressure on these

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devices set into action a simple mechanical timer. A secret passage clicks unlocking its entry way when a prayer continues for one minute. This sound echoes throughout the chamber making its origins impossible to find, thus the entrance is impossible to find. The secret is in the cross. It took Paul a week to figure this out and what to do next.

Paul is our new pastor. He had to keep resetting the locking system before finding the next chamber's entrance. This took many attempts by resetting the device and trying, and retrying over and over. Resetting can only be done by sliding open and closing the original entrance stone. He was ready to give up in the midst of his weeping when a realization hit him. Revelation is found only in the cross itself. In his repentant position he touched the cross. He slid his finger tracing the cross's incision feeling a slight burr of metal protruding. He pressed and slid it from the horizontal beam's left side to its right side. Paul could hear stone rubbing against stone as something happened. There is a door in the floor half way back the corridor. It pops up only one half inch. Stepping on it will again lock it, and sound the intruder alarms in the underground cavern. You can step on the door and not even notice it. Its marble context matches the floor exactly. Sliding your feet is about the only way to find it. You will know it when you feel your shoe bump its lip.

Dave repents as I lift the unlocked stone door. We step down into a virtual city of supplies and information. The original pastor built his church over what must have been a huge underground military bunker. We cannot stay down here long though. This place has limited living space. It's dedicated essential to supplies we need for living. It has running water, a small complete bathroom, and electricity. None of us have figured out where the electricity is actually coming from. We've found the pump bringing in the well water, just not the source of its electricity. We believe the former pastor installed and hid some sort of protected solar power system somewhere around the neighborhood.

Upon entering this lower chamber you'll see a makeshift chapel. It can hold thirty two of us. We assemble here on Sunday

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only. This is where we plan, pray, and replenish. We would love to all take safe harbor here, but we cannot all fit. The "T" members all agree no one will live here. This place is for supplies, information, and Sunday worship only. The only other time it can be used is in extreme cases of emergencies-like Dave and I am currently in. Today is Thursday.

There are several room entrances jutting off this corridor with the main supply chamber at the far end. The first room you'll come to is the chapel. It's on the left.

A DVD dangles from a bent paperclip hanging over its entrance way. There is a laptop on a small table as you enter the chapel. I remember the first time I played that DVD. I live by its words now. "Don't give up. You do have hope. You have repented and are covered with eternal grace of God's mercy. Our God is on your side. He will help you. I will not lie to you. Your life will be extremely hard, brother, until Jesus returns with all the fellow Saints. You have one advantage no one has known before. You know exactly when Jesus will return. You have three options concerning your life here, and in eternity. One, don't take the brand and stay alive exactly seven years. The seven year countdown starts on the exact day a particular man will broker a seven year peace accord between the Holy Land of Israel and its enemies. The second is being caught by the Son of Perdition or his followers. You will be tortured to death. Both of these options require extreme faith. There is one last option. It is to give up and believe his lies and wonders. Most everyone still alive will. You cannot and must not be willing to take this Great Deceiver's mark. He may or may not end your torture. He might even promise you great powers and wonderful pleasures. But, it will be for a short time. He is the king of lies. You will know his mark. It will be his requirement to buy and sell. You will then worship him. His mark will be used to distinguish his followers. Stay away from him. Stay away from all his agents and his followers. They have sold their very soul to him. They are all damned to an eternity of pain in Hell." This large black pastor left his words forever etched in my mind and in my heart. His last words were the most important.

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“The Holy Spirit now dwells in you my dear brother, and will help you towards Christ.” He left a file next to the laptop with written instruction surrounding the inventory of supplies and hundreds of one hour long DVD sermons. Each one’s filled with scriptures dealing with this particular time. We use a new one every Sunday. It gives us the strength we need to make it through each week. At my inauguration I was given: two each-three by five inch Bibles.

One’s for my personal use and one is to give away when the proper time arises. Both are now hidden in my home.

Dave and I grab a meal ration from the supply room and return to the sanctuary to eat. I decide again to ask Dave about what happened earlier at my house. He starts begging me to stay at my place. I gently try refreshing the rules us Irreverent brothers all agreed on. “It’s safer if we all remain separate.” Dave already knows no “T” member knows more than one other member’s address. This is to prevent a captured member from revealing more than one other member. The added benefit is each person is commanded to state they live alone, or with their family members only. The theory is: if a member is captured, the LD most likely would just execute their prisoner; since there is no reason to torture them. But, where there are two, there are more. You’d most likely be tortured and be in the midst of Demons, until you die; that’s if they’d let you die. One last point to being alone is: your senses are better to distinguish intruders. The theory is: you know the sounds you make. You can even smell trouble better. “Our senses would be confused Dave. I might not know whether you made a noise or a LD, or if you were causing a particular smell or if it was from another source. Our advance warning would be compromised. The odds are just so much better alone.” He starts sobbing, “I can’t do it any longer all alone. I’m so, so scared; especially at night!” He bends over into a sitting fetal position blubbering, “Oh God, pleeease help me-I just can’t take it anymore!” I knew he experienced something horrific before his earlier intrusion. I bend close to him and whisper, “I guess we’ll somehow do this together Dave; Lord willing.” He reaches his right arm over my left shoulder, cupping the back of my neck. He

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remains fetal and pulls me slightly towards him while reverently gulping, "Thank you, thank you, thank God, and thank God for you."

I give him a minute to gain himself. I tell Dave, "Come on buddy, we got to go. The Demons will be out soon."

Demons love the dark because of the fear it creates. We slide the entrance stone back over and dash, while bending over to run. We then race methodically to the tree line.

Dave is bigger than me, but I'm battle tested in fear. It's not that he's weak; it's just that I've been through more. I've seen war and experienced suffering. I guess my life has more surrealistic moments than most others. His life has been more real. Well, at least till "Harpazô Day." That day he lost his wife, Becky, and his kids, Sammy, and Brittney. That day he also lost his mind.

Dave heard something come on the news at work that day, while I was working under my truck in my garage at home. I drive a "big rig" across country for a living; or I used to. I live by myself, so I was not alerted to what was happening. I figured something was wrong a couple hours after. I live on the outskirts of town. Most all of the activity was in town a few miles away. I heard sirens screaming by my house; one chasing after the other. After the third one passed I rolled out from under my truck and lifted my garage door. There were pillars and pillars of fire off in the distance. Each one was belching enormous amounts of filthy dark smoke. Not the regular black smoke that comes from the occasional forest or house fire. I saw this type only in war. Only JP 5 (jet fuel) burning fuselage cause fires like these. It burns everything it touches with the heat of Hell itself. I knew each pile had a fuselage, and each one took a lot of lives. As I was looking, a fire engine and several rescue trucks raced towards the closest pillar of smoke about 8 miles past town. I counted a dozen fires before deciding to go help.

Dave told me he raced out of work after hearing the commotion and mayhem coming from outside. Dave's first concern was to go check on his family, but when he got outside he walked into a different world. He saw car after car crushed in

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accidences everywhere.

People were frantically running and screaming. Some were grotesquely injured and others ran mentally impaired.

He tried to maneuver around all the devastation and drive home, but there were too many deformed vehicles and dead bodies in his way. Dave leaped from his car and started running towards home. He tried calling, but all communication went haywire. He remembered chanting, "My babies, my Becky," like a cadence, all the way home. But, he didn't get that far. He found a "big rig" with two cars crushed under it. He recognized Becky's license plate ID. He dropped to his knees yelling, "My God," as he continued crawling over the bloody asphalt towards the mangled mess. He imagined what he knew he'd see, but he was wrong. All the doors were compressed way past the point of opening. He could only frantically reach his arm inside to feel around, and felt no one. He then replaced his arm with his face through the broken window hole. There was no blood and no bodies in the wreckage. The last thing he saw was the clothes he remembered them wearing when he left for work that morning. The only thing he found in the car that day was three distinct sets of clothes in three individual piles. That's when he lost his mind.

Dave leaps ahead of me taking point. I carefully scour the surroundings. We are close to home and it's getting shades darker. It's pretty close to sunset now. I suddenly spot a female LD, and worse-she sees me! My only defense is to stay far enough away so it can't spot the fake "Trinity" brand on my forehead. I shake internally as I stand in my fear, but I remain unemotional exteriorly. I decide to fake that my shoe came untied and bend over to hide my forehead in the process. I begin silently praying for divine protection that she stays far enough away from me that our spirits won't conflict. If she gets to close she'll be able to sense my spirit is sanctified. I nod a "good day" and stand to notice her empty presence continue walking by on the opposite side of the street.

I return walking robotically and unemotional as possible passing the hidden body of Dave below in the bushes. I continue

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staring out of the corner of my eyes that lock onto her black empty ones. Her direction influences my direction of travel. My blank stare seems long enough to convince her I am LD too. I think, "If she only knew how scared I really am?" My head snaps from my sideward glance forward to what lay ahead. I can feel her stare as my inner consciences says, "Continue on, and don't fear." I've made it a block without any alarm. I turn the corner and proceed to duck and cover behind some bushes. I see Dave dodging, observing, and covering as he makes his way up to my location. I see that the sun is almost completely down while waiting for Dave to catch up. I reinsure my confidence by realizing it's only one block more till we're home.

Most of the debris filling the streets has been cleaned off the streets the last year. That use to help hide us as we'd travel back and forth to "T". It's getting much harder now to maneuver without getting caught. We make it to my house and sneak onto my property. Its abandon appearance has so far kept "Trinity" agents and the LD away. I hope no one noticed that the window was open. The last thing I want is to raise any suspicion. I crawl up the side of the house first, and then through the window. I view the perimeter and wave Dave up. We slide the plywood back in place and secure it.

We're finally in for the night. Dave snaps and shakes the green glowing light into a "glow stick" then hooks it on a wire that I impaled in the middle of my front room floor. The wire sticks up about a foot and is shielded 180 degrees. It only gives its green glow inwards, producing just enough light to read a little before sleeping, or to light my escape route-just in case. Dave looks at me and whispers "Thanks brother." Feeling safe, he rolls over and slowly drifts off to a better place.

I remove a blanket from my upstairs bed and return to cover Dave. I take the glow stick and check the damage he caused to my back door. I then secure it temporarily by forcing a chair under the knob, and then sliding it tightly against the door. I return to my bedroom while whispering a prayer of protection over this house, and on us.

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I sit on my bed shaking my head in disbelief. Why didn't I believe? Why didn't I at least research it? Everyone I love disappeared that day. My momma and sis invited me to share in their faith, but I refused to be indoctrinated. I don't want some set of rules condemning everything I do. I refused to know their compassion as they tried over and over throughout the years. They'd always end each conversation with, "I'll pray God reveals His love to you," or a simple, "God bless you Joey." I weep now every night before retiring. "Thank you God for your revelation, and answering the prayers of my momma and sis." They both went in the great snatching away.

I now know the truth. Not only do I know it, but I feel it. I open my Bible to read a chapter as I do twice a day. I'm starting in the book of "Titus" tonight. I try memorizing a verse a day. It is like soul food that provides protection. It answers every question I can come up with. It is not about a list of rules no one can follow. It's about the love of God. It's about a relationship with God. It's about accepting the gift of God by just saying, "I need you in my life Jesus." These words won't make you perfect. These words just make you forgiven. Then, God's Holy Spirit (His helper) fills you. No evil can enter the house where God dwells. I am protected and have peace amidst all my fears. I am eternally forgiven and eternally loved by my Abba, my daddy. My eyes grow heavy as my hearing grows more alert. I mumble thanksgiving to my creator and ask for blessings while dozing off.

Immediately, my bedroom floor rumbles as I sink into my bed. Invisible arms start pulling me down through my mattress. I try wrestling them off me, but there's nothing grab. Their amazing strength squeezes the life from me, and their evil presence crushes the faith right out of me. I do the only thing I can do. I cry out "Jesus." These arms release me as the enormous weight of their evil presence pushes me through my bed, through my house, and through the ground below.

My heart melts in its abandonment as I fall through this endless despairing darkness. I slam to a stop shattering every one of my bones into pieces. The pain is so immense I think I never

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wanted to die so much. It's beyond description. The extreme cold of loneliness and helplessness battles the ferocious heat for possession of my eternal soul. My eyes swim through my tears as they fearfully move up to see that warning plaguing me. The sign slowly swings as it creaks a hideous song of captivity. It whispers with a multitude of voices over and over the hopelessness of this place. All my senses are perfected here. Every one of them feels, taste, and hears everything dripping from this awful place. Every one of them is warning me the "Relentless" come to tear me apart.

They draw nearer as I pry my heavy head up. The pain and depressing gravity seems to have glued my sizzling broken body to the jagged iron floor. I see their glowing eyes and feel their thirsty presence surrounding me. I draw in as much of this poisonous air as my hurting lungs will allow me, and in one last futile attempt I exhale "Jesus." I now surrender myself to the hopelessness of Hell.

The nature of the approaching snarling creatures' suddenly changes. Their swiping claws turn to defend their gruesome faces as their heads jet upward. It's not my body's feast that centers their attention, but what their senses are screaming to them what is coming down. I am so, so thankful for the momentary reprieve from my intense throbbing. The shout of his name magically numbs me. My eyes drown me with hopeless tears that soak every aspiration in my heart. I am poured out and spent with fear as I lay prostrate in pain.

I hear the "Relentless" cry out in agony as their screams chase after their hasty retreat. The malevolent hand squeezing my heart suddenly lets go. The heaviness jumps off of me which confuses me. Something comes that must be more wicked. I am surely cursed.

I stare up and see a prickle of light. It releases a sparkle that showers down the greatest feeling I've ever felt. I feel its hope. Its bright light overwhelms my eyes. This wonderful joy is beyond my imagination. I just want more of it. I'm totally blinded as this light blankets me, and then it starts slowly filling everything, and

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flowing everywhere. I continue to stare through my blindness, at its hypnotic origin. I can't see anything, but its peace is moving closer and closer. All of a sudden, I am totally and emphatically over taken. I hear these words bellow with the power that shakes the very foundation of Hell. "He's mine!"

My heart, oh my heart has returned me. I can't speak now.....!
I can't talk now....!

My tears reverse their flow and stream out of me. Each one carries the gratitude of my heart. All this love over taking me is..., is..., tremendously magnificently perfect. I feel my worthlessness compared to the admiration the approaching entity somehow feels towards me. All I want is more as I babble and tremble out my simple worthlessness. "You are not worthless my son, you are one of my special jewels." He wraps His warm adoring arms around this frail and broken body as I weep, "Abba, daddy." He scoops me ever so gently. His touch spontaneously heals every one of my ailments. His overwhelming perfect love for me is unbearable. I feel 10,000 times beyond wonderful.

We rise softly while He stares down. I feel His emotion as He holds me securely in His embrace. Our hearts share the pity His heart feels for all those hopeless eternal souls we forever leave behind. He speaks to me as we jet away, "I bring you to a place of true wonder. I am bringing you home son." My spirit adjusts to His embrace as it composes many questions. I feel His strong absolute power scaring me into absolute submission. "Oh my dear, I know your thoughts.

Don't worry my child. I truly love you and will protect you forever. We travel now beyond my universe. What you see between us and the distant galaxies are moments in time you have experienced." In this vision it's like I'm watching a movie playing over a celestial movie screen. I see a backdrop of galaxies, nebula, and wonderful amazing colors swishing by. There are all types of objects stirring about, with infinite shapes and sizes. Over this background a moment from my past begins to play out.

I am five years old watching my little friend Samantha from my front yard. Her kitty was just run over by a passing car. I stare

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as she frantically tries summoning her kitty from the curbside, but it just lays there motionless bleeding in the middle of the street. I hear her cry and call out to him. I don't know how to help her as she stands all alone sobbing. I do the only thing I can think of. I walk over to her side and place my little arm around her. I tell Sammy, "Don't cry. He's in heaven now." Oh, the compassion in this moment. Oh, the sorrow we share.

I see another, another, and still another instance come alive. It's every moment of my life playing simultaneously. I clearly see, completely feel, and thoroughly comprehend every revealing bit. Suddenly, all the visions vanish. I now see just my dear sweet grey hair momma. She is kneeling while praying a bedtime prayer. Now, I begin hearing all her prayers flooding over me as she pleads the same prayer night after night. All her rushing voices suddenly disappear. I now listen to their essences sum up in this one heartfelt request. She sweetly asks Jesus to come save me - her little boy. I want to weep, but I cannot. God's immense love for me won't allow it. I now see my sis and all the times I shunned her invitations to accept Jesus.

As this movie continues, I see many more moments of my rebellious life flutter by. I just feel sorrow for the way I lived, and how I treated all those whom really love me. In the midst, Jesus opens His hand while extending His arm, and then swishes it side to side. "Joey, those rebellious moments are remembered no more. They were forgotten the instant you

welcomed me in to your heart. Now, you will remember them no more." Instantly, the weighty burden is lifted. My sorrow disappears as an invigorating freshness envelope me. I now see and feel only His immense love, awestruck wonder, and captivating glory as we briskly leave this universe behind.

In a moment we stand facing each other. I find I'm staring into His compassionate eyes as He stares lovingly into mine. Suddenly, I feel life coming from the grass carpet I'm currently squishing between my toes. This immediately startles me! I begin hopping, trying not to hurt it. "It's alive, it's so alive!" I see His mouth form a gentle amusing smile. "Relax Joey and enjoy the grass. You will

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not hurt it. I created it. It adores your presents and desperately desires to embrace your feet. Stand upon it." I rest without worry as its tickle wraps around my toes. In this moment I begin to notice the beautiful music coming from all around. A heavenly breeze usher an awesome sensation of sweet fresh flowers. All of a sudden I realize I can actually taste the nectar it's producing just from its aroma. I stick my tongue out to catch as much of this delicacy as I can. My ears are lured back to the sweet charming music coming from every direction everywhere. I can't see the source, but I know in my soul this music is devoted to worshipping Him. He answers before I even ask, "This is the beginning of Heaven. Everything overflows with my praise. The grass, the trees, the flowers, and every creature sing's praises to me. This is even the yearning of your soul." I discern that I do feel it singing choirs of quiet praises. I listen and giggle at my soul's awesome joy. I begin to become aware of my senses. Each is intensely receptive. Each combines with the other's function.

I can taste the sounds permeating my tongue. "Wow!" Each sound taste uniquely different. I can even taste the amazing tapestry of colors I feel all around. I look towards the sky and taste the difference between the fluffy whiteness and the deepness of the blue. Each is so vibrant. It's like I'm a baby experiencing everything for the first time. The flavors explode in my mouth. My new super vision allows me to see colors beyond color, and things at incredible distances. I experience each shade is a different morsel of ambrosia. I spread my arms outward while leaning my head backwards in my attempt to soak in every new sensation. I have a second epiphany while using my new and improved senses. I can even taste the sky with my eyes. My senses are no longer independent of each other, but act as one large tongue lapping everything up. The sky is the bluest hue of blues, and its smell is like fresh picked blueberries. I can even feel its smooth sweet moist texture with my eyes. I gobble in each and every sensation my soul will devour. As I begin to notice having more than just my ordinary five senses, I hear Jesus speak, "I've brought you here for a reason Joey. It is to give you hope. It is to

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share this hope with those I will bring to you. It is to give you, and them, the strength to overcome the pain and horror you will face. Remember, I will never ever leave you, or forsake you. Your nightmares were given to you to warn those hardhearted. Some will only come to me through fear and despair. Use your nightmares as a warning of the eternal pain and suffering, and Heaven as their eternal reward. I will protect you from the reoccurring nightmares. They are no more.”

All of a sudden, I begin drifting away from Jesus. My heart cries out, “No, I won’t go back to that awful place! It’s full of fear and despair.” But, my heart also shouts submission to His will. “I will do whatever you ask me Abba. I know the importance of what you ask.” I feel His love carry with me, as His final words resound and slowly dissolve, “No man knows the wonders I have waiting for those whom truly love me.”

In a moment I am back in bed. The depression of this place over takes me, but a holy remnant of His glory shines through the plywood crack covering my window. This single golden beam’s warmth is giving me amazing new strength. I know my new mission and the reality of this past night. I can only say, “Thank you Lord.” His awesome love empowers me to do what I have not before. This is to bring the message of salvation without reservation. I am not afraid anymore, for I know now that I am truly blessed.

Chapter 3: The Revelation

I am more rested than ever before. I close my eye lids while savoring the final moments of this night. I spread my arms basking in the knowledge I have a Heavenly home. The vacuum of this vision has brought home an adoring aroma that drifts around me. It's like lying in a bed of sweet grass right after its cut, but better! I smell it wisp gently away under the vibrating footsteps climbing the stairs to my room. Dave drags along a familiar depressing odor. It's the stench of realization now beginning to fill my bedroom.

I sit up to a slight tapping on my door. "Good morning sleepy head; looks like you had a good night's rest. Did you hear the commotion early this morning? It sounded like it came from a few blocks away. I heard a girl screaming frantically as she was running away. Then, there was nothing. I peeked out the window to see if danger might be coming, but everything quieted down. I figured you were dead tired to sleep through all that, so I just let you sleep. Seems you needed it. I was up and down all night keeping an eye on things." Dave ends his information bombardment long enough for me to squeeze in, "What a night!" Dave replies, "That's what I'm saying buddy." If he only knew!

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I turn and sit facing him as the palms of my hands massage each of my eyes awake. My left hand continues this maneuver as my right hand pats my mattress welcoming Dave to come sit. My patting hand moves several times up then down while pointing to my bed. I command Dave "Come." He sits knowing I have something important to say. My right hand now clasps my chin while I stare forward into space. "Dave, I had a revelation." All his senses come to attention as they fix themselves on my next words. "I stood before God last night!" I feel funny after saying this. "It's true, I was in Heaven. Jesus gave me a mission." Under normal circumstances I'd expect him to think I'm some sort of "nut job." These are not normal times though.

"I knew it, I knew there was a reason you didn't wake up." While still staring at the fixed point in space, I slowly nod my head up and down. "There's something He wants me to do that will change my life. It will change everything Dave." He sits more attentive while leaning further forward. He places his hands on his knees while his face snaps toward mine. I tell him, "I'm scared Dave." I sit motionless as he wraps his left arm over the top of my shoulders and tug several times, "That's why I'm here buddy. I'm your buddy, right?" I force a small grin and say, "That's affirmative." Dave requests I give him all the details of what happened. "Later Dave, later," I reply. I know in my heart he's the guy I'd like to sit back to back with in battle. Even if we were faced with impossible odds; he would stay at my side. There's no one alive I'd rather shake the pillars of Heaven with. But, I know in my soul I'll be facing this mission alone. This is my cross to bear.

Our purpose was just to stay hidden and survive six days a week. It was to help others keep away from "Trinity's" brand. It was to study the Bible learning what to expect is coming the next three years. That's changed now. My mission is to spread His message. I have to give up my defensive position and attack the "high ground." This is something I have to keep hidden inside me for now.

I suggest we go eat our daily meal. We make our way downstairs as I think how I must risk everything. I think about

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being caught and what the Demons will do to me. But, I feel the power of God touching me and quieting my impending fears. His spirit equips me with an arsenal of trust in the message found in the passages displayed at “T”. As we continue to the kitchen I’m given another weapon. My mind retrieves a verse my momma would say: “I can do all things, as long as God is with me.” I think now, “I can stand all things.” But, I realize there is one thing I can’t stand. It’s the thought of what will happen to Dave if something happens to me.

We make it to the kitchen. I tell Dave to take a seat. He looks at the damaged door and repents of his action. I lift a trap door in the kitchen cupboard floor, where I hide supplies and trash, while telling Dave, “We need to fix that door today.” I pull out two packs of MRE (meals ready to eat). I tell him, “We’re going hungry tomorrow,” seeing these are the last of my MRE. Members of “T” only take enough supply of MRE to last a week. One reason is: this is the safest maximum amount a member can smuggle back home. Second, it is to preserve “T’s” supply in the event a member is captured. I tell Dave, “Today’s Friday, and I’m giving you my Saturday ration.” He thinks a second and gratefully acknowledges my gift. “Thanks Joey, I’m sorry for the trouble I’m causing you.” I reply, “We’re in this together brother.” His face draws up in reaction to what I just said. I see a tear begin forming and hanging just off the corner of his eye. His left arm forms a brace for his head on the table as his hand tries to hide his emotion. I guess he’s overwhelmed with the fact someone could still care about him in this despairing time. My coarse cactus coating blocks a tear from forming in my eye.

We cautiously limit the sound we make opening the foil packets, and chew its contents quietly. I peel back the Velcro cover protecting my precious Army surplus watch revealing its 8:08 am. “Boy, I did sleep in.” I scold myself to the fact I’m always up at dawn. I wind it as my eyes look to Dave’s wrist. I wonder why he wears that useless quartz watch. All exposed electrical devices were “fried hard” about a year ago. That’s when “Trinity” started using nuclear weapons; three years after it promised

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everyone eternal world peace. It fed the world deceiving lies promising order, restoration, peace, and prosperity. This happened right after "Harpazô Day" and the Middle East attack on Israel.

I remember hearing the news stating, "The Middle East is preparing for war." Three different armored battle lines were forming to attack the tiny nation. There was also a Russian led armada sitting just off Jerusalem's coast. These band of countries were preparing to verge from all four directions of the compass. Islamic Clerics believed the vanishings were a revelation to usher in their long awaited coming messiah. They proclaimed Israel's destruction was the "linchpin" holding back fulfillment of prophecy. The major world powers chose sides escalating the threat of world destruction. Innocent Israel miraculously survived the perpetrators unscathed. Their attackers' were left total devastated though. The remains of the war became choleric poison to the world economies. That's when "Trinity" birthed. It promised protection, future prosperity, and (most importantly) food. All the chaos scared most sovereign countries into gladly surrendering their freedoms and pledging their alliance to "Trinity." The "Pale Horse" of starvation soon forced more packs with this devil. It seemed like their only hope at that time. "Trinity" pledged to bring immediate salvation. It did in a way.

"Trinity" played on their fears and stole their sovereignty. Its instrument was a token symbol contracting a final Middle East peace accord for seven years. This ended the threat of any war in the world for over three years. Their lying nature was soon revealed. "Trinity" started using its newly acquired arsenals by dropping nuclear bombs on non complying countries. This tactic was to demonstrate its power scaring the final sovereign's in to submission. Some bombs were detonated in the air over these countries. These types of explosions cause an Electro Magnetic Pulse (EMP) burst which results in destroying any exposed electronically driven devices from ever operating again. It has something to do with the electrons going permanently "berserk" in the copper components. That means anything electrical

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touched by the EMP blast was “fried hard.” “Trinity” used just one on us. My fallen United States lives in the 1800s now.

I guess Dave wears his useless watch to check time in a difference sense. It reminds him of a better time. I stare at Dave and silently pray, “God please pity us both.” My heart sinks in my throat, but I know this time there is coming a better time.

I remove my small Bible from the supply chamber. I return to the table and open it to “Mathew.” Dave scoots close so he can read as I whisper, “Chapter seven.” I begin with, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find it...” These are the words I need for today. I say a prayer asking for divine guidance and protection for us this day. I order Dave to stay inside today and be quiet. He asks what I’m going to do. I tell him, “I’m going on a ‘seek and you will find’ mission.” Dave asks me, “When will you be back?” I grab the spare Bible and close the secret supply chamber. I subtly remove the chair securing my back door, then slowly open it. “Soon Dave, it should be by dark.” I exit the house cautiously running to my back fence. I climb over, then leap into the ally. I have no idea of where I’m going. I just feel my spirit tugging at me to just get going. I let my shoes choose the direction, and I let God reveal our mission.

My head pans back and forth. I walk close to the fences lining the ally giving me some concealment. I am not as scared as I have been. It’s like someone is walking with me as I experience a peace I cannot explain. I reach the end of the ally and peer past the last fence rampart. I peek left, then right to find both coast are clear. I pull back, and then lean back on the fence to meditate. I think, “Which way Lord?” I wait and listen for a sign. I wait, and wait, but nothing happens. I am kind of angry being left so wide open without any way to defend my position. I whisper, “God, I need some help here. I’m risking everything. Please show me where to go and what to do.” Still nothing happens. Desperate, I decide to keep walking straight down to the next ally, and the next, until I get some kind of sign. I stop at the end of the third alley and peer checking for LD. Quickly and quietly I robotically walk across the street. About 20 feet into the ally I stop and lean my back on the

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fence behind me. I listen to see if anyone noticed me crossing. I tremble slightly as I regain my composure.

The stress of this constant maneuvering is beginning to wear me down mentally. Time stands still as I notice a Blue Jay land on the adjacent fence. He sings this most wonderful soothing bird song. I am harmonically hypnotized in the moment. I forget this world and feel Heaven all over. He ends his song and freezes all his movement. I feel he senses something is coming. He jumps up and abruptly flies off. I decide maybe he's the sign, so I follow him.

Strangely, his flight path follows the direction of the alleyway system. It lands on the last fence of this ally and begins his beautiful beckoning song again. It seems inexplicably quiet today as I methodically approach his welcoming song. All of a sudden I see an LD appear at the end of this ally. I know he's one; my spirit tastes its evil. I become a wood slat on this fence behind me hoping to become invisible. I silently pray, "Please Lord, protect me." The LD seems to be hypnotized by the bird's song. He strolls toward him, and then stops and stares into his eyes. Yet, this brave bird continues singing unafraid. The tempo of my heart races knowing he's got to sense me. Only 20 feet of empty space separates me from certain doom. The bird leaps and flies to a tree branch at the beginning of the next ally. The LD's trance is immediately broken and his head turns directly towards me. I stare into his dark eyes seeing only his empty tortured soul. I'm so focused I can read his "Trinity" brand in his forehead. The terror overpowers me as I stand frozen. He drips with a demonic presence. The Blue Jay again starts his song. My soul says, "Pray Joey," as it reasons it's impossible that he does not see me.

Quietly, I mumble as my spirit cries, "Help me Lord. Send your Angel of protection." I close my eyes tightly and wait to be slaughtered. The next thing I hear is a faint voice say, "Job, Joey-Job." I crack my left eye open a slither while my eye lid fights to remain shut. He's gone? The Demon filled LD is gone! I shake the wooden slats supporting my exhausted body as I slide down to the ground whispering "It's a miracle." My whole body begins

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screaming, "Thank you
Jesus"!

I sit for several minutes silently praising my redeemer. I pry my pocket Bible out of my back pocket and fumble open to the pages in "Job." My thumb flips through the chapter pages stopping at number 23. I feel in my spirit I should start reading here. I begin at verse 8. "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold. My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside." I say to myself, "My God." God gives me exactly what I need when I need it most. I know His invisible presence guides me towards His will.

Amazingly, the Blue Bird has not moved from his tree branch. It's still singing his harmonious beckoning song. I push along with purpose trusting I have God's guidance and protection. I close in on this mysterious bird as he begins to stare at me. He continues his soothing message as I whisper to him "I'm naming you Flicker, because you flicker a little flame of hope in this miserable world." He quirkily tilts his little head seemingly to say "Yes" in agreement to his new name. Flicker suddenly leaps and takes to flight once more. I follow him in and out of alley ways, and even across intersections unafraid. My spirit tells me I am suppose to follow him wherever he might go. I make it to the street corner and turn towards the direction of Flicker's whistling song. Immediately, I see a herd of LD ushering what must be an Irreverent straight towards me. I watch Flicker abandon his post and alarmingly fly off. I chant silently, "I have God's protection" while proceeding robotically and unemotionally up the side of the street and into the jaws of this living hell.

The closer they come the more my stomach churns. My spirit rebukes their vile presence. I begin to see the poor soul in their clutches. He screams in agony as they torture him. I sense two LD are Demon possessed. These two restrain and easily drag along their rather large captive. I can see from the distance that their

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eyes are red bottomless pits of darkness. I continue towards the herd acting like I am an LD. My spirit seems hid from their detection, but I try and maneuver as far away from them as possible without acting suspicious. I swerve to the right of the approaching mob and up to the remnant of the sidewalk. I fill my face with emptiness and walk with a purpose. My acting seems to be working and my fake forehead brand seems to have tricked them. They pay no attention to me, seeming more interested in torturing the poor soul in their merciless parade. I continue with my statuette solitary procession going in the opposite way.

I see out of the corner of my eye several LD sprinkling broken glass in front, while the confined Irreverent is forced to walk barefoot every step of the way over it. I hear the glass crush and grind into his bones. The possessed laugh every time the Irreverent screams. The other LD march just behind; and are equally sided to the left and right. They fittingly look like pallbearers. My compassion battles inside me. I desperately want to help the battered man, but my spirit warns me to keep going. I pray God grant us courage and him mercy, as I march right past him. His benevolent spirit briefly commingles with mine. He shouts toward my direction, "Save my family!" The LD following him punches him into unconsciousness. One LD thinks the message was for him as he smirks, "'Trinity' is their only salvation." I hear the top of this big man's feet dragging away the broken glass while blood squirts out his gruesome trail. The shoes of the LD following him crunch up and down while slurping through the red sparkling goop. I now know today's mission. Loud moaning turns the corner suggesting his revival. His crying moves away as today fades back into its eerie silence.

I weep inside my spirit, and then I put aside my compassion. I know I need to concentrate on what the big man asked. I pray, "Show me the way Lord." Magically, my little Flicker appears. His song leads me along several more alleyways to and abandon auto garage. My little friend sits atop a dusty fuel pump covered in webs. He stares and sings in my direction. I approach him while thinking how this would be an excellent place to hide. There's no

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use for gas stations any more. The EMP blast ruined the unprotected electrical pumping system. And, there's no way to deliver gas to this station anyways. I ask him, "Is there someone here?" He stops his song and jerks his head pointing it toward the stations entrance way.

I cautiously tread through piles of aged leaves blocking the doorway. I lean my head in peeking at the empty shelves and wrappers of debris. I see no signs of life. I turn back to view my little friend for reassurance, but my little Flicker has flown off again. For some reason my eyes notice something I did not before. I see slightly dust covered footprints surround by a carpet of dust. They lead away from the garage bays. I figure the trail to be fairly fresh by the thin film of dust filling the shoe prints. I gingerly step inside to investigate and immediately force up a small wafting dust cloud. I swipe the choking mist out of my view while noticing a dim crying sound appear. It grows louder as I move toward the far side of the mechanic's bay. As I step down into the leaves filling the chamber, I notice a pressed path leading back to a stack of boxes. I try moving them as the crying suddenly stops. They will not budge. I carefully direct my voice towards the stack saying, "I'm here to help you. I'm not EVIL; I'm Irreverent."

The stack of boxes begins to magically disappear away from me. They are attached somehow to the face of this hidden door that move as the door swings open-inward. A majestic halo begins to bend around a dark silhouette, as two smaller halos form on each of its sides. I proclaim to the silhouettes, "I'm here to help you." The entity grabs my sleeve and pulls me quickly inside.

My eyes adjust to the light filling this cave as my ear's fill with, "Who are you, and what do you want?" I sense the fear in her voice while observing her draw the two tattered Angels close. This beautiful dirty woman commands, "We will not take the brand no matter what you do to us!" My spirit forces me to stand motionless at attention in reverence to her amazing courage. My soul romantically utters a firm soft, "God bless you." A deathly embrace follows as her joyfully squeezing forces the air out of me. She whispers in my ear "You're really here to help!" I reply, "Yes, I

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am.” She responds, “You used the word God.” She abruptly reseals the entrance door now that she feels completely safe.

I look around as she moves back. She hurries to remove the clutter hiding her dining table with one arm, as the other waves towards me to come and sit. Her face turns back to sadness with worry. I stare around this one large room resembling a sort of home. I shift my way over and around the clutter, and then sit as she commanded. She snuffles out, “My husband went to look for food two days ago. I don’t know what happened to him?” I sit unresponsive thinking I don’t dare inquire about him. I realize now he may have been the man being dragged away. I don’t think revealing this news would help either of us in any way.

“My name is Joey. Believe it or not, a little bird told me where to find you.” Her hands begin fumbling with their fingernails, as a slight smile makes a disbelieving “Uhnt uhnt” sound. “I’m Katie. This is Jordan, my big boy-who’s five, and my darling Hanna-three. We moved in here three years ago. This used to be the supply room for my husband’s garage.” She continues to volunteer all aspects of her daily life as a secure feeling comforts the children enough to begin playing.

I ask her how they get their electricity for the lights. Katie explains how her husband installed several wind generators that he hid in the trees behind the garage. This underground store room seems to have been protected from the EMP burst, and where he got the supplies needed for his electrical project. This system utilizes auto generators, batteries, wire, and PVC pipe. He ingeniously cut some fan blades from some PVC pipe he found in the building, and then hooked it all together to make small electrical producing “windmill” generators. Her husband also made artificial light bulbs to light the interior. They’re simply clear plastic two liter soda bottles filled with water to magnify the sunlight. The bottles are angled downward and stick through the tops of the wall on the sunny side of the building. I ask her, “How is the light inside hid from being seen outside; especially at night?” Her husband used the black removable stands that came on the bottom of the bottles and cut them in half. She tells me

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that he hung it just under the exterior part of the protruding bottle. This hides any escaping light from this chamber while hiding the bottle from the line of sight of anyone outside. Light comes in, but it doesn't go out. They even have a table top garden inside that utilizes the pumped in light. This also helps make fresh air at the same time. He seems like my kind of guy.

After several minutes sharing information I ask Katie if she was a Christ follower. She tells me she is not, but she wants to know all about Him. Katie explains, "I've seen the evil in "Trinity," so I know there must be good somewhere. She reminds me, "You can't have one without the other. I always ask my husband to find a Bible on his food missions." I pull the spare I brought and hand it to her. I tell her to open it to "Romans" 10:9. I ask Katie, "Would you like to know how you and your babies can receive the promise of eternal life in Heaven? How about having a personal relationship with Jesus, our creator? Would you like to experience the supernatural protector who promises to provide for all your needs?" Katie answers, "Yes, yes, and yes." I tell Katie to read this passage aloud.

She reads it stating, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." I ask her to repeat the same prayer of repentance I said some time ago. She repeats after me: "Dear Jesus; I do believe you are God. And, I do believe you came to save me. I believe you died and rose again. Please come live in my heart and guide me. I believe with all my heart that all my sin is now forgiven." I give her a hug of congratulations and tell her she is saved.

Katie weeps with the knowledge she now has something wonderful to look forward to. I tell her, "The little Bible is yours to keep." I explain how her children are under God's gift of grace too. I begin showing her prophetic passages of what is still coming on the world, and when Jesus will return to set up His kingdom on this world.

After talking for quite a while, I peel back my watch's Velcro cover and see it is getting to be late in the day. I explain briefly

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about "Project T." She tells me that she and her babies' have one day's food ration left. She also alerts me about another couple that ran from the brand, living nearby. I promise Katie I will return in a day, or two, with food and another Bible for the couple. Katie tells me she will treasure her little Bible always, and she will tell the couple about Jesus and me. "I got to go before it gets dark!" I proclaim. Her face seems to glow with her new found comfort and strength. We hug as I leave Katie with a parting prayer, "God watch over Katie and her family." She quickly opens the door and abruptly shuts it behind me. I rustle leaves up the stack of boxes trying to hide the door by making the surroundings look naturally desolate. I back away while fluffing up the path of leaves leading to the concealed entrance. Finally, I drag a rag behind me wiping the footprints I made out of existence, and sprinkle a handful of crumbled leave to replace the missing dust.

I exit the gas station trying to remember my return path. I immediately notice how dark it's getting and see the sun set. I walk quickly and pray inside, "God help get me home safely." I decide to chance a shorter route than the one I took to get here. I'll need to walk down more streets chancing LD detection, but I should be able to get home before it turns pitch black. I know this is when the Demons come out in force.

I turn a corner four blocks away and see a gruesome sight. He looks like the large man the LD drug off. I can't tell exactly, because of all the blood covering most of his body. He is tied to a telephone poll. I guess they left him for dead, and as a sign to scare other Irreverent brothers to convert. I press the side of his neck with my fingers and feel he has a slight pulse. It's faint, but it's steady. I whisper into his ear, "I am here to save you." I untie the restraining prison of ropes freeing him. He falls into my hands as I realize his weight. I pray, "Jesus, give me the strength." Somehow, I find the strength. It takes every ounce of my energy just to lean him on my back. I waddle away carrying him "piggyback," struggling to cart this prisoner of war away. I rush to get as far away as possible before the Demons' realize my victory.

After two alleyways I fall down face first dazed and confused,

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and in complete and utter exhaustion. Suddenly, I realize I am disoriented to which way home is. His warm blood drizzle down my face as he lay dead still on my back. I hear words begin to babble out of his torn lips. He quietly and slowly repeats, "Save my family, please save my family." I whisper back, "They are safe and saved." I force myself up and find some supernatural power to continue. It seems my words have comforted this large man enough to allow him to drift back into unconsciousness. Just as he does, I hear Flicker. I cannot see him, but I know his wonderful joyous beckoning song. I follow the melody ahead as it continuously leads us to another location.

I make it to my backyard fence, and then fall down in utter exhaustion. I wake sometime later peering into the dark and realize I passed out. The cold of the night grips and slaps me, chilling the perspiration soaking me. I turn my head and see the large man is lying next to me with a small pillar of steam percolating out his swollen mouth. This tells me, at least he is alive. I force myself up and yank myself over the top of the fence. I fall into my backyard loud enough to alert Dave with my thump, and the sound of all the air rushing out my lungs. I see the back door open slightly and hear Dave ask, "Joey?" I gasp back to him, "Yeah buddy; come give me a hand." Dave swings the door open and quickly "low steps" across the dark backyard to help me.

"I thought they got you. I'm so glad to see you Joey." Dave helps me by pulling me upwards off the ground. I lean over to brace my tired legs by clasping them with my exhausted arms'. "Dave, I've brought you a special gift. I need a hand getting it over the fence though." A puzzled expression fills his face as he confusingly replies, "A gift?" I chuckle a sigh of relief and say, "It's good to be home."

Both of us jump over the fence as quietly as possible. Dave looks unbelievably at the bloody mess of a human laying here. Dave whispers, "Is he alive?" I feel his neck again to check his pulse as he begins to become conscious. I whisper to him, "We need your help to get over this fence." Dave grabs his other side as we heave up the large man. I lean into him and tell Dave, "Leap

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over the fence and I will push him up from this side.” I think about the insurmountable six foot height of my fence as I bend down under the large guy’s propped body. I pray for the super strength I’ll need while I leverage my shoulder under his rear, and push up. I strain lifting him as I tell the large guy, “Try and grab the fence and pull with everything you have left in you.”

I see him agonizingly strain to grab the top of the fence and pull himself over. Dave grabs his arms from his side of the fence, pulling him as hard as he can. The large guy’s bloody body greases the top of the fence aiding us in sliding him up, and over. Dave has problems maintaining his grip, because of the gummy mess, as I feel the immense weight of the guy increase. “Once more,” I tell both of them. One last push up, and then he flops over the rest of the way onto the backyard. He thumps on the hard ground as all the air rush out of him. I know what he must be feeling. I quickly leap over and grab his arm. Dave and I begin dragging him in the house as fast and as quietly as possible. Dave shuts the door behind us as I finish dragging him over to the kitchen wall.

“Dave; get the bucket from under the sink, and then fill it with water.” I scramble to get my sewing kit located in the bottom of my hutch. “Here’s the water,” Dave whispers. I tell Dave, “Now, go get several glow sticks and light them.” While Dave retrieves the sticks, I go get some worn towels and a warm blanket. I return to the glowing kitchen floor and begin dunking a towel into the clean water. I dab off the blood still slowly oozing out his many wounds. Immediately, his scabs stick to the towel. The pain from peeling the scabs off his body helps revive him. “Dave, help me drag his head onto my lap.” I whisper in the big guy’s ear, “You’re with friends and we’re taking care of you.” He shakes with fear, and possibly due to lack of blood, but it subsides in my embrace.

Tears start to come out his eyes as he regains his faculties. “My babies, my poor babies!” he cries out. He then flops around in his attempt to try and get up. “I got to get them before those Demons do.” I secretly whisper in his ear, “Do you have a wife named Katie, a son Jordan, and a daughter Hanna?” Every part of his body jumps to life. He grabs and tugs my sleeve while

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exclaiming, "You've seen them!" "Yes, and they're just find. Lay back down and I'll tell you all about my meeting with them." All the excitement causes him to pass out once again. But, he does it with a slight smile this time. I tell Dave to take over blotting the blood. "It's a good thing he passed out. I need to stitch close a lot of lacerations." We spend a good two hours removing glass from his wounds and sewing closed numerous cuts over his entire body. I think, "He will need antiseptic and antibiotic medicine if he's going to make it." We decide to leave him in place and cover him. I roll up a spare towel and slide it under his swollen head using it as a pillow. I dump the blood filled bucket down the sink and then store it. Dave grabs the glow sticks from this room as we leave the battered man to rest.

We move to the opposing front room and sit up against the wall. Dave quietly asks, "What happen to him? Do you know him or something?" I reply, "I stole him from the hands of 'Trinity.' You won't believe the miraculous day I had." I fill Dave in on all today's details as I begin to feel myself fighting to stay awake. After, I tell Dave to quietly fetch me a blanket and pillow from upstairs. He leaves and returns with the requested bedding supplies. I tell Dave, "take my bed for tonight. I'm going to stay here just in case Katie's husband wakes up. I'm sure he'll want to know immediately about his family." Dave tells me, "Goodnight," and then follows my instructions. I cover myself over as my stomach begins to ache. I think to myself, "Here are four more mouths to feed, but I'll trust you God." I begin to dose off with the comfort of knowing He listens to my prayers.

Chapter 4: The Strength of David

“Ohhh, helllp me!” comes crying out from my kitchen. I stretch consciousness into my jumbled mind as I yawn amidst the continuous moans waking me. I stagger to my feet snatching the wall for support as I whisper in the direction of the kitchen, “I’ll be there in a second.” I straddle the wall for a few paces as I wake up. Rays of sunshine lay a railroad track directly to the jostling lump on the kitchen floorboards. I ask myself along the way, “Is it morning already?” I find it is taking me longer than I thought it would, so I whisper again, “I’m coming.” I watch the blanket covering his face slowly slide off as his inflated cheeks flap a quiet, “Katie.” I squat down over him being careful not to press his swollen injures. I put my mouth to his ear as I speak, “It’s alright friend; everything will be okay.” I notice his blood filled eyes peeking through slithers of his bulging black flesh. I cannot help feeling some of the pain he is experiencing. “Katie, my babies” he strains out in agony. I tell him, “They’re fine. Don’t worry, and don’t try and talk. You need to be still and rest.” I proceed explaining all about my chance meeting with Katie. He defies his

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body's will to rest as he hinges on my every word. "I'm going to bring your family some supplies tomorrow. I'll tell them that you will be home soon. I'll look after your family till then." I inform him how Katie accepted God's gift of eternal salvation. I assure him both Jesus and I were watching over his newly saved family. He reaches up as if to hug me, but he has no strength. The only power left in him is the, "Thank you" he repeats until his mind drifts once more away.

I stand in the morning light in more ways than one. The yellow of the streaming beams suggest it is midmorning. My watch divulges my assumption to be correct. I see its 9:33 am. I splash some cold water on my face at the kitchen sink as Dave greets me with a shallow, "How was your night?" Through my towel I muffle, "Morning buddy." Dave inquires about the condition of Katie's husband. I inform him, "He'll need medicine and lots of prayer to get better." We both decide to lay our hands on the three of us and pray for healing, guidance, and continued supernatural protection; all while the big guy sleeps.

I tell Dave he needs to stay here while I go to "T" for food and medicine. "Sit near Katie's husband, and keep him quiet. Keep him warm and attend to his needs. I'll be back soon." Dave replies he's going up stairs to grab another blanket and his Bible. I grab the spare Bible from the secret supply chamber just in case God reveals another soul searching. I remove the back door barricade as Dave returns. I pan the backyard while Dave pats my back. I reply, "You too buddy," as I exit. Dave quietly draws close and seals the door, as I bend, and then jog quickly to the backyard fence.

I listen quietly for any signs of life before jumping over the fence. My heighten senses give me the okay. I proceed up and over as subtly as possible. I land in a front leaning prone position while detecting for signs of LD. My peripheral vision notices the bloody message we left on this side of the fence last night. I grab some dirt and rub the red trails. My mind makes a mental note to clean it later today. I stand and march off towards my mission for today. I am no longer terrified walking alone, because I travel with

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the confidence of Christ.

A passage from the Bible fuels my conscience and strengthens me. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not yet seen." The book of "Hebrews" is my morning breakfast, as my mind eats some of its stored passages.

This is something I've always had problems with—"faith." Science does not accept this concept and ridicules those who do. I don't know why it is so important to God we have faith, but I know it's impossible to please Him without it. It goes against my logical nature, but I also believe in something else that can't be proven scientifically—"love." That is the very essences of God!

A scream off in the distance alerts me of possible LD activity. Pressing forward, I rededicate my focus to audible and visual observation. More agonizing pain echoes from different distant clusters. It seems screams are coming from all around. I realize something is happening beyond the normal today. Commotion is raining down everywhere. "Yeah," I confirm to myself, there's never been this much LD activity before. I stay low and move fast towards "Project T."

My little Flicker appears out of this pandemonium. His flame of hope lifts my spirit as he lands at the entrance of the far alleyway. I see him standing statuette on top a chain link fence. My mind asks him, "What, no pretty song for me today?" I maneuver towards my blue buddy at regular intervals of observing, ducking, and then covering. A strange tingle tickles the skin of my neck warning me somehow that something is wrong. I decide to take heed to its advice and obscure my existence. It proves to be a good decision.

One LD appears between the frameworks of fences lining the alleyway. She comes within reach of Flicker's lifeless posture. She stops and stares at him. Her devoid emotional state seems to war with that part of her soul feeling compassion and beauty. Her face is painted with puzzlement while she peers at his petrified pose. Tenderly, her hand draws to his warm flame of hope. My spirit sorrowfully whispers, "Her soul awaits the fatal flames of Hell." Sadness fills that void in her soul as she tries gently touching him.

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Flicker suddenly pricks a warning of the damnation and pain awaiting her. Anger of this revelation provokes her to swipe at him, but my Flicker flies off faster than her fury can retaliate. She retreats into her previous path of travel taking along the blood drop in her hand. I reflect, "Thanks little friend for the 'heads up' warning."

The next alley is further away than it was just moments ago. I move to a secure point at the end of this alley and assume a prone position. My eyes locate her on the adjacent street as she unites with the LD precession marching away. My head slowly slides side to side pitying this dark army.

I use this diversion to crossover to the other side.

Remote shrieks far off follow me as I forage for cover. Perfect protection appears past a pile of debris. I remain on high alert to the surrounding screams, and possibility of LD, as I bend behind the pile. "Move out!" commands my mind; fighting my body's desire to stay safely here and rest. "There's no time to waste!" My mind keeps pushing me along from secure position to position. I finally realize there is one more block till I reach the hidden protection of "Project T." I continue to methodically maneuver through the immediate mass of madness all around me.

A spiritual force of evil looms thick in this day's air. I take every precaution in approaching "T". My mind tells me this is not a good idea while circling the entrance way. My conscience reminds me of those deeply depending on my success. I race upright to the stone sacrificing its stealthy secret. "Time is of the essence" is the rationale favoring the odds of chance. I hastily perform the entrance ritual that slides the stone aside, and then leap into its light below. Quickly, I turn and grab the stone and slide it back in place. Sitting lifeless, I listen on the steps just under it. A faint frantic conversation fills the foyer as I fear the worse. The muffled words that I detect echoing are not from the outside, but rather from deep below. A "whew" of relief is forced out of my subconscious. This strikes me as very unusual; since no one should be here till tomorrow. Quickly, I go repent the secret entrance code to open the hidden chamber below. I realize during

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this ritual the revealing flaw to this fortress; the pastor did not make the lower chamber soundproof. The stone in the floor pops up. I slide open the chamber as five sets of dismal eyes stare quietly at me. Waves of hurrying hands yell at me to descend now. I scamper five steps down, then reach and slide this entrance stone shut. I warn my brothers' about the sound traveling up and suggest we move further down in the chamber. We retreat to the chapel's seclusion.

After we're all securely inside the chapel, I ask, "Why are you all here?" Each brother tries explaining their reason as they talk loudly over one another. It seems all out war has been declared on finding every Irreverent. My fellow brother Scotty gives an account of how his secret partner is captured by the LD. "I heard Joshua screaming as he was running towards my house. They grabbed Josh right before he tipped them off to where I live. I guess his fear of being caught got the best of him." Scotty gives every terrifying detail as every brother intensely listens. Scotty cries in his hands suppressing his words: "The poor guy. I wanted to help Josh, but there was too many LD beating him. They promised he would take the brand or they'd cook him alive." Every Irreverent brother here tells a similar story. Every accounting is about seeing someone they know being tore from their hiding place, or captured off the street. Brother Ken gives us the key reason for all the LD commotion.

Kenny has a friend who's too scared to risk becoming a member of "T". But, Ken does bring this elderly gentleman food and supplies. It seems this old man over heard a possessed posse of LD shouting orders to each other outside his hiding place. Ken tells us the old man heard, "We've got to find our example. He's around here somewhere." Ken thinks they'll tear the town down if they don't find him. I know now the reason for all the LD activity. They're looking for Katie's husband, and those who helped him escape. Fear has taken us over. There's never been a time our faith's been tested so much. Never before did we need so much to don the protective "Armor of God."

Fear is the Devil's weapon. It is the destroyer of faith. My

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brothers' are shaken by what has happened. They worry about what they now face in light of this dark war. Not one here is showing concern for anything but themselves. Two brothers want to find the guy the LD are looking for and give him back to "Trinity's" henchmen. Two other brothers want to take as much supplies as they can carry and leave town. I shake my head wondering how those brothers not currently here will decide to divide our fate.

"I am the reason," I tell my brothers. "The LD are looking for the man I stole from them last night." I continue to explain what happened. I tell them how they tortured him, and how they left him as an example to scare us in to converting to their theology. I explain how the LD left him for dead, but I found him and he was still alive. "I will take responsibility for him" I exclaim! "I will take the chance caring for him and his family until he's well enough to do it himself. I am sorry for the pain this causes all of you. God has revealed His purpose for my life. It is to save everyone He brings to me. 'As for me and my house, we WILL serve the Lord!'" My expression convicts the room to silence as each of us search our own soul to what is right. And, to what God would have each one of us do.

I go and bow before the chapel altar and pray. With open arms I prostrate and speak loudly to my God. "Jesus, please give me the 'shield of faith' to protect me against the evil that will attack me. Make my 'breastplate of righteousness' impenetrable to fear, torture, and doubt. Give me the 'helmet of salvation,' and the wisdom to discern and escape the Devil's traps. Most of all dear Lord, give me the strength of 'David' to conquer giants that would come between us. Amen." I feel all alone at this moment and sad for what we have become.

The warmth of the multitude covers me, as my brothers hands begin laying upon my back and shoulders. They begin quietly praying over me. Some pray for forgiveness and some for strength to go through what we face. I know in my heart these trials will perfect our faith. And, I know if our God is for us, then who can stand against us. These are the times for men of courage. These

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are the times to trust in God. We pray in unity, pouring out our hearts towards Heaven. I don't feel so alone anymore.

Some of the men are too afraid to leave the protection found here. Three of the five decide they are going to stay at least till after Sunday meeting. Two say they won't ever go back to their homes. My agenda is to grab the medicine and needed extra supplies and get moving. I realize I still have a lot to do. I stuff it all in an old military rucksack the founder graciously left in the supply room. I find a flashlight in the bag and turn it on. I'm amazed it works. I bid my comrades' farewell and warn them to keep their heads low and voices down.

Scotty follows me up to the main entrance while reassuring me that I have a copilot flying with me; and his name is Jesus. I give him a "man hug" and tell Scotty, "Thanks buddy." I slide the stone underbelly very slowly and quietly away. I lift my head half way out and turn it to observe. I return my face slightly towards Scott and tell him, "Adios, I'm out of here." I tap a "goodbye" pat on his shoulder as he replies, "God go with you Joey." I "low dash" to the tree line as I hear the stone slide and click back in place. I pray for the power of invisibility that will keep me safely hid from the Demons until I get back home.

I make it behind the first old Oak in this patch of forest. I catch my breath and observe for LD activity. It is amazingly quiet. I expected the air to be filled with screams. This quiet is the quietness you hear after a sizable snow. This quietness is yelling, "Something is just not right!" Every part of me prays for divine intervention as I maneuver the alley searching for protection. Pieces of torn clothing mark the asphalt trail home.

The tattered cloth shreds seem more like a warning with a purpose than windblown random remains. Some are too high off the ground to find their way there by chance. "No," I deduct, these bloody swatches are particularly placed for a reason. I don't yet understand why, but I know they are bloody little flags demanding attention. I keep low and keep moving.

"Why did they do that?" I think. I occupy my mind with all the possible reason. "Is it to flush out Irreverent through fear? Maybe

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they are setting a trap of some kind?" I approach the street at the end of this alley and see why. There are three mostly naked chained bodies fixed to telephone poles on the adjacent street. Each is decorated with dozens of locks. Each one of these wretched souls wiggles in pain and groans in agony. Each wears a barbed wire crown. And, each looks like they were whipped with the barbwire before it became their crown. Each body is blackened by a brutal beating. Each of their hands is nailed to their pole. Each body is covered in blood. Each has a sign nailed above them. Each of these exhausted martyrs' moan for help, or prays for death. "This is more than a warning" my heart screams! This is past even mockery. These human hostages are a dare. These chains and locks suggest to anyone planning a rescue, "This is a choice you will lose!"

I know this is a trap, but I sense there is something more. I don't dare go any closer than I am. My spirit agonizes in the swell of compassion flowing over me. I command myself, "I must not be over taken with compassion!" I realize there's nothing I can do right now, except get these supplies home. I hurry to get home as those savage images burn in my heart and mind.

I precariously make it to the backyard fence as my mind and heart continue to battle each other. I see there are no signs the LD have been this way-yet. I toss my rucksack over the fence, and then myself. The dimming orange yellowish light says it's almost evening. My sturdy long shadow precedes the dancing of my sack as I race to my back door. It makes it to the house first, and then stands up at attention on my back porch. A second later I muffle through the slither opening in the door jam, "Dave, open up. It's Joey." I hear soft footsteps creek their way towards me. The restraining chair carefully scratches the wooden floor as it's carefully dragged away. The removing of the security chain seems to be taking forever. Finally, Dave finishes the rigorous process as I escape the tension outside. I rub my hands all over my face as I sit on the floor next to the door. I tell him, "Give me a few seconds."

I take a moment to reflect and absorb the security of home. I

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decide to take care of immediate business before telling Dave about everything that's happen.

Dave opens the rucksack knowing there are rations inside. He lifts out the medical kit I prepared from the supplies at "T," and then sets it next to Katie's husband. Dave returns to the sack and grabs himself a MRE. I sit watching him rip it open. He pulls back the foil, revealing the smell of meatloaf, which he hurriedly chews like a candy bar. I scoot over to the covered sleeping lump on the floor. "How's he been?" I whisper. Dave chews out, "Oh, his name is Moses. He woke up a couple times. Once was long enough to tell me his name. He kept saying, 'Thank you' over and over." I methodically pull the cover down from his face, hoping the blanket hasn't stuck to Moses wounds. "Hi sleepyhead, I brought you some antiseptic and fresh bandages." His swollen eye lids are froze in place leaving just a slight gap. The whites of his eyes roll down as two blue orbs follow. "I need to apply some antibiotic cream on your wounds." He's conscience enough to realize this is going to hurt. The expected pain causes Moses to stretch his puffed blacken cheeks into further agony. I dab clean water on his wounds, and then apply the soothing ointment which immediately softens the drawn stitches. His eyes and face are full of questions that demand urgent answers. I continue dressing his sores and tell him, "Relax buddy, everything will be fine."

"Now, I want you to stay still while I tell you about Katie-okay? First, your family is worried about you. But, they are just fine." Moses pleasure of this news defeats his pain as he forms a small smile of gratitude. "I'm going to see her first thing tomorrow morning, and bring them food and supplies. I'll tell her you are just fine, but you can't walk just yet." I try thinking of all the things he might want to say to her if he could. "I'll tell her you love and miss her, then I'll give her a big kiss and a hug. Well, maybe not the big kissing part." Moses slowly grabs my shirt sleeve as his eyes dance with tears of laughter. In this moment, I know I've made a lifelong friend.

"Hey big guy, I want you to take a couple pills for me. Do you think you can?" I wonder if I can force them past his swollen lips,

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and shove them far enough in for him to swallow? I ask, “Dave, get me a cup of water,” as I open the bag of penicillin. I try making Moses laugh a little more, hoping it will pry open his scabbed lips. “Here comes the chew-chew train.” I make the cup of water bump and bounce up and down as it dances towards his mouth. Moses strains to lift his head as I quickly slide my free hand under it assisting him up slightly. I pour a little water, attempting to lubricate his lips, mouth, and parched throat. I slide the pills in his mouth as I watch a pink stream drizzle a trail down both cheeks. Moses struggles to swallow as I watch his throat stretch. My compassion awakes inside me to see this mountain of a man reduced to his current pathetic condition. My dark compassion overtakes my desire to destroy the evil that could hurt such a big babe. I silently weep and war as I address his wounds.

“Moses, I want to tell you what else happen when I visited Katie.” I explain to him about the salvation message and God’s promise of eternal life. I even tell him about my wonderful experience in Heaven. “All these things, Moses, you can have too. It is called grace, and it is a gift from God. You just have to want it, and you just have to ask Jesus to come in to your heart. Tell Him you need Him, and you too will have the eternal promise and power that comes with it.

Katie did.” He again pulls my sleeve and tries nodding his head, “Yes.” I tell him, “That’s all you needed to do big guy” I welcome him in the brotherhood of the eternal saints. A peace, such a sweet peace, brings joy to his face, as he retreats in the comfort of anew soothing sleep.

“Dave, come in to the front room. I need to tell you some things.” As we walk, I think of how I am going to explain what happened today. I don’t know how to break it gently, so I give him all the details. He takes the news badly. He starts uncontrollably shaking, and then crying so violently it causes him to collapse under the weight of his fear. His weaken body leans onto the wall behind, and then slides down it. Dave becomes frantic after I explain what I must do. “I got to go and see how I can help those crucified Irreverent.” Dave yells, “No, no, no you can’t! We’ve got

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to take care of us. What happens to Moses and me when you're caught?" I whisper, "Keep it down Dave. Do you want the LD here too? This is something I got to do. I've just got to try." Something inside me won't allow me to enjoy safety while they hang there in hopeless misery. Dave searches inside himself and knows this is right. I prepare a few things to bring with me as Dave finds my "bolt cutters" in the garage. "I got to go. Every second lost is one more eternal second for them. Pray for me buddy. Please pray for me." I sling the newly supplied rucksack over my shoulder and decide to exit through the front door. Dave sticks the "bolt cutters" in the sacks webbing as I peer out the door. "Okay buddy, I'm out of here." He gently shuts the door as his words slowly disappear "I'll be praying for you Joey."

I am praying the extreme darkness of this night will be my friend, and hoping it will hide me from the evil waiting ahead. My eyes adjust to the unusual eerie blackness as my soul continually prays for supernatural protection. My fear grows every step closer I get to the martyrs. If not for the shaking of my legs I believe my shoes would freeze to the pavement. Every part of me says to turn back. Yet, I move forward. Every thought reminds me how foolish this venture is. Yet, I go on. There is some substance amidst my prayers torturing my logic. The faint whisper inside me grows louder and louder with every step I take. I don't know what it is saying, but it comforts me. It feels like evil has swallowed all the light in the world-this night.

Howling and moaning swirls around me, echoing a warning. The evil invites me to attend this feast of the martyrs. An awful vision appears to me. It's me hanging alongside the martyred. I rebuke it! Yet, I go on. This night's air grows thick with a foul stench.

I fight my way to the end of this lengthy street. I've never been this scared. I prepare to turn left onto the street of the martyr as that whisper grows louder inside me. I step around the corner and see; not just three, but now a dozen hanging bodies filing along each side of the street. Stale blood painted on the pavement mingles with the fresh blood that drips, and drifts upon

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the repulsive night air. I think this must be the perfume of evil. I know life still lingers here. The living produces the sound of plopping that drips down to their living pools of blood. I go on.

I see and hear no evil as I walk down this street, but I feel its presence. I reach back and remove my flashlight from my sack. I stop at the first martyr and feel her old cold dead body with my free hand. I move to the next and see the frozen horror on his young face. His life is also gone. My boots crackle as I step on the next corpse's dried fallen remains. Deep sorrow overtakes me, as I look at her once beautiful face. I find the next body past her is as hard and cold as pond ice. My faith grows weaker every step I take. I am reminded of the courage these souls had each step I take. All of them refused the brand. I draw from them the strength I need to go on.

I count nine empty bodies that suffer no more. I have no more tears left to give these dear brave souls. The weight of my sorrow is breaking my heart in two. Something pushes me on though.

I touch the foot of what looks like a teen age boy whose face has become old in a day. I realize he must be one of the three I saw earlier today, because they all had signs above them. The sign above him reads, "We have your young." The heaviness of the chains and locks must have torn his right arm loose from the nail. His nail pierced hand hangs over his sacrificed hardened puddle of blood below him. One of his fingers is frozen in a peculiar pointing position. He seems to be reminding me of a greater sacrifice paid long ago. I give up hope any innocent I reverence will be alive. Yet, I go on.

My heart feels as hard as these cold corpses. I struggle to the next pole containing a grey motionless body. I steer my light up to the crooked sign just above his head saying, "They will be ours." I bring the light down over his agonizing face. I look for signs in his face of the story it might tell about the horror of today. I jump back in astonishment. I think, "Did his mouth just move?" I stare at the corner of his mouth stretching slightly. I question if this is just a reaction to rigor mortis? "No!" my heart screams. I watch his lips open ever so slightly. I pull my "bolt cutters" quickly from

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my sack as I hear a slight moan from the next pole. I flash my light to see the pale face of a woman gently lifting the heavy weight of her barbwire crowned head. I think, "Two alive, Thank God!" I frantically move in position trying to cut his restraints, but I don't know where to start. Should I cut the heavy chains or the nails in his hands first? I just know I must hurry. I tell him, "I'm here friend," as I think, "Please stay alive." I find a new strength to go on. It comes from the joy of possibly saving some of these poor wretched souls on this miserable dark night.

"You fool! Do you think you can steal them from us?" This sarcastic command is screamed out from the darkness behind me. I don't dare turn around; as my skin turns to stone. I hear evil laughter begin surrounding me. There's a rush of Demons lining up to do battle. I don't know why they just don't instantly destroy me? I feel myself ready to break as I shake in my devastation. "We are legions and legions of warriors." One advances and mightily and violently slams me to the street. Yet, I live. The whisper inside me returns as I drift into unconsciousness. Now I hear its words plainly.

"Will you stand with me Joey?" I feel His holy presence pushing back the evil. "Will you be brave for me?" This gentle firm voice enters my dazed state of mind. I think in this moment how I am nothing. "Will you fight for me my son?" I feel myself dying in the pain of my broken body. My little Flicker lands near my face as I stare at his and think, "How brave a little friend you are to come and stand with me." His head tilts as if to ask me, "Will you?" I swell with a righteous anger that obligates me to try and get up. I think how these martyrs' died so heroically. I struggle to whisper, "Yes, I will stand for you Lord." I push myself through my agonizing ache up on my broken arms. I scream loudly through my pain, "Yes, I will be brave for you my Lord God!" Blood rushes out of my mouth as I spit at the evil encircling me. "Yes, I will fight for you, and even die for you, my Lord and Savior! For, you are my God!"

I watch as I stand now seeing the forces of the night. This invisible world materializes showing the evil monsters

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encompassing me. There are thousands upon thousands of hideous giants waiting to tear me to shreds. I feel God's supernatural presence repair my brokenness as I see the evil tremble. My little Flicker leaps to my shoulder and looks steadily ahead. I scream once more, "Yes Lord, I will stand for you!" Flicker leans his head forward as if he is preparing to charge. He looks more like a ferocious Eagle preparing to swoop mercilessly on its helpless prey than the tiny bird he is. I stretch my arms upward and march forward into the multitude of these damned.

Flicker leaps ahead as I scream, "In the name of Jesus; I rebuke you!" I hear explosions behind me as I feel the warmth of this most extraordinary light approaching. I race towards the evil foe while pleading, "In the blood of Jesus-be gone!" I notice just the mention of His name causes this hoard to buckle in pain. A juggernaut wind passes me, knocking me to the ground. I anxiously lift myself to reenter the attack, but a friendly invisible voice tells me, "Stay down." I lift my face and see wonderful beings appear, but only momentarily. My allies sparkle with each strike of their flaming swords, and then vanish. My furious Flicker flies a protective circle around the two souls still hanging. He shrieks a deafening roar daring these Demons to come nearer. I believe my little friend possesses the power that will send the evil ones straight to Hell. The stampeding legions retreat while screaming into the dark. The holy warriors show no mercy as each evil voice begs before being blown apart. Each dazzling swipe of their superior swordsmanship shows their slashing and shedding skills. The Angels virtually conquer the evil hoard in a minute. I hear the rush of a multitude of wings and see flashes following the foe filling the stormy dark sky. Silence approaches as my Flicker lands on the last unread sign hung on a martyr's pole. I shine my light to its message. It reads: "We wait for you!" I shudder at those words as I realize its meaning. The war for the innocent has just begun.

All the locks and chains miraculously fall down from every martyr. A departing voice announces, "I am well pleased my son." I turn my face towards Heaven and thank my Lord. The miracles

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are not yet done. I look to the lingering lady as her body bends forward. It's as if she's being gently plucked from the nails, slurping through her hands. She falls slowly through time into my swooping arms. It's as if an invisible Angel hands her to me. I cradle her slumped body down to the ground, and then pluck the barbed crown from her head. I toss the crown away as the adjacent gentleman falls off and floats down to the pavement. I stand a moment in awe of what just happened. Realization slaps me with the notion that I have no idea how I'll carry them away. Urgency tugs at me with its warning to "hurry!" I touch both bodies and pray, "Dear Jesus; I need one more miracle."

Warmth returns to both their bodies as the grey of their skin is colored with warm pink. Life grows in their chests and wind blows in their breaths. Lacerations covering them turn to scars, as scabs disappear before my eyes. I again thank my Lord. I grab each of their hands with mine. Wiggling eye lids try to open, and each lip quivers like it is ready to speak. I squeeze my hands a little tighter attempting to wake them. She returns to the living first.

"My name is Joey, and I am your friend." She pushes her weak body up and off the ground with her left arm, and then rubs her forehead with her right. "Where am I?" she asks. "You're with a friend who is going to help you." I hear a moan from alongside me. He shows signs of waking, while she attempts to stand. "Sir, can you hear me?" I ask. "What's happening?" he asks. "My name is Joey, and I am here to help you. I need you to try and get up." He tries to stand, but his legs wobble from weakness. "Amanda, my name is Amanda" she replies; as he tries to stand. I notice her shaking and see much of her clothing is in shreds. I pull a large black trash bag from my sack and hand it to her. "You can wrap this around you to protect you from the chill." But, it is also to cover her naked areas, which I do not say. "I'm Randal Gather, but call me Randy-that'll be fine." The process of salutation returns me from the supernatural surrealism back to the mundane of this world. Suddenly, my conscience reminds me that more evil will come soon. I tell the gang, "We got to go!" Amanda and Randy follow me as I think "Project T" is our closest and safest bet for

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tonight. Flicker leaps off and flies away. We hurry to march out of the “valley of the shadow of death” into the outer darkness.

I whisper to Amanda and Randy, “We need to be quick and quiet while we travel.” We navigate the alley ways keeping quiet while constantly moving. My Flicker begins singing his beautiful song several blocks ahead of us. He warms our spirits and informs me the coast is clear. Flicker stops singing as he “leap frogs” in front of us to his next location. His song begins again a few blocks ahead. He continually beckons us along our journey as we only move during his song. After traveling many blocks, I see the safe haven of “T”. It’s just about a block away.

I tell the couple to keep their profiles hidden in the bushes. “Stay here until I wave you on.” This night has been filled with divine providence, so I forgo the normal entering procedures of “T”. I rush to the stone and slide the secret entrance open. I hurry and jump down three steps, and then wave the “okay” sign and whisper, “Come on guys.” Amanda is the first to arrive. She jumps in and stumbles down the dark stairs, unaware of their existence. I catch her fumbling body and gently nudge her down. Randy leaps in and then feels his way down with one hand and his other rides atop Amanda’s shoulder. I give them the “shhhh” sign as I slide the entrance stone back, locking it in place which the light system on. We stand a second allowing our eyes to adjust to the light, and the security of “T”.

We stop at the end of the steps. “It’s okay to talk now, but keep your voices low. I know you have a lot of questions. I’ll try and answer them shortly. For now, follow me.” I reveal the repentance ritual to my new brother and sister as I unlock the lower chamber’s secret. We move down the steps while I watch their faces fill with amazement. I see every brother whom remained here is asleep inside the chapel. I move past its entrance while whispering, “Let’s be quiet and let them sleep. We’ll go to the supply room.” Both their eyes seem to smile as I open the supply room door. Randy says, “Look at all this stuff. Your place is simply unbelievable.” I grab some blankets and hand them to Randy and Amanda. They quickly wrap them around their

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cold bare bodies. "I'll get you some decent clothes to wear in the morning. I don't want to move the supplies around and make noise." I see an open box of MRE and know they're probably starving. I hand them both a pack to eat as we each search for a spot to sit atop the stacks of supplies. I then explain what happened today. It seems neither remembers very much after they were taken away by the LD.

Amanda tells us how she and her brother were caught. I immediately find out both of them actually lived two towns away. They came here to relocate. It seems all hell was breaking out in her town. "Trinity" stopped food supplies from coming in, because they heard the town had a major underground Christian network. "Trinity" surrounded the town with the intent on starving everyone to death, thus eliminating the Christian problem. Even the LD was forced to starve as penitence for letting this happen. "Trinity" pressured the New California Guard to secure the town's perimeter and shoot anyone trying to leave. "I saw people eating people!" Amanda cries. "It didn't matter if they were even brothers of the Eternal Vestures in the Legion; they were eating anything they could. We Christians' could not do such a thing."

She tells Randy and me how the Christian clan decided to escape town in small groups. Each group would sneak out of town and go in a different direction. This would increase their chances of survival. They thought finding a town with enough food for a small group was more probable than if they all stuck together. Plus, stealing food and supplies once they got to their new location would not be as noticeable. Amanda explains they got out just in time. The LD were tearing the town apart trying to catch all the Christians. They caught a few and chopped their heads off right in front of her home. Then, they got a hot metal poker and burned a mocking imitation of their brand in their dead heads. After, they stuck the heads on poles and staked them on ever major street intersections for all to see. Amanda states, "I guess these members in the Eternal Vestures in the Legion hoped 'Trinity' would stop tormenting them by producing dead

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Christians.” She says, “Trinity” showed no mercy and the affliction didn’t stop.

The Christian clan had one last meeting at their secret gathering site. They all said their final goodbyes. Each was given equal portions of the last of the supplies before attempting to leave town. They were all given enough food to last about two days. Amanda was part of a five person group led by her brother Jimmy. “One of our group members was caught as we were escaping town. This sweet elderly lady was just too slow to keep up. We had to run across an open field to make it to the safety of the surrounding forest. The rest of us made it before the Guard noticed her. She just couldn’t keep up.” Amanda tells how one Guard grabbed the Old lady by her hair and yanked her head so hard forward that he almost tore off her scalp. This old lady never screamed. She just stared at the forest smiling. It was like she was thanking the group for taking her along, and wishing them a safe journey. Amanda cries as she explains how this sweet lady smiled before another LD soldier wacked her head off with a sword. “Jimmy, the two others, and I made it to a town ten miles away just to find the same thing happening there.”

Amanda tells how the animals in the forest constantly tried to attack them along the way. “Someone had to keep a continuous lookout every moment.” She goes on telling, “Not even the littlest of the animals were afraid of us. It’s like they went mad.” Amanda explains that squirrels would drop from the trees and bite them. Sparrows would occasionally swoop down at them. “I don’t know if all the animals have diseases or are starving, but I know none of them were afraid of us.” She also noticed how the forest is dying. “Half the trees had no leaves. and most of the bushes were dry and crumbling. There were a lot of dead animals along our way too.” I told Amanda about the Bible stating God would remove animal’s natural fear of man as a judgment on mankind. He would allow deceases to increase over the entire world. She did not know this.

Jimmy and her two friends eventually found a place just outside of this town. It was some sort of farm. A rubble pile now

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stands where a barn once did. The house was missing its roof, and there were dead LD inside. She tells us "The bodies were covered in sores." They thought the fear of decease was the reason these bodies were just left alone. They came to the conclusion this might be a good place to hide. They wrapped their remains in plastic trash bags and took them away into the forest. She stresses that they buried them real deep. They finally had a place to hide, but now they needed food. It was several days since anyone had eaten. They found a few cans of vegetables inside the house stashed way back in the cupboard. They rationed them, but they only lasted two days. During this time they realized they needed to look for more food to stay alive.

Amanda tells how Jimmy decided he would venture out to look for food. She knew he'd have to go in town to find any. She also knew how risky this would be. Amanda refused to let her big brother go alone. She convinced him he needed to get enough supplies for everyone. He could not possibly carry that much by himself. He reluctantly agreed, because he was worried about the risk they'd be taking. That was the main reason she wanted to go also; she was worried about him more than her own welfare. Before they left on their mission, everyone one came together and prayed for blessing, thanksgiving, and protection. Amanda and Jimmy decided to travel as much as possible under cover of the forest. They would get as close as possible to downtown before coming out of the forest. Their game plan was to look for abandon houses and search for any overlooked food. They believed the darkness would offer their best protection against being detected. They figured if they left at sunset they could make it to town right after dark. They all shared a final meal of canned corn together. Finally, the two left for town as the sun was setting.

The forest brought them by the back of deserted department store at the edge of town. Jimmy knew this place was definitely picked clean, but he hoped someone may have overlooked a can or box of food. Plus, this place was much safer to search than going in town. Jimmy saw a roof access ladder attached to the

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back of the building. He had Amanda wait at the edge of the forest while he checked inside. She explains, "I waited and waited for him to come back. I got worried after about an hour. I knew something bad must have happened for him to be gone so long." Amanda goes on to explain how anxious she became. She decided she had to go see if he needed of help.

"I ran to the back of the store and proceeded cautiously up the ladder. I saw the open roof access lid, thinking this must be how Jimmy got inside." She starts to cry and shake while telling what happened next. "I started down the ladder inside when I heard laughing. It was an evil laugh." Amanda followed the laughter half way down the ladder to find Jimmy being beat. She says one man was chocking Jimmy from behind while another one was burning Jimmy with a hot poker. He was laughing as Jimmy agonized. A third man having the brand grabbed Jimmy's left arm and broke it. "Poor Jimmy" she cries. "They were demanding to know who else was with him. But, he kept answering 'no one'." Amanda grabs her head and bawls her eyes out. I hurry to shut the supply room door hoping she hasn't woken the brethren. "They also kept asking him, 'Where is he?', like they were looking for someone special."

Jimmy and Amanda didn't realize the store was really an LD trap for strangers. It seems the LD notice this place to be a regular stop for visiting Irreverent searching for supplies. The way Amanda describes the place, it sounds like they use it as a sort of headquarters. It also sounds like it is an Irreverent jail and torture chamber. They picked the worse time to enter the trap. This was the night following my rescue of Katie's husband. The LD want revenge, and to put the fear of EVIL in every Irreverent heart. I figure these are the reasons they hung those innocent souls on poles.

Amanda goes on explaining how she was caught. She heard a noise from above as a man came down the ladder she was on. She knew she had no place to run accept right into the hands of the evil enemy. She was punched and whipped without mercy. The worst part was they made Jimmy watch. They told her they could

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stop the pain if she would renounce her god and freely accept the brand of "Trinity." Amanda remembers wishing she would die. The pain was too great for her, but she refused to give up her hope in a loving God. She thinks they must have knocked her unconscious after that. The next thing she remembers is waking with tremendous pain coming especially from her hands. The weight of the heavy chains made her hands and arms feel like they were on fire. She tried to look up and find out why they hurt so much, but lifting her head caused even more pain, and caused lots of blood to pour down into her eyes. In a brief instant, she noticed her Jimmy hanging next to her. She then hung her head down in great sorrow and defeat, crying out, "Why God have you forsaken me?" The last thing she remembers before seeing me is hearing someone speaking the words, "I will never leave you, or forsake you. You are a child of the Most High." Those words filled her with great comfort, and most of all- hope. "These words transcend my spirit with a new strength," Amanda states.

There are only a few hours of sleep left in this night. I tell the two how we need to recharge ourselves. I know today will be filled with many choices for us to make. We need some sleep if we are going to make rational decisions. I proceed to toss them a few more blankets, and then ask Randy if he'd tell me his encounter in the morning. We pray that God will give us His blessing of protection and divine guidance before we drift off in exhaustion. We all feel Him covering us this night in His warm peace.

Chapter 5: Army of Faith

“Come to me, oh, come to me.” Am I a sleep, or is someone commanding me to wake up? “Please go away. I am dead tired.” I fight to open my weary eyes just to find this deep sleep has glued them shut. My tiredness is being devoured by an invigorating sensation of light. “How long have I been asleep? I must have been really tired, because I now feel like a new man. Maybe I’ll sleep just a few more minutes.” In my dream I hear, “Joey, come here.” My spirit commands me to awake as it automatically replies, “Yes Lord, I’m here!”

I open my eyes and feel effortless in this fountain of pure light. I hurt with the overwhelming love sprinkling down over me, around me, and through my very spirit. I stretch out my arms to soak in these loving rays. I worship this outpouring and fall on my face, powerless to its glory. I taste it, I feel it, and I long for it. I feel like I am being tickled to the point of passing out. It’s like laughing uncontrollably to the point of exhaustion. I’m blinded by it, but it so, so good. I am overwhelmed with this unqualified love, realizing it’s meant just for me!

My mouth pours out words I’ve never heard before. “Joey, your spirit sings songs that long for me.” My heart yells,

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“Reverence!” to this all might voice, but my soul screams, “Abba; my dear daddy.” I just want to hug Him and squeeze Him, and be with Him forever. “I am proud of my brave son.” The joy of these words slams me to the floor. I am so weak under the weight of His appreciation. My spirit affirms the greatest words I could ever hear “My God is proud of me!” I weep profusely on this magnificent crystal floor. My tears puddle with rainbows of glistening diamonds.

His voice tenderly commands me, “Rise!” My physical weakness in this moment dissolves away. A refreshing wave pounds and washes over me with the strength of “Sampson.” I stand with conviction and dedicate my attention to Him.

“Yes Lord!” He stretches His arms as a great rumbling endlessly echoes throughout this great chamber. The continuous reverberating sound defines this great hall’s size. “You have stood for me. You have fought for me. You were brave for me.”

I quietly and humbly reply, “It’s my honor Lord.”

“Your great faith pleases me. I require more bravery of you.”

I kneel using my right leg while bowing my head. “Yes Lord,” I solemnly answer. “Great tribulation is about to fall on mankind. The things that will happen will change hearts. The fear of these things will shake the world. The fear of some will cause them to die. A final chance at redemption will be given everyone not under the mark. This is the voice of truth.”

My mind fills with every prophetic passage I’ve ever read or heard. I have spontaneous complete understanding of every verse. My spirit speaks without words, “Lord, I know your words, of these things to come.”

His Holy Spirit speaks to me, “I will give you my power to overcome any evil, and to defeat any demonic attack. You will witness the ‘good news’ you’ve chosen to put in your heart.”

Again, He asks, “Will you stand for me? Will you be brave for me? Will you fight for me? Will you trust in me?” A great benevolence snatches me from behind. I am plunged back while screaming to the bright image in the fading light, “Yes, I will Lord!” I wake up screaming “Yes, I will!”

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I find myself sitting in the echo of, "I will;" as these words slowly drift away.

"Are you all right Joey?," Randy asks.

It's as if I awoke fully conscious replying, "I'm fine brother." My soul desperately desires to divulge my revelation, but my spirit tells me to wait awhile. Calmly, I turn and ask Randy how he's feeling. I peel the Velcro cover back on my watch to see the hands pointing to 7:30. I reseal the cover and notice Amanda remains sound asleep. I think how tired she must be. I bet this is the most sleep she's gotten in some time. Randy's wrapped blanket reminds me of his need for clothes. Quietly, I journey to the storage closet on the other side of the supply room.

This is where the pastor stored dry goods. I find a couple pair of mechanic's suits that might fit both of them. "Here you go Randy. See if this fits you."

I swap places with Randy and tell him, "You can use the closet sink to change and wash up." Some rustling sounds coming from the chapel suggest the brothers are awake.

Randy muffles between the wipes of his towel, "Thanks Joey, they seem to fit fine." I grab a food ration and hand it to Randy as I ask, "Do you remember what led to your capture?" A grim look appears as his head slowly shakes side to side. "Don't worry friend, you can tell me when you're ready."

I grab his shoulder and firmly squeeze saying, "It's okay." I motion with my hand for him to follow me, as I move quietly towards the door. We both leave Amanda to her peaceful sleep, while we go introduce Randy. I softly shut the supply room door behind us.

The Irreverent worship and prayers whisper in unison throughout the hall. Randy and I approach the chapel. "Good morning Scotty." I ask him, "How did you sleep?" Scotty is standing at the chapel entrance trying to look over my shoulder at Randy. I stoop slightly and introduce them to each other. Randy and Scotty shake hands as Scotty wraps his free arm around Randy. He then ushers Randy into the chapel. Scotty quietly explains what the other brethren are doing and welcomes Randy

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to join in. His conversation is interrupted by the clicking and popping sound of the overhead chamber door. Scotty and I cautiously stare at the top of the stairs waiting for the descending legs to reveal our guest's face. In a moment, and at the same time, we both recognize and welcome our dear friend with, "Its Pastor Paul." Scott goes to greet Paul and help him secure the entrance. He informs Paul of our new guess, as Randy and I move into the chapel.

I fold open a couple metal chairs and invite Randy to sit beside me. I try explaining everything that is going on while filling him in the details surrounding "Project T." His eyes are very attentive to my every word, as he absorbs the ambiance and comradeship going on all around us. Randy's face is overwhelmed with emotion as he fights back tears forming in his glazed eyes. I guess all the compassion is more than he's felt in quite a while. I wrap my right arm around his adjacent back and say, "Randy, welcome to our brotherhood and family." These words break the dam holding his tears back. I do the only thing I can and give him a brotherly hug filled with compassion.

Pastor Paul pulls up a chair right after closing the chapel doors. He introduces himself to Randy, while he opens and clangs his metal chair against Randy's chair. He bends his arm and stretches his hand open, suggesting to Randy his hand in friendship. "I hear your name is Randy; welcome. I'm regarded around here as Pastor Paul." Randy slides his shirt sleeve over his eyes, wiping away his tears. Paul sneaks into Randy's lap a rag that Paul carry's as a makeshift hanky. Randy accepts his kindness and replaces his shirt sleeve with Paul's token hanky. Randy gives Paul a slight nod of his head acknowledging his appreciation for Paul's kind gesture. The other brothers gather near the altar and discuss the recent activity. I go to join them, and give Paul and Randy some more time to finish introducing each other.

I move in near the group while overhearing their discussion. It seems everyone's concern is towards the Ld's escalating violence. They want to know what is going to happen to us, and to "T." Kenny suggests we form small groups carrying as much rations as

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we can, and then leave town. Some brothers want to start some sort of “guerilla warfare” against the LD. One brother states, “I’d rather die by taking a few of them out than by being captured and torture by them.” This is quickly reputed as crazy. Most all agree we just don’t have the manpower, skills, and resources to mount any real sustainable attack. The consensus is: we’d be slaughtered or caught and tortured anyways, because we’re not warriors. The group keeps brainstorming ideas to what may be the best solution. Scotty wants to know what we can do to find his partner Joshua; that’s if he’s still alive. Pastor Paul joins us by listening in. I know what I have to do, but this will be my cross to bear.

Paul exclaims, “Brothers, I suggest we pray first. Let us worship our Lord and Savior, and trust in Him alone for our solution! Come brothers; let’s begin with the word of God.” Every brother finds a seat and eagerly waits for what Paul will say. “Please open your Bible’s to ‘Isaiah’ 50:10. ‘Who among you obeys the Lord and fears the voice of His servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God’.” It’s as if Paul’s words are specifically meant for me. But, they seem to be a perfect fit for all of us. Paul says, “Let us worship Jesus.” He leads us in a song we all know by heart; as we sing “How Great Thou Art.”

“Today there is great fear among us. I know what’s going on. I’ve seen the carnage outside. I know the power of this evil to destroy what we hold dear. But, I know something else brothers. I know my God is greater than this evil.” Every ear bends towards every word out of Pastor Paul’s mouth. “We must, I repeat, we must trust and rely on our God. For, ‘He will never leave nor forsake us.’ This is His promise. Let us pray together brothers.” These words of encouragement are the perfect food for our starving hearts’. I can feel His holy presence filling this chamber. Fear is fleeing as faith fills the void. My brothers speak their private prayers’ that sing in harmony. This chapel chanting and sounds of whispers might be what a choir of Angels might sing.

Randy stands and jostles his way past the praying brothers. The pastor notices him winding a path towards him. Randy’s face

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is filled with urgency as he approaches Pastor Paul. "Can I help you Randy?" Paul asks. Randy's eyes are bulging as his mouth quivers out, "Can you tell me about this god of yours? I've heard about him, but I don't know anything about him." The pastor grabs Randy and bear hugs him. "Dear brother, this is the first step in finding Him. It is your walk of faith to inquire about Him." Randy just breaks down and falls on the floor crying. The brothers all come and pray over Randy. "I'm nobody," he cries. "I've always refused to believe he existed. I've even cursed his name. I feel lost in this world. Can you please help me pastor? I'm so tired of being so scared." Randy never lifts his head through his conversation. He repents his unworthiness to the floor the whole time. Paul comes down to Randy's lowly station and whispers to Randy a message. "Yes Randy, God still loves you. He has always loved you; even when you didn't love Him. And yes Randy, He will forgive you; if you let Him." That's all Randy needed to hear. His face turns the deepest shade of red as the whole of his body shakes violently. "Please, oh please God, please forgive me!" Randy rattles out. His request is answered as he's in filled with the Holy Spirit. He starts yelling praises uncontrollably in the heavenly language that no man can understand.

Excitement takes over the chamber as my other brothers' spirits also begin their conversing. Randy's body flops like a fish on the floor as he asks, "What's happening to me?" The pastor laughs, "It's your spirit feeling the Holy Spirit as it speaks a lifetime of longing to God." Randy is a little frightened by his supernatural occurrence. "You are receiving a special gift not all men are given Randy. This is a very special gift God gives to special people. It's called 'being in-filled with the baptism of the Holy Spirit'." "Does this mean I'm, what you call, 'saved'?" Paul responds, "No Randy; that happened the second you called out to Jesus." The brothers begin rejoicing as Pastor Paul soundly laughs, "Yes Randy, yes you have become a Christ follower." Randy weeps louder, releasing a whole life of pent-up emotions. A giant smile forms on his face as his uncontrollable shaking jars free his repeated gratitude's of, "Thank you Lord." Randy jumps to his feet, and then hops up and

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down. He laughs and claps, "I feel good!" We give him a round of applause, welcoming our new eternal brother. The pleasure of His power slowly dissipates among us as we return to the order of the day.

Amanda pokes her peeking head past the chapel entrance doors. I am the first to notice her. I walk backwards towards her as I announce, "Oh brothers, I didn't get a chance to introduce our new sister. Her name is Amanda." Her facial expression suggests her shyness. Her arms pull tight to her chest and fidget with her slightly fetal body. I grab her hand and pull her inside, as she wiggles her fingers with her free hand, "Hi, I'm Amanda." I whisper to her as we walk towards the group, "Looks like your overalls fit fine." She softly giggles, "Yeah, thanks Joey." Pastor Paul returns to his pulpit and congratulates Amanda for joining us, and then offers her his salutation. Paul asks if several members might retrieve some MRE for our Sunday meal. Scotty answers his request as Kenny follows him to the supply room. We form a chair circle in the middle of the chapel and wait for diner to arrive.

Randy looks at Amanda as small tears hang in his eyes. He is wearing a smile a crowbar couldn't pry loose. He tries holding back his joy, but it's too strong for him to control. His residual giddiness causes him to unintentionally jump up and down in his seat. Amanda smiles and tilts her head, with a smile that questions Randy's sanity. "I've been flying with Eagles," is Randy's answer to Amanda's quirky expression. "You've got to try it sweetheart," he laughs. She shakes her head side to side and smiles a big smile. She leans and hugs him, softly saying, "I've been there honey. Congratulations!" Randy looks back and forth while fighting his ability to control his laughter. Every brother falls to the power of Randy's contagious joy as they all begin in the merriment. This manna is something we have not eaten in quite a while. It tastes wonderful. This is a momentary piece of Heaven that each one of us needs so desperately. But, we also know this peace will only be temporary.

Scotty and Ken return with our meals. "Who wants the meatloaf, or the ham & egg special?" Scotty asks. Ken and him

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pass out selected meals to everyone as a more serious nature manifest itself. “So, what are we going to do now?” Paul request. Most of the brothers speak their concerns about going back to their homes. As our conversation continues, the rest of the brothers begin showing up. I look at my watch and see it is now 11:05 am and think about Dave and Moses. He is probably worried to death about me. They are probably starving too. I am reminded of the need to get more rations. I need to get enough to last a week, and enough for Katie, her kids, and the rest of us. I also need overalls for Moses. I get up to go retrieve the supplies as more brothers arrive and fill the chapel.

I find everything I need in the supply room. I nearly fill my rucksack. I see a dusty bag of candies sitting on a shelf just in back of this stack of boxes. I think how much Katie’s kids might like this treat, as I pour a handful into my sack. I strap my rucksack on and return to the chapel. I’m back just in time to hear Randy explaining his ordeal leading to his capture.

“It is a miracle I am here. Thank God for Joey. Two days ago, the LD found me hiding in the abandon radio station in Brookhaven, near the former trash dump site.” Most of us know Brookhaven is the next town south of here. “I lived there over two years. No one ever came around the smelly place. There was no real reason for them to. Everyone knew it could not broadcast anymore. It was miles from town and very isolated. It was the perfect place to hide out. The station had a hidden basement below it. That’s where I actually lived. I found a shortwave radio about a year after hiding out there. I was surprised to find it still worked.” I figure the electronic components were protected from the EMP by being stored way below ground, and shielded by all the concrete. Randy explains how the radio had a built-in hand crank generator. He says, “I would listen only several minutes a day to see if there was any useful news from the outside world. I never tried to communicate with it. I was in the Army and know how the enemy can “triangulate” my position. I wasn’t taking any chances of trying to talk on it.” I think how we could use that radio here. “I knew things were escalating. One of the last

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transmissions I heard was the Fed's commanding their 'Trinity' troops to hold-off the Irreverent militia until reinforcements arrives. It was happening near Philadelphia." I think, "This is amazing news." It is mindboggling to know other brothers have decided to fight the forces of "Trinity." Randy continues with, "This was also happening outside Indianapolis. Reports suggested they actually over took a Fed military base and supply depot. The militia even stole and used, tanks and APC's (armored personnel carriers) against the Fed's. The next thing I heard were feet running down the station steps."

All Randy's previous joy now turns somber. "I still don't know how they found me. They didn't even check to see if I had their stupid brand. It was like they knew I wasn't one of them before they found me. Five LD attacked me. I hit one with a machete before the hoard pounced on me. The blade just bent around his evil head. I felt like I was the rope in a 'tug o war.' One said, 'He's mine,' and lifted me up with one arm- like I was butter."

"They got me outside and beat me repeatedly. I thought I was going to die, but they stopped just short of it." All the brothers just shake their heads as Randy continues. "The next thing I remember is hearing screams approaching. I turned my head from out of the dirt, which my face was buried in, to see two columns of bruised bloody bodies bound together being dragged along towards me. I turned my head back and saw the Devil! Yes, I saw what looked like the Devil wrapping razor wire around my lower legs. I was too tired to fight him off. I swear though, this guy didn't look human. He was hideous. I never knew evil before, but I could feel he was evil. He pulled the wire so tight I screamed. He actually enjoyed me screaming-and laughed." Randy grabs his forehead and leans over. "My blood jet out in streams as he began pulling me along to meet the lines of captives. That's when I again saw the LD who carried me out of the station. But, this time it was like he was the leader. He ordered one of the columns of captives to stop next to me. The LD pulling that column said, 'I see you invited one more to diner. A couple more and we'll have a banquet.' I guess they cut arteries in my legs, because it was

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squirting right into his face. He stuck his tongue out trying to lap it up.” Randy then cries and cries. He gasp for a breath, and then cries some more. He tries to tell us what happened next, but the excitement of remembering has taken the air out of him. We decide to give him a moment to compose himself.

Many of us stand and move to the hall area. A few stay to comfort their new brother. A debate proceeds as brother discusses with brother about what we should do next. Factions form taking different stances. One group thinks we should just keep doing what we have been. Everyone should remain separate to protect the brotherhood from being totally captured. Another sect still wants to split the remaining supplies, and take their own chance of surviving. One more group wants to form our own militia, or send reinforcements to help the existing militia currently battling “Trinity.” The last group wants to wait and recon for possible other Irreverent still in the area, and then join forces to form our own militia. Brother Gary comes out to give us some new information that Randy just told them. “Randy said there were 60 or 70 people tied to him. He said they only took about nine of them away to torture, before they chained and nailed them to telephone poles. The rest were brought to the abandon department store just outside town. The worst part is, they are mostly women and children. We all change our perspective with this new information. I know what the signs on the poles above Randy and Amanda really mean now! The LD intend on using our people as ransom to capture more Irreverent. I’ve seen this happen before. It usually works in war. Gary explains how Randy heard the LD leader promise his prisoners they’d take the brand and worship “Trinity,” or he’d cook and skin each of them alive; starting with the children first. Frenzy takes over the brothers. It seems many of them know some of the captives. And, none of us are willing to leave the fate of women and children in the hands of this Evil Living Damned. This surely would be evil.

Pastor Paul notifies us that the answers we need will only be made known through prayer. We return to the chapel and join hands. Each of us quietly takes time to offer our individual request

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up to the Lord. After several minutes the pastor leads us in a corporate prayer. "Dear Father of all creation; grant us your knowledge and wisdom. Show us what you will have us do. Give us the power to discern and defeat the evil snares ahead of us. Please instill in us the strength to follow your every command. Remind us we do not walk alone. March with us oh Lord in our army of faith. Amen."

The pastor's words made me realize: it was my faith that allowed me to find Katie. It was my faith that gave us Moses. It was my faith that defeated the Demons. It is by my faith that I'm here today. I also recognize that a man without faith is the weakest of men. He can only try and do what he can imagine. But, a man with faith can do the unimaginable. For only God knows what that is. Faith is the only way we will defeat evil. And surely; faith is the only way we ever please God. For only a fool will say in his heart that faith is foolish. Yes, I will have faith!

Time is of the essence. Urgency tugs at me to act in faith. The things that will happen to those innocent captives cannot be allowed to happen. I need to hurry and drop these supplies off at home, and then, somehow, rescue those women and children. I overhear Paul tell the congregation, "Stay here at least till tomorrow. This will give us more time to understand what we should do. It will be safer for everyone too. The LD and Demons are running ramped. There is a good chance of them finding us on our way home, or by living in them after we return home." The brothers all agree. I turn to walk up the steps as the pastor runs to me. "Where are you going?" he asks. "I got to drop supplies off at home, and go do something after. These things can't wait." I don't dare tell him what the something after is. It's too dangerous to ask any of the brothers to come along. "Joey, in my spirit I know you are going to do God's work. Therefore, I'm going with you." I try and think of a single reason he can't come, but who am I to tell him he can't do God's work. Scotty overhears the conversation and tells us he's going too. "Joshua could be with them. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try and help." Amanda comes over and says, "I know what you're up to. I'm going too. I know exactly

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where the accesses are into the store.” Randy is right by her side and says, “I’m not afraid anymore. I’m going to help whether you say yes or not.” I shake my head side to side and tell them, “What a motley crew. Do you all realize the cruel things these guys will do to you if you’re caught?” No one says a word. “I’m going to have to move fast, make quick decisions, and take chances. Do you think you can handle that?” Again, no one says anything. They just silently nod, “Yes.” I say, “Aren’t you a find bunch of soldier.” Scotty tells the pastor he knows where some supplies and equipment are stored that may help us. Paul tells Randy, Kenny, and Amanda to go help Scotty get it. They dash off while he calls another brother over and gives him instruction on what he should do if something happens to him. Then, Paul asks me if I know where the old “Gardener Floral Mill” is? I tell him, “Yes, it’s not far from the department store.” “Do you think you can meet us there in, say, one hour?” I check and sync my watch, and then reply, “That’s affirmative. One hour then.”

He follows me up the main entrance; then helps me tighten my rucksack. He pushes the light switch turning the chamber lights off, and then slides the entrance stone open. He pops his head out slowly as I move up in position. I see its dark out. I tell Paul, “Thanks.” I pop my head up for quick look around. I then whisper down the dark entrance way, “I’ll see you in one hour.” I rush out and hear him whisper back, “God watch over you brother,” as I dash to the tree line.

I hear the almost silent click and locking of the stone door while observing from in the bushes for signs of LD activity. I say a silent prayer asking for divine protection and guidance for all of us this night. All seems clear, so I move out towards home as fast as I can. My haste forces me to remember along the way, that I have to rendezvous in less than an hour. I hear some distant activity banging and smashing. The sounds ring out through the damp cool night air. It’s far enough away for it not to be of immediate concern. I maneuver along my normal route of alleyways and back streets as fast as I can. There is evidence the LD have been this way. They left a lot of trash and debris in the alleys, and in the

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backyards of abandoned homes. I wonder how many more souls they might have captured, and hope Dave and Moses are still safe.

I make it to my backyard fence and squat to see if I've been noticed or followed. Everything seems clear. Slowly and quietly I remove my heavy sack and drop it over the fence. The slight thump of it hitting the ground is followed by the creaking of my backdoor. "Joey?" is whispered repeatedly as I jump the fence. "Yes buddy," I whisper back to the dark figure peeking halfway out the rear door. Dave opens the door fully as I grab my sack and dash to porch, and then inside. He shut's and secures the door as I sit against the inside wall trying to catch my breath.

"You won't believe everything that's happened," is Dave's news alert. This is quickly followed by, "Where have you been all this time?" I point my index finger up, suggesting to Dave, give me a second to finish catching my breath. "I'm glad you made it back okay. I was scared you got caught." He continues explaining the reason for his excitement. "LD came here last night. It was like a living hell. I could hear them all around the house. The only thing I could do was pray and keep Moses quiet. I closed my eyes and prayed like never before; expecting them to come in." Dave nervously recounts the occurrence as I attentively listen in. I empty my rucksack filled with supplies as Dave's bulging eyes delight. He seems to want to comment about the goods, but his desire to finish his accounting won't let him stop reporting the prior activity. "I knew we were 'dead meat'. I put my arms up in surrender, and gave myself up to our Lord. That's when the miracle happened." Dave starts bawling his eyes out. "Thank you God," he repeats several times, and then goes on. "There was this light flashing all through the house. It was the brightest and most wonderful light I've ever seen." Dave stops and swallows hard through his excited restricted throat. "Every flash caused the LD to scream, like it was killing them. Then, they ran off. They all ran off. I peeked through the crack in the plywood over the window to see the flashing was coming from the direction you went. I started to pray real hard God would keep you safe. I was so worried about

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you buddy.” I realize at this moment how much Dave really cares for me, and how much I care for him. “You’ll never guess what happen next? It’s a miracle because Moses was healed-totally healed!” I look over to where he was, just to realize the lump on the floor is just a balled up blanket. “Yep, I believe it was those flashes of light that did it. It was holy lightning. Yep, it was holy lightning.” I shake my head in amazement towards heaven as my heart screams, “You’re surely wonderful God.” I also realize those flashes came during the war for the martyrs. “Where is Moses now?” I ask Dave. “He left around noon today. He said he had to go check on his babies, and his Katie. But, he said to tell you he owes you his life. And, he’d see you again soon.” A warm feeling fills my soul. I know I have received another true treasures waiting for me in Heaven. One is eternal friendship with Moses, and the other is with my buddy Dave. For, these are the only kinds of treasure we bring with us into eternity.

I rip back my watch cover and see I’m running behind my time schedule. “I got to go again,” I tell Dave. “Wait!” he exclaims. “I don’t even know what happened to you, or why you were gone so long.” I stand and strap on my empty rucksack as Dave commands, “I’m going too!” I freeze at the possibility of him even suggesting his wiliness to face danger.

I tell him “Where I’m going is evil. What I’m going to do will take a miracle. I’m sorry Dave, but you can’t come.” I’m worried Dave just doesn’t want to be alone tonight. I can’t blame him after all that’s happened. “I’m going with you!” demands Dave. “I don’t care anymore what happens to me. I want to help, and I’m going to help. If you leave me, I swear I’ll just follow you. Do you want that on your conscience?” I again shake my head side to side in amazement. I have this epiphany in my spirit. I know in my heart I got to take Dave along. I tell my buddy, “Okay, you can come. Just make sure you stay close to me and do exactly what I say.” Dave’s facial expression seems puzzled at my acceptance of his demand. “You mean you’re not going to argue about me coming?” I reply, “No.” “Why?” he asks. I tell him, “Because, it’s a God thing.” Dave grabs his jacket, and we’re out the back door.

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After making it to the backyard fence Dave whispers, "Where're we going?" I pop my head over for a look around, and then return saying, "The old 'Gardener Floral Mill' at the edge of town; and we got about 30 minutes to get there." I pull myself over, jumping down to a squatting position. The area seems clear, so I stand and offer my hand of assistance over the top of the fence to Dave. I feel his right hand fingers join mine. I grab and pull his hand helping him climb over. We squat for a final look around before taking off. Dave speaks softly, "Can you tell me why we are going there?" I advise him, "It's to free some Irreverent prisoners. Let's move out." Dave's mouth forms an oval that's ready to speak. But, I put my index finger to my mouth signifying a "shhh" sound.

We move along in 40 feet intervals towards our objective. We advance in turns, with one leading and the other observing. Neither advances unless the forward position gives the silent "okay, all clear" sign. I see Dave's hand bend forward telling me, "It's okay to advance." We repeat this procedure for close to a mile and a half. We're not far from the old floral mill as we hear the bushes ahead make a rustling and snapping sound. We freeze instantly and observe for what may be causing it. Dave looks back at me, waiting for my command on what to do next. I jerk my left hand towards Dave, and begin pushing air downward with it. This is the symbol for him to stay put, even if I move out. I advance and run past him moving closer to the bushes that the sound came from. About fifty feet away, I see a person stand and run out of it to another bush further away. I see another person repeat the same maneuver joining the first person in that same bush. I can sense these armatures are Irreverent. I have this feeling these are my brothers and sister.

I wave Dave to advance to my hiding spot. It's taking time for him to catch up, as I am about three maneuvers ahead. I wave him on to my hiding location behind some trash cans. After Dave arrives I murmur, "I think it's the group from 'T' that's going to meet us." We begin to move while staying just behind them-just in case I'm wrong. I see the old mill's silhouette emerge above the

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tree tops. I know we're real close now. I hear some commotion off in the distance. Again, I hear something. This time it is a bunch of sounds that seem like faint squeals. My heart cringes thinking it could be the sound of a child being tormented. I throw all "caution to the wind" and wave Dave to move fast alongside me. I forgo the time consuming maneuvering procedure and start running to the rendezvous point. My spirit speaks, "Time is of the essence!"

I approach the back of the old floral mill and see the group ahead entering its back door. I know it's my brothers' as we maintain our rapid pace. We are about a minute behind the group as we close in. I can hear Dave just behind me panting between my huffing breaths. I'm praying that our stamping feet, gasping, and the swishing of my sack doesn't alert a Demon.

We make it to the mill and run right in the dark open backdoor. I run into the darkened figure I think is Randy, startling him, as he stops my forward progress. Randy analyzes my face in the dark. He double checks it to make sure it's really me. My body wants to bend forward and just suck up all the air my lungs will hold, but Randy's long grasping arms and body won't let me. Five seconds later, Dave runs right into my back. This action pushes the bunch of us about three feet further ahead. A distant shadow speaks, "I brought some things that can possibly help us." This voice sounds like Scotty's, but the darkness hides his true identity. I'm too exhausted to inquire "who said that?" I just listen as Dave and I gasp. Someone snaps something, as a green glow grows out of the dark. It reveals my comrades' friendly faces. We form a huddle formation so we can discuss more quietly our plan of action. Pastor Paul leads the gallery of green floating faces and asks, "Did you hear the screams coming from the abandon department store?" I answer, "Dave and me heard it a few minutes ago." Amanda whispers, "We need to hurry. I heard children screaming!" We are in a dilemma on what to do. Paul proposes we pray together for guidance and a solution. We bow our faces and firmly grasp hands as he directs us in prayer.

"Oh Lord of lords and God of all, please hear our prayer. We

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need your supernatural help this night. Please Jesus, show us what we need to do this night to defeat this evil enemy. Please lead us Lord along the path we must take. Dear God, please give us a revelation right now. Be with us this night and supernaturally protect us. We stand tonight on faith to our Most High and mighty God. Amen.” We lift our heads to see the glistening green glow that glitters in every teary eye. Each face is full of them.

A pounding sound approaches our position through the “old mill’s” doorway. We see one hefty shadow stampeding towards us as our hearts swell with anticipation. It looks like a torpedo bouncing in the night sea, while it constantly readjusts its aim. The thumping of its feet becomes fearfully deafening. We know we have no time to defend against its pursuit. The only thing we can do is just watch it “zero in” on our destruction. And, pray!

A deep loud voice precedes this fairly large man saying “Is there anyone in the re?” We don’t dare respond to its question and give our presence and position away. “Moses; it’s me Moses,” this dark figure bellows. I recognize in an instant the owner of this voice. “Don’t fret fellows, it’s my friend Moses.” His huffing and puffing is leaving a contrail of small white misty clouds. He rushes through the doorway revealing his anxious face. We stretch out our arms to stop Moses from crashing through us. He runs right in to me knocking me back several feet. I hug him and hold him up as his body begins to buckle. He urgently tries to say something, but his exhausted body requires all the air it will take to talk. “Catch your breath buddy,” I say, while keeping him propped up. I advise the others that Moses is a recent friend and new Christian Brother. Great relief comes over them as they pat the large guy; corporately congratulating him in friendship. “Joshua and Jericho,” Moses spews. “I..., I..., I was told!” Moses pauses for his next breath, “...to tell you Joey, these words, ‘Joshua and Jericho’.” He pauses again as a majestic smile appears. “I had a vision or something,” Moses proclaims! New life comes over him as his breathing returns. “It was wonderful. It was from a big beautiful Angel.” Moses strongly warns us that he’s not crazy. “I just know it was real. The Angel told me to hurry and go tell Joey

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these words. He told me he would guide me to you. And, he did. He also told me to say, 'Trust in the Lord.' Moses turns his head looking at every face. It's like he desperately desires for us to believe him, but he seems surprised that we accept his message without doubt. Suddenly, it hits me like a ton of bricks. I command the group, "These words are how we will win tonight."

I know what those words mean now, and I know what we are supposed to do. "We're going to do what Joshua did in the Bible." I think back to my Sunday school days that my momma made me attend. I vividly remember the story of "Jericho." God gives Joshua a game plan to conquer his enemy, but it will involve extreme faith. The plan requires Joshua and the Israelites to march once a day around the impenetrable fortified kingdom of Jericho. The victory comes on the seventh day. During the preceding six days they are ridiculed by Jericho's soldiers. On the seventh day they shout and blow horns while the procession completes seven trips around the city. Finally, Jericho's walls crumble and victory is theirs. I suddenly realize how they defeated their foes. They acted in great faith believing God would do the impossible.

"We will walk around Jericho and God will give us the victory," I exclaim! My spirit authenticates my decision. It gives me a peace surpassing all understanding. I know this is the right choice as surely as I know God is with us tonight. "Here's what we are going to do."

I explain each of our tasks for this night. Our group files out the old "Gardener Mill," as fear and doubt immediately attacks us. We move quietly and steadily toward the LD headquarter and prison. Pastor Paul begins praying mildly "Psalms" 23. This is the cadence we march to this night. It will be our battle cry throughout the rest of the fight.

Paul speaks parts of these verses while our feet keep to its rhythm. Each of our voices softly recants this section of the divine prayer. "Even though I walk," our pastor sings. "Through the valley of," we reply. "The shadow of death," we resonate. "We will fear not." This verse suffocates the fire of fear and kindles the

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flame of faith. There is order in our steps and unity in our hearts. "For, you are with me!" Paul loudly proclaims; and each soldier robustly confirms. We have forgone all our stealth as we arrive at the department store property. Proudly we sing our praises towards heaven.

A great rumble begins shaking this unholy ground as we proceed to step on it. The sand is soaked with martyr's blood screaming to be avenged. Their blood begs for vengeance with each reverent step we take. I can feel the martyred returning with each closer step. The war is about to begin as we file boldly onto the battlefield.

A fog begins forming from the field and fizzes up under the pressure of our holy feet. We feel the innocent blood boiling up from the sand that it was forced to swallow. It releases an eerie steam of screams. It floats mysteriously upward concealing our presence, while leaving only a faint impression of where the department store once stood. The building top reveals a rampart of red floating eyes. They know we're here. The fog fears not as it slaps and flogs these foes with the haunting words, "Justice." Their evil red eyes stand firm, but I know they tremble. I see red streaks vibrating in the dark just beyond the mist.

We stop and huddle, as I reach in my sack and remove the torches we'll use in battle. I hand two sticks to each of my fellow comrades. We return to our file and stretch-out our ranks to the prescribed extended arm distance. Repeating snaps of the sticks give life to the night. Each soldier holds their green torches in each of their hands as we lift our arms and prayers. Amidst this glorious green glow we are assaulted by ridicule and evil laughter. Vulgar gestures are shot at us. But, this evil cannot penetrate the protection of this halo of jade. The majestic mist eats their malign assault while we stand fast in our praying. The fiends continue to fight the fog, but our friend just digests their toxic mess. It chews and swirls their vile swearing; then vomits and hurls it back at them. We slowly march into battle as the fog opens and frees a path before us.

The menace is confined to its fortress. We sense the demonic

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apprehension as the fog surrounds them. We extend our line further as we proceed closer. The enemy tries out maneuvering the fog by hurling doubt and catapulting fear over top it. "We'll rip the flesh right off you pitiful puny people, and tear apart our prisoners." We defend ourselves with the shield of faith, and deflect these mortal blows. We firmly and steadily advance towards our objective, slashing with our swords of truth. "We will fear-no evil, for you are with us," we loudly proclaim! The cumulative reverberations of our prayers intensify, as they penetrate and stir the fog.

The steam of the innocent slain savors this sweet serenade. It swallows our slashing words and amplifies them. The fog blasts the building with our bombs of praise over and over. Each prayer of faith is a direct hit on each damned soul. Each of our prayer's strikes a Demon with the words of truth; ripping it apart. The red eyes of the night bleed down the rampart, as horrid and ghastly screams beg mercy and relief from their tormentor. My heart says to me, "Never give mercy to evil, and none shall be given on this night."

Each step I take closer to the building builds one more block in our fortress of faith. I thrust my arms forward again and again, as I rebuke this enemy. Each word I say, and each jab of my arms, stabs these foes through. The green lights I hold burn my words into their dark souls. I watch as they fall from the wall into the murdering hands of the mist. I stare as my army destroys the Demons and vanquishes the LD. The evidence is their trails of screams retreating away. A remnant of the demonic enemy remains determine. But, it realizes its previous weapons are useless against our attack. We hold fast to our faith as we near the base of the building. This thickening holy fog climbs the stone, reaching up and choking the remaining foul cursing foe.

These desperate evil forces try a last ditch effort. We continue the war while we walk in our worship. Children appear through the mist on top of the building. Each one of them cries out for their momma to come help. Evil embraces these innocent instead. Dozens of Demons lift high dozens of tiny bodies-like offerings to

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the dark night sky. They threaten certain death to these youngsters as they dangle them from the store's roof. These possessed LD dare us to come closer, while they persecute the children with their evil snickering. We look to each other's face questioning what is the right thing to do. But, we know in our spirit what we have to do. Our army of faith halts.

We stand firm in righteousness and shout as loud as we can. Each member repeats "Psalms" 23 over and over. This pains these devils as they juggle to restrain their captives. They buckle over in agony as we stick them with our daggers of words again, and again. The pain proves to be too much for them. Terrifyingly, they toss all the tots over the side as we watch in horror. Each precious body hurls to the ground as we stare hopelessly on. This action stops our prayers long enough to afford the Demons a last lingering laugh. Our hearts just melt in despair.

A voice suddenly proclaims "Time, stand still!" Instantly, everything freezes in this moment. There is no doubt to whom has given this command. There is only one with authority over time. Every creature, holy or not, produces a pose in this present painting. The fog floats away and reveals the invisible hands of God. Time resumes as He cradles and calms each innocent life, resting assure in His giant protecting hands. We marvel as each babe gently floats down to earth. The evil uses this opportunity to flee from the Almighty's power, and His wrath. We rejoice at His works and feel great relief. "Holy is He who delivers us," we shout!. "Victory is ours" we weep.

The stillness of the night returns as His holy presence departs. We see all the children nestled side by side in a somber sleep. Each of these little faces glows with a halo of glory from God's given kiss. The mothers and fathers evacuate from inside the building. Each looks for their dear darling that their arms long to hold. Pastor Paul looks on in amazement while just shaking his head in awe. The rest of us huddle and hug for the victorious faith we displayed. A combination of joy and emotional exhaustion has weakened us to the point of collapsing. Yet, we apprehend the thought of what we still need to do. We have no place for all

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these bodies, but we have to do something soon. We realize it's only a matter of time between our victory and the return of the Demons, and LD. We brothers' and sister unite once again as prayer warriors, and ask for a sign from Heaven.

No sooner than the last "Amen," then a beam of light shines down. In this light descends a pure white giant. Every one of us bows in reverence to this warrior. His wonderful warm spirit draws us, but his awesome destructive power overwhelms us. The sheathed sword he carries is twice my height. He lands, but still soars at least twenty feet above me from head to feet. Cool clouds flow out his large mouth as he speaks his deep words: "I am a messenger of God. I've come to seal these elect until His kingdom returns. This place is now under the protection of the Most High. The greatest heroes of Heaven now circle and defend this holy ground. No evil will dare near it." This magnificent being finishes his bequeath and ascends in the light it comes from. We all bow again in respect to his parting, and give glorious thanks to the maker of miracles.

Amanda asks, "Where are they? I don't see them." Pastor Paul tells her that Angel's live in the invisible realm just beyond our ability to see them. He assures us they are here among us, and around us. I tell Amanda that I know this first hand from my recent encounter while rescuing her. I comfort her with my words, "Trust God." Her face grows a smile, and her head gently shakes, "Yes," and then replies, "Always." This night made every witness believers in miracles. We assist the parents, children, women, and men back into the building. I tell Paul through all the commotion that I'll look around inside and see what I can find in the way of bedding, food, and supplies. He remarks, "At least we have electricity." He notices the interior is lighted while he stares at the mess left behind. Randy, Scotty, and Ken try moving piles of debris away from the main area in order to make room for the approaching multitude. Moses helps a family organize a homely spot to settle in for the rest of the night. I can't help feeling his concern for his family that's still out there. I take one more moment to see all the faces of the parents as they smother and

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suffocate their babies with love. Even those adults without children indulge the stranger's children with adoring affection. I feel like we've immediately become one large family. A warm feeling saying somehow everything will be alright comes over me. I take this feeling with me as I turn and proceed to investigate for the spoils of victory that this building may hold.

"What an amazing night" I think. I move towards the back of the building trying to find the area where supplies are normally kept. I kick some boxes blocking my path hoping to move them out of my way. My foot just bounces off them. They are filled with something too heavy to be kicked away. I pull my knife out and slice open both boxes. I open the first box and pull back the flaps to find it is filled with survival supplies. I reason the LD most likely confiscated this paraphernalia from the home of some poor Irreverent they captured, or killed. I shuffle through the box making a mental inventory of its relevant contents. I notice part of what looks like a radio at the bottom of the box. I lift out a cellophane wrapped bundle containing individual packs of assorted vegetables seeds. Next, I remove a treasure of knowledge. The titles of these two books suggest they are field manuals. One deal's with survival and the other is titled "Quick, Simple, & Easy Medical Solution." I know these will definitely come in handy. The final obstacle in my way is a box marked "Power Supply." I pull the small box out and see the radio below it. It is a shortwave emergency band radio. I grab it and turn its charging handle knowing the electronic components are fried. But, I see the red power indicator light brighten as I continue to turn the cranking handle. I am amazed it survived in tack after the EMP blast. I flip the emergency band to short wave and tune it in hearing only the crackle of static. It may not be picking up outside signals yet, but I know at least it works. I move the radio with cautious hands placing it back in the box. I proceed to open the next box marked "Power Supply." I think about the person these personal belongs came from. This person had knowledge of what would be important when all hell broke loose. I also realize this person must have been former military, or some sort of

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survivalist. I run my blade along the tape securing this box, and then flip the flaps up. I tell myself "It's an optional solar generator." I realize it will only produce a small amount of electricity. But, it is handy for small appliances and charging other devices. I think, "If there were only some that worked, this would be handy." I place it back in the bigger box next to the radio. I try and lift the box, but it weighs a ton. I run my blade over the thick cardboard covering along its side cutting a slice out. I tap it with my blade hearing the tingling sound of metal behind the cardboard. I smile knowing why the radio survived. I see this box has a thick lead lining. "This guy was definitely military" I proclaim! The lead lining proves he prophetically knew something was going to happen.

I am able to lift the other box with ease, but it's still heavy. I open it and see canned goods inside. I decide to retrieve this box later. I continue looking for things we need immediately (e.g., blankets, sleeping material, food, and water). I move towards the back area of the building, which is sectioned off. I see six rooms. The first two are small offices, These are followed by a "Men's" and "Lady's" bathroom, and two doors marked with "Supplies," and "Storage." I mumble, "Jack pot!" This is my best bet of finding what we need. I see both doors have been kicked in. It looks like they've probably been looted already. I say a silent prayer some supplies may have been overlooked as I venture into the "Supplies" room first. This seems to be the most logical choice.

Out of curiosity I flip the light switch on. I am surprised as I exclaim, "'Son of a gun', all the electricity in the entire building seems to work!" Technically, I know the electrical wiring should be ruined by the EMP blast, and I have no idea where the electricity might be coming from. I wonder if holy protection has anything to do with this. This is surely a night of miracles. One other thing I notice: there is no evil stench lingering, but rather a sweet smell. This fact comforts me.

All the shelves are empty in this room and their stands are tilted over, or lying on the floor. Several open boxes sit in the rear part of the room. Carefully, I hurdle the metal mess to explore the

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boxes. Dust clouds rise before my eyes as my feet stir-up the dirt. I see every box is empty, which is exactly what I expect. I turn around looking from a new perspective for anything I may have overlooked. "That's weird," I think. It's not what I see that strikes me with suspicion, but what I don't see. There are clean square areas on several of shelves noticeable only from this side of the stands lying over. I conclude there was something recently on these shelves before the stands were tipped over. I do not see any slide marks wiping the dust away. This suggests the boxes were removed from their stands before they were tipped. I figure the lack of dust where the cleaner square areas are means it happened recently. Next, I notice slightly dust covered footprints leading to the wall on my right. "That's strange," I think. "Why do they come and go towards that particular door less wall?" I follow the trail to the wall and tap it with my knuckles. It sounds like solid wood. I lean on the wall and push it. Nothing happens. I move to my left and repeat the process. The wall makes a clicking noise then pops out about two inches. I become excited, but scared at the same time. Maybe there are some supplies behind this hidden doorway, or maybe it's a "booby trap" left by the LD. I see a hand hold exposed in the side of door. My senses tingle a warning to proceed with the utmost caution. There is also a blast of cold air seeping from around the crack in the opening. I stand to the side of the door and lean my back against the adjacent wall just to the side of this opening. Now out of the way of the door, I pry it open with my right arm. A freezing fog floats in the middle of this compartment. It quickly moves out of this hidden room directly towards me.

I shiver in the chill attacking me as the foggy crisp air clears from inside this room. I realize that this room is really a super large freezer. My eyes pop in astonishment to see pallets and pallets marked with "New CA Guard." I figure this must be the LD supply depot. The plastic wrap around each sealed pallet suggests whatever is on them is still intact. I count seven visible pallets stacked on seven more, reaching up to the ceiling. It makes sense there is probably another row of pallets behind these ones. I

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determine this by the sheer size of the room and where these pallets sit. I pull my knife and slice a piece of frosted plastic wrap from the first pallet. I discover this pallet is loaded with boxes and boxes of MRE (Meals Ready to Eat). This evidence supports the idea this is LD supply headquarter. They only distribute these supplies to those wearing the brand and leave the rest of us to starve. I deduct they store the MRE in this freezer to protect and regulate it. After all, MRE don't need refrigeration. I check the next pallet and find it is the same type of supply. I thank God for this abundant blessing.

I quickly inspect a couple more pallets and find even more goodies. One pallet is filled with can goods, and several portable stoves. I can't believe my serendipity of finding the contents lying on this next pallet. It is filled with sleeping bags, cots, blankets, towels, toiletries, and even military clothing. This is beyond just good luck. I hear that little voice again in my heart. This time it answers, "This is how God abundantly provides for the faithful." I nod my head affirming the small voice.

I venture beyond the corridor of pallets to what maybe behind them. I find there is another row stacked to the ceiling. I sum we have at least twenty eight pallets filled with blessings. Again, I thank God for all His love. I turn to leave and go get help with the supplies, but I notice something strange. There are a dozen stain spots just below a dozen hooks embedded near the ceiling on the far wall. I know in a second this was more than just a supply chamber. The brown bloody silhouettes scream this was also a torture chamber. I grab a towel from one pallet and try wiping their memory away. I pray heartfelt "last rites," as I end-up just smearing these poor shadows past existence. I promise myself to keep this a secret-for now.

I return to the main hub of the building and see clumps of children nestled on the floor. Pastor Paul is quietly directing the men towards the needs of the masses, while Amanda attempts to "goodnight kiss" every sleeping child. I wave to the pastor and some of the brothers to come here. Paul's gaze doesn't seem to suggest he expects much from my excursion. I stand with my arms

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crossed smiling at him as he approaches my position. He confirms my smile with his own. He can tell my continuous smiling and steadfast position is saying more than I just found something interesting. He knows I'm not usually this emotional. His face fills with his growing smile of expectation. The other brothers arrive at the same time as Pastor Paul. Paul tilts his head and asks, "What?" I stare at him as I tell them all, "The Lord surely is good!" I see all the confused faces wonder what I am talking about. I place my hand with all my fingers pointing up, suggesting to them to "stop" their advancement. I proceed to twist my hand and bend my fingers over slowly, giving them the "follow me" sign. I see them glance at each other wondering just how big I scored.

We move orderly at a "quick time" to the "Supplies" room. I see their smiles turn to frowns as they enter the emptied supply room. I continue to motion to them to follow me as I venture into the hidden freezer compartment; which they failed to notice upon initial entry. Smiles return along with bulging eyes as they peer in. "Wow," is the best I can do to explain their surprise. I give everyone the abridged tour along the way to the pallet containing the bedding. I hear Paul call out loudly and repeatedly, "Amen!" The brothers reply with a more solemn and astonished, "Amen," as they slowly savor this most abundant blessing. We immediately form a "fire detail" and quickly begin passing cots, blankets, and sleeping bags down off this mountain of supplies into a stack on the floor. The rising pile on the floor becomes almost unmanageable. We stop and grab as much as each man can hold, and then carry the supplies back to the main area. Pastor Paul and Scotty remain in the main area and quietly distribute the bedding. Afterwards, they begin assisting each parent in setting up the cots they need. The rest of us make several return trips getting the rest of the necessities needed for tonight.

We enter the freezer one last time and grab several cases of "grub." I notice the exhaustion of our slowing steps as we struggle back to the main area. Gently, we set the boxes down so we don't disturb those already sleeping. I grab a cot and set it up near the separate area where the stacks of rations now rest. Scott and my

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buddy Dave decide to camp alongside me. I throw a MRE meal on each of their cot's as they finish unrolling their sleeping bags. "Bon appetite," I whisper. I return and sit on my cot, and then tear open my MRE. Dave sarcastically states, "Goody, I got a 'ham and egg' bar." He sits on his cot and crosses his legs, while forcing himself to gratuitously smile between each unsavory bite. I chuckle contently under my breath at him. His action kind of puts things back into perspective after all the unbelievable events. I know now his friendship is a true friendship. And, that he hates ham and egg bar's.

Paul shows up and suggests we post a guard. "I think we should take turns keeping an eye on everything. You know, in case someone needs special assistance. We also need to guard against the possibility of a unforeseen fire breaking out." We all agree each one of us will take one hour shifts the rest of the night. Paul decides to take the first shift. "No pastor, I will" I tell him. "I'm not that tired anyway; you know-with all the excitement and all." This is, of course, a lie. I am dead tired, but Paul's actions suggest he needs rest even more than me. "Plus Paul, we're going to need you more in the morning. So, get a good night's sleep." He grabs a cot and sets it up as I start diming the main lights. I find a comfy spot to sit located on a lonely stack of MRE. I look over the silent multitude peacefully sleeping and wonder how my marvelous God will deliver us from the danger and chaos laying just ahead.

Chapter 6: Abba's Promise

I hear some children whispering the latest morning news. They try being as quiet as children can, but their silly sweet giggles wake me. The precious youngsters remain as still as possible atop their cots trying their best not to wake the adults. I see some sunlight crawling across the ceiling yelling at me "Get up!" I try and force my body up, but it seems I'm heavier today. I think there must be several narrow windows near the top of this store's walls. The light is a welcome reminder of fonder days. I reminisce of days filled with the warmth of love and hope filled with dreams. I think how this sneaky sunlight will lift the dreariness from this place along with our spirits.

I smell fresh coffee brewing. Oh, so many memories hit me at once. My strong desire for a cup outweighs all my present thoughts. "Morning" comes from a familiar friendly voice. I ask "Dave, you made fresh coffee?" I finish my morning greeting to him by replying to his salutation with "Right back at you-buddy." I stare at him confused. He has never been the type to take initiative-before, but I am proud he's trying. I tell him "Well, the coffee smells great." Dave enlightens me on how this morning endeavor came to fruition. It's too early for my mind to think, so I

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pretend to listen. I just want to sample some of the “wake up juice.” I can’t remember the last time I had real hot coffee. He continues explaining as I reach for the antidote to my sleepiness. “I got up early and remember seeing the portable stove in the supply freezer. I thought it would be nice to make coffee for everyone. I went and got the stove, but the frozen metal of the stove stuck to my hands” Dave laughs. “But, the metal defrosted as soon as I got it back here. I also found a bunch of bags containing coffee rations. Ahhh, but I couldn’t find any sugar.” I just sip my coffee and pat his shoulder with my “that’s alright” seal of approval. I squeeze out between sips “You did great Dave.”

He remarks that he might have made it a little too strong while I swallow my next gulp of the delightful nectar. I shake my head, “No” in disagreement. “This is just fine.” I think how I need this extra black jolt of caffeine to wake up anyway. “It’s hot and ‘Jim Dandy,’ fine Davie.” He gives me a special smile for adding the “i” and “e” of affection to the end of his name. “Yep, it’s just fine.” I start on my second cup as Dave looks at the large pot and begins to worry if he’s made enough for everyone.

The place fills with yawning and the rustling of sleeping bags. I notice a couple, far off, zooming in on the aromatic dream cloud wafting about. I see this woman sit up and turn towards the man next to her cot. She smiles and silently forms the word “Coffee” with her mouth. I reason they are probably husband and wife. They struggle to wake as I watch their feet carry them towards the heavenly smell. She graciously tries brushing decency into her hair with her hand as she dances this way. He, on the other hand, looks more like a tightrope walker fighting to keep his balance. He straddles behind her following the fine line between the cots with his outstretched arms. I enjoy this morning’s entertainment as I finish my second cup.

Dave becomes aware of the awaking multitude wishing to sample his godly concoction. “I wonder if I made enough?” he again nervously replies. Both Dave and I hurry and shove away some of the boxes blocking his newly formed coffee stand. I try making a make shift café with tables and chairs made with some

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of the surrounding boxes. I look on as the wild bunch stampedes towards Dave, as he nervously asks himself again, "I wonder if I made enough?" I just laugh at my buddy, at his predicament, and at the beauty of this moment. We watch the rest of the motley crew stalk the smell. I rhetorically respond, "Ain't it wonderful Davie; ain't it just-wonderful!"

Dave's exploit helps us all remember finer times. Sometimes it's the simple things that make the world go around. It might be the sight of children playing on the playground, or the song of bluebird on a warm spring day. It might be a word of encouragement during the storms of life. Or, it may be just an innocent childhood memory while staring at passing clouds. I don't know where they come from. I just know it's those simple things that make life worth living. This morning is one of them. For me, I'll take the simple things in my life.

Realization approaches. Pastor Paul summons all the men to come join him. I feel the joy of the moment slipping away as my heart adjusts to the priorities of our mission. "I'm coming," I yell, while turning to march to the meeting.

Paul greets everyone as he bids us to come in his newly formed meeting area. He made it by shoving around stacks of MRE boxes and other supplies. I arrive as this morning's prayer circle just as it is forming. Dave shows up and breaks the chain of joined arms. I grab his hand and reconnect while Paul begins leading us in communal prayer. "Lord, lead us in your mission to save souls. Please continue to divinely protect and provide for us. Give us the strength to carry out your will. Gives us peace to discern the things you desire. And Lord, please bless and guide us along your righteous path. Thank you Jesus, Amen." The group concludes the circle with our own, "Amen."

We retreat to the bleachers, trying to find some sort of something resembling a seat. Paul begins listing the important topics we need to discuss. Number one is: how best to organize the new living quarters. Number two on his list is: assigning certain daily responsibilities. And three is: picking leadership positions to make sure certain things are done for our mutual

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benefit. This includes governing and regulating our large, but limited supplies. Lastly, we discuss our new mission concerning the other Irreverent brethren throughout the area. We choose leaders and agree on work details before deciding on the most important topic.

We try coming up with the approximate amount of Irreverent still in town. Figures differ between my "Project T" brethren and the rest of our new Irreverent family. We estimate there may be around forty families still in town, and maybe a hundred individuals still hiding. We reason this by the amount we've come across on this side of town, and by the town's actual size. The new brothers have a different picture. They believe there are at least 20 more families than we guesstimate, and maybe 50 more individuals. This puts the figure somewhere between 260 and 400 Irreverent still out there. I look at Paul as he looks at me. Our faces and eyes ask the same questions. How can we get them safely here, and how can we possibly house them all. I turn my head to estimate what 400 additional souls might look like living here. Pastor sees me shaking my head side to side in bewilderment. He responds to me by addressing us all. "The Lord gave us this place. He is protecting this place. And, He will provide for this place." I am reminded of the constant miracles I've seen while hearing that faint voice whisper again, "Faith Joey."

I just remember; I haven't seen Moses this morning. I look to Dave for answers. He tells me he noticed Moses gathering some stuff as he was making coffee. "I saw Moses talking with Scotty after he got his stuff ready." I walk around the group to engage Scotty on the other side. I interrupt the conversation he's having with his new friend. I ask, "Do you know where Moses is?" Scotty tells me, "He left about an hour ago. He was heading back to his family. He told me to tell you how grateful he was." I worry after hearing this news. Moses is in real danger now more than ever. The LD and Demons may not be able to come onto this property, but I'm sure they are at its edge waiting for any opportunity to destroy all of us; even if it is just one Irreverent at a time. We hurt them real bad last night. I know they want revenge, and their

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supplies back. I know I got to go help Moses.

“Pastor Paul, oh Pastor Paul” I command! “Over here; I need to talk to you right now!” I grab my rucksack while Paul heads over to me. I check it to make sure it still has the “bolt cutters,” rope, and little “first aid” kit. I swing the sack on my back as the pastor arrives. “I’m going to find Moses, and if it is God’s will, to bring his family back here also.” The pastor is surprised to find out Moses left. “I guess I would do the same thing if my family were still out there,” he replies. He helps me adjust my rucksack as he prays a prayer of blessing over me. “This is a God thing Joey. I will prepare a place here for Moses and his family.” I turn my face towards his and nod, “God be with you too today.” Paul whispers back to me, “You too Joey.”

I hurry up the roof access ladder and open the ceiling hatch, and then advance to the flat roof’s edge. Pastor Paul lowers the hatch behind me as he whispers, “Go with God and do His work.” I pan the surrounding field for LD. I don’t see any, but I know they’re there somewhere. I stare in the most likely direction Moses should have taken hoping I might still see him off in the distance. I can’t find him though. I think he is either: already caught-god forbid; or he is long gone. Either way, I’m going to find and help my brother. I’m sure the enemy is looking at all the access points on this building. I decide to descend down the rope rather than chancing any of the access ladders. I hustle to the north end of the roof and observe while sitting with my back pressed against the inner wall. I toss my rope over the edge of the store. Peeling back my watch cover I see it is 8:12 am. One last peek around and I repel over the edge and down the outer wall. I make it down and then remain motionless in a squatting position observing for LD for about a minute. Gently, I pull down my rope while staring at the perimeter. I roll it quickly and store it inside my sack. I take a last look around then run for it. I debate as I run, “Should I take the tree line, or the alleyway system?” The urgency of my mission causes me to risk detection and chose the faster alleyway system. This is probably the way Moses took to Katie’s anyway. Off in the distance is a balloon of smoke floating high in

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the cloudless morning sky. I see another black balloon just below the first rising above the skyline. Neither of them has a smoke trail. I conclude these smoke clouds' were caused by two independent explosions. From my military experience I realize only fires leave smoke trails. Explosions usually blow up most of the combustible material leaving just a balloon. These float near the area I'm headed. I pray that Katie and Moses are alright, as I shift to a different cover position along the alleyway system.

I hear jets off in the distant sky screaming. I make out the Jets camouflage color identifying them as New California Guard Jets. The roars of these beasts help cover my tracks by diverting attention from me. I take advantage and double the distance between intervals of ducking, observing, and advancing. The "Doppler Effect" from the screaming jets suggests they are moving away fast and low. The fading roars gradually diminish revealing the sound of my trotting footsteps. I go back on stealth maneuver as the quiet settles in.

I pullback the Velcro cover and see it is 9:15 am. I deduct from the time I saved, and the distance I covered, that I should be closing in on Moses. "Poof, poof" noises suddenly echo throughout the alley. I know immediately what these familiar sounds are. They're two distinct explosions muffled by distance and elevation. It takes me a few seconds to figure out the direction and origin. "Roarr" explodes right over my position filling my ears with a million banging drums. The jet is low enough for me to read the New California Air Guard marking. It peculiarly heads in the opposite direction of the other two jets. Evidently, it has a different target to attack. I conclude all out war has been declared on Irreverent. I stick to my mission and concentrate on my objective through all this commotion.

I stop and observe at the end of this alley. The surroundings look familiar, but I am slightly confused on how to proceed. Last time I came to Katie's from another direction. Adjusting for this new information I determine Katie's place is close now. I still hear the ringing of drums affecting my ability to accurately detect sound. I know I must be making "huffing" sounds as I try and

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catch my breath. I'm afraid my breathing may alert a passing LD. I try and slow my breathing, but my chest is fighting me for the ability to control the air supply. Its expansions and contractions are in a race with my pounding heart. I place my hand over my mouth suffocating the uncontrollable sound until the race is over. Slowly, I move my head past the picket fence that I'm currently crouched behind. I peer left, and then right. I strain my hearing trying to observe for any unusual noise, but my eardrums are numb. I lean up and get ready to bolt across the street. All of a sudden, I see Moses! He's dashing across the adjacent framework of fences lining the street that I'm preparing to cross. I realize, if I hurry straight up the next alley I might be able to intercept him at the next intersection. I am greatly relieved that he's alright; at least for the moment.

I run across the street into the adjacent alley, pounding the pavement all the way. My lungs and heart try and catch up as I stop at alley's end to observe. I listen for the enemy, but all I hear is the thumping and pounding of my body, as my hearing begins to return. A cold sweat drips off my warm forehead blurring my vision. I don't have enough time to swipe it away, or wait for my heart and lungs to settle. I dash left hoping to cut off Moses.

Suddenly, I notice the two LD giving chase behind Moses. I immediately dive to the ground hoping to fly under the LD radar. I lift my head just enough to see them vanish pass the fence. "Poor Moses" is the only thing I can think of. I give all out chase just behind the LD as I turn onto their street. I see them closing in on Moses. I watch Moses advancing in a duck and cover maneuver. I immediately realize he doesn't realize he's under attack. If he continues on his present course he'll lead them straight to Katie and the kids. I reckon Moses is about a half a block ahead of his pursuers, which are a half a block ahead of me. I wish Moses would turn his head around to see them. I think, "Maybe I could alert him to the approaching LD?" I got to do something to thwart the perpetrators before it's too late.

Frantically, I look around for anything I can use to cause a diversion. "Got it," I tell myself. I see a glass bottle at the base of a

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dead tree. I dash up to it. I launch it into the middle of the street, and then hide behind the nearest tree. Two seconds later it explodes with a popping noise followed by a thousand tingling chimes. My hearing returns and goes on full alert. My ears turn into radars searching for any sign of approaching LD. My body shuts down all operation of its external motion rededicating its resources to my hearing. But, my heart and nervous system refuses to cooperate. I shake uncontrollably and shout at my heart, "Be quiet!" Crunching sounds come from the street as I think, "They bought it!" I peek out past the far side of the tree, trying to see Moses. "Thank God!" my mind exclaims. I see his tail end sticking out behind and old abandon sofa. I realize he knows about the LD following him. I decide to secure the deal with the LD. I blast the loudest whistle I can muster, and then scurry back towards the alley. The plan is for them to chase after me.

I hear the thumping of one set of feet follow me. I silently pray for a miracle as I run as fast as I can back to the alley. I don't dare slow down to make my turn into the alleyway. I lean away from my legs as they fight the "inertia slide" forcing them in the other direction. . My pumping legs try to pass my rushing feet, but their lack of oxygen and the slippery sand beneath my shoes won't let them. I am praying this LD does not have the supernatural power of a Demon as I run up the alley. I make it to the next alley as my gas finally runs out.

I hear the steady pounding of the encroaching LD "zero in" on me. My mind grows fuzzy as my selfish body steals all the oxygen for itself. My emergency overdrive is now over driven. I collapse to the ground. The sound of the impending racing LD answers the question; it is demonically powered? I seem to be going into a dream state as my eyes stare at the space ahead of me. The only things I feel is numb and tired. I fight to stay awake, but my pending doom convinces me to just sleep. My sense of fear drifts away, which scares me. I see something strange ahead and wonder if this is what happens when you're about die. A small fuzzy jet is streaming right towards my location just as I give up the fight. I think how unlucky I am to have taken on a Demon and

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a enemy jet.

My head's pounding as I come to. I have no idea what time it is, or how long I've been unconscious. I'm wondering why I am still alive. My blurry eyes squint as they adjust to the overpowering light. I feel a tiny presence touching my shoulder as I lay on my belly. I slowly turn my head around as my fear returns. I suspect this LD wants to torture me before it kills me. My blurred vision can only make out the detail of one small eye staring directly at mine. I strain my vision and my face to see more clearly. I notice this Demon has an awfully small eye. A tiny powerful punch hits me right between eyes. "No," my mind yells! I reason this was not a punch; it was a knock. Again, it thumps me in the same spot. Suddenly, my vision magically returns revealing the owner of this mysterious eye.

Flicker's face pecks my forehead once more, as if to check my conscious reflex, or just maybe to say "hello." My extreme emotional state "flip flops" from fearing, to feeling fantastic. My whole body shakes under the influence of the tremendous change of emotions. I see his friendly little blue face covered in blood, and then wipe my head to see if it came from me. My hand returns clean, as I use my other arm to slowly lift my body. I don't have to wonder long where the blood came from. I see lots of blood and a battered eyeball lying on the ground. Just behind it are a couple blue feathers and several bloody footsteps staggering away. I remember now thinking that the approaching jet looked kind of weird. It was blue and awfully small. I thought at the time my eyes were playing tricks due to the jet's speed and distance; and my state of mind. Again, he pecks me. "Okay," I tell my little friend, "I'm getting up!" I try and pat his little head and tell Him, "You sure are amazing." But, he leaps and flies away before I can. I head out in Katie's direction and pray Moses got away alright too.

I make it to the end of the alley and see the old gas station one more block away. I notice the front door is open as it slowly swings and squeaks in the warm morning breeze. This may be a sign Moses made it inside. Everything is remarkably still and quiet

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at this moment. My urgency slips back to a high state of reconnaissance. The last thing I want now is to alert any more LD. I play it safe and take my time searching and observing the premises before trying to enter it. I wait several minutes to see if there is any movement in the immediate area. My senses affirm it should be safe to move out. I leave the safety of my current position towards my objective inside the station.

The door swings slowly open at the moment I arrive. I dash inside the dusty building as a cloud mysteriously closes the front door behind me. I see a fresh set of footprints through a slight haze leading towards the mechanic's bay. My concern for the family hastens me, but my vision blocks my approach. The sun is painting swipes of tiny bright golden galaxies that are reflecting off the airborne dust. Each of these stripes of light blinds and muddles my perception. Their contrast is making it hard for my eyes to focus. I salute with respect to the light and proceed with my partially covered eyes honoring my sight towards the darkness.

I shuffle through the trail of leaves covering the bay till I reach the hidden door. Leaning over the top box concealing the door I direct my whisper behind it. "Moses, Katie, it's me Joey." I hear the doorknob screech as a thin line of light emerges in the door jam. Through it an eyeball appears. Quickly, the door opens, as Katie tackles me with her hug. "Thank God it's you. Hurry honey and come in," she softly commands me. I jump around Katie as she kicks the unwelcome leaves back into the bay. I see Moses at the table sitting and doing something with his arm. Katie locks the door and gives me a quick explanation of what happened to Moses while she tries to hurdle past me towards him. "My baby is hurt and I'm doctoring him up." I realize now that Moses is applying direct pressure with a towel to a wound on his arm. He turns and gives me a big smile. Katie pulls back the towel slowly as Moses repeats, "Owie." Katie continues administering "first aid" as the big guy waves his available arm inviting to hurry over.

I jostle through and hurdle over the clutter while hearing the kids play in the corner of the room. I stop for a second and

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remember the candy. I toss a few pieces to the tots who immediately recognize the delectable contents. I hear, "Thanks Mr. Joey," as I continue to move over to the table. Moses informs me, "I don't know what I would have done if you didn't alert me to the LD? I would have led them right here." I ask Moses, "How did you get away from that last LD?" I reach back into my sack and toss Katie my "first aid" kit. I tell Katie, "It comes complete with stitching equipment." She grabs it and goes to work on the big guy. Moses continues by stating, "I didn't! He caught up with me and tried to kill me. I just beat him to the punch." I sense Moses had no enjoyment putting it out of its misery. Moses hangs his head down in sorrow more than shame. "It was either that evil creature or me. I thank God he gave me the strength to break its neck." Moses goes on to tell me how it caught him and tossed him around like a "ragdoll." He hit the thing many times with all his might, but it just kept coming; like it didn't feel any pain. "The scariest moment is when it choked me and I saw straight into his empty eyes. He didn't have any pupils or a soul. I just wrapped my arm around his thin neck and squeezed as hard as I could. He dug his fingers into my arm, but I wasn't letting go till it was dead." I watch as Katie sews the pair of eight inch long gouges close. I ask him what he did with the body. Moses states that he stuffed it down the manhole in the street. I think hiding the corpse may have bought us some time. I'm hoping it will be enough time to get this family back to the "old department store."

We go on talking about all the activity we saw today. I try to draw some possible conclusion about the airstrikes this morning, while Moses continues to give me additional details about his encounters. He saw some Irreverent fleeing from the direction of the explosions. He hid from those evacuating their hiding spots and watched them search for new places to hide. He wanted to somehow help them, but his main concern was to get back here to his family. We both determine that last night's defeat has provoked all the evil forces to all out war on Irreverent. We immediately devise a plan to get all of us out of here tonight and back to the safety of the store. The sooner we get there, the

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better it will be for us all. I check the time and see it's already getting close to sunset. I ask Moses if they can be ready in one hour as I watch Katie finish applying a dressing on his wound. He tells Katie to bring only a small bag of personal belongings and to dress the kids warmly. I grab the remaining "first aid" supplies and shove it back in my sack. We all eat one last MRE before we head out.

I check my watch and flashlight. It's exactly 7:00 pm and thankful to find the batteries still work in my light. Katie gathers the kids as I go over some rules with Moses. "I'll take the lead with Katie as she follows just behind me. You bring up the rear just in case they sneak up from behind. Make sure none of the kids fall behind Katie too far. In an emergency; you grab one kid and I'll grab the other. Then, we all run." Katie finishes attending to the children as I show her and explain my command signals. I tell her what each signal means and how we will move to the store. She repeats my hand gestures proving to me she knows them. I look Moses in the eyes and ask, "Are you ready?" The big guy exhales a sigh of worry and says, "We're all ready." Katie looks around one last time. It's more a look of respect at what has been her home the past several years than a "good bye." I don't think she'll actually miss the isolation and cramped quarters, but it was still home to her and her babies. Moses steals the opportunity by asking if he can lead us in a prayer. I bow my head as Katie joins our hands. "Lord, I know you're here. I saw the miracles you performed last night. I never been much for praying, but I promise I'll do better. Give us another miracle tonight and keep all of us safe. Oh, and thank you for my new best friend. Amen." I look at him and graciously nod my approval. Moses tells the kids they'll need to be "quiet as a mouse." I open the door as the light goes out.

I hold Katie's hand and lead her through the path of crumbling leaves. She holds Jordan's hand, and he holds Hanna's. Momma warns them to keep a tight hold on each other all the way. She tells Jordan not to let go of his little sister's hand no matter what happens. She reminds Jordan he's her big brother and a big boy. I

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can smell the dark dust clogging my nostrils. The only evidence anyone is behind me in this darkness is the children's muffled coughs, and Katie's holding hand. We stop at the front door. I explain to the group to stay here until I motion mamma. "When I tell you kids to come, run with your mom. Do you think you two can run fast, but real quiet?" Both of them whisper, "Yes." "Okay everyone, here I go."

I stick my head slowly out the entrance and look around. I notice it is really dark again. Everything seems to be fine as I dash to the abandoned car at the edge of the station lot. I bend down and observe with my head just above the hood of the car. Everything seems clear and exceptionally quiet. This worries me because any noises we make will really stand out tonight. I pray, "God hide us and protect us." I wave Katie on as I continue looking around over the hood. I hear the tapping of all the little steps approaching me. Now, I hear a set of thumping. I already have my next shelter position picked as Moses whispers, "Okay, we're all here." I want to tell him, "Everyone within a mile knows that by your loud footsteps," but I say, "Good job," instead. I warn him to try and run a little more quietly though. I dash again making my way to what looks like a mound of trash on the other side of the street. I determine the pile is just big enough to hide all of us. I see a shadow about three blocks away cross the street. I debate if we should return to the station and wait a while. But, I reason it is better to keep moving rather than trying to move later tonight with a bunch of sleepy children. The shadow has disappeared for about a minute now. I decide to wave Katie across as I give her the "shhh" sign; which means to be extra quiet. I stare down the street to where the shadow crossed, and then back at Katie. In the dark she looks like a mother goose with her waddling goslings'. They arrive safely, but seem like they're slightly out of breath. Moses brings up the rear. This time he seems to be more alert to the sound he's making. I barely notice him this time.

I make it to the corner fence of the alleyway and wave the bunch over. I decide we are spending way too much time in this

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endeavor. Waiting for them to catch up, and then moving, has become time consuming and dangerously slow. I push my hand down to let Katie know to proceed here and wait. I run to my next location as she rushes to my previous spot. I keep repeating this tactic over and over. We seem to be moving a lot faster. I just worry about those little legs getting too tired. They have to take twice as many steps as I do. I keep pushing them on as hard as I can. We make it halfway down the fourth alley before Katie raises the "stop" hand signal to me. I acknowledge her by repeating the sign back to her. I figure we still have about twenty alleys and two open fields to cross. I give them a few extra minutes to catch their breaths, and their leg strength. While we wait, I pick three positions ahead that we'll use in our advancement.

It is getting cold out. I see little steam clouds puff above the already tired bunch. I determine this sitting around in the cold will stiffen and cramp their exhausted muscles. It can also cause excessive shivering, and even hypothermia. It's not so much the cold that does this; rather it is the large loss of body heat. I make a mental note to limit the amount and duration of the breaks we'll take from here on out. I snap my finger to alert Moses that it's time to get moving. He nods as I move to the next spot. I low run to a bush and stop. I decide to keep going and wave to them to "keep up."

I hear the growl of a dog about four houses ahead. I turn and wait for all of them to make it to my last spot. I silently give Moses the "wait there" signal with my hand. This growling sound is something I haven't heard in a while. I thought everyone has gotten rid of their pets. Lately, all the animals have been acting weird. Even pets have been turning on their owner's. This started about a year ago. It's as if they're no longer fear humans. Even little critters will attack. People just abandon their pets now. I thought all the pets were already killed, eaten, or had run off. I wonder where this one came from. He sounds like he's going to attack someone. I pray we can get by this crazed creature before he notices us. I move slowly, cautiously, and quietly onward.

I advance to a spot parallel to the growling menace. As soon

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as I squat he attacks something in the dark back porch area of the adjacent house. I wave the bunch to catch up to me, using this diversion to our advantage. I'm betting the dog will be concentrating on its prey long enough for us to squeeze by unnoticed. I watch the dark figures on the porch wrestle the dog. I'm filled with sorrow as I watch it being shaken and bitten to pieces. Now, I can only see shapes floating throughout the dark of the porch. I believe they are swatches of shredded clothing. I hear a gurgling sound as the growling and barking stop. The bunch arrives as I silently instruct them to move ahead of me to the next location. I decide to stay behind in case it tries to attack any of us from behind. Moses waves to me the "all clear" sign. It's not a second too soon as I advance. I see the dog's silhouette stand still on its silent victim. I hurry along as I think whatever he attacked is surely dead now. I pray, "Go with God and rest in peace."

I make it past the present danger. The incident gives the bunch a little more time to rest. I jump past them to the next position while waving the "wait here" sign as I pass. I find a protruding section of fence to hide behind. I give them the signal to advance as I "leap frog" ahead to an overturned trash dumpster. I wave to them to keep coming as I continue my rapid pace. I want to get as far away from this area as soon as possible. All the commotion the dog made is sure to have alerted someone. I just don't want us to find out whom that someone is. I keep us moving fast for another four alleys. The speed we've been moving surely deserves a needed rest. I wave the bunch up to my position watching Moses carry both the kids. Katie holds his arm trying to assist him, but she really is just weighing his tired body down. "We got to rest," the big guy commands. I tell him to take a few minutes as I go and scout the area ahead. "I'll be back in five minutes. Keep the children warm," I warn him. I see him sit and open his jacket to tuck everyone inside next to his body. As I dash off, I watch Moses wrap his big arms of protection around them all. I take this picture with me tonight, and will cherish it the rest of my life.

I make it to the end of the next alley and look around the

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corner. There seems to be a crowd of noises several blocks to my right flank. I thought it was too quiet for too long. I am finding out now why. It seems the evil was concentrating on this section of town tonight. I guess there are a few dozen or more LD by the sound of it. I hear yelling back and forth, and about a block apart. It seems to be holding steady to the area over there. I know I need to get all of us five more alleys sections away. If we can make it that far we can stop at my house for a safer rest. I hurry back to the bunch.

I approach to find them all catching some sleep; all except Moses. His worry to protect them keeps his senses heightened. I slow to a walk and give them a minute more nap. I report to Moses my findings, while trying not to wake the rest of them. "I located some big activity a few blocks over." I see Moses' face fill with fear. "Don't worry, we'll be alright. We have someone bigger on our side. We need to move quickly for the next five blocks. The LD are still far enough away for them not to be an immediate problem. We should be fine if, that's if, we can keep moving fast enough for that long. My house is five blocks away. Do you think you can handle it that long?" Moses reaches down inside and pulls out an extra amount of determination. His face fills with anger, not at me, but with his own self. He is attempting to force his body to handle the rigor that lay ahead. He nods as he stares into space while replying, "You keep us safe, and I promise we'll keep up." I tap his shoulder and tell him, "It's time buddy. We got to get going."

I jump to the next position and stare back. Moses is placing the kids in position as he rubs increased circulation into their arms and bodies. I give him a slight whistle to get his attention. He looks at me waiting for my command. I wave at them to advance. As they start to this position, I move to the next. I see little Hanna trip and fall, but daddy gobbles her up before she hits the ground. Each of the children's legs looks like Sandpipers scurrying across the darkened beach. I see momma's blackened arm sway backwards pulling along her dangling baby Jordan. She looks like a little girl frantically trying to launch a kite on a windless summer

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day. I pray, "Dear Lord, give us the strength of Sampson this night." I move out advancing onwards once more.

We make it three blocks before the family is totally worn down. Moses has been carrying both the kids for the last block and a half, while Katie is billowing tons of steam like an old steam locomotive going uphill. They need a break before all of them breakdown. I wave them to where I am. Moses chugs and jerks, then chugs again. Katie's legs are wobbling side to side faster than they are frontwards. They finally make it to my location. I stand and hug them while pulling them downward for a rest. I take my jacket off and wrap it around all of them the best I can. I reward them with, "You guys are doing great." I remind them, "We're almost there. It's just a couple blocks more." A cold chill suddenly comes over me, but I try not to shiver. I realize that my warm jacket may be the only thing keeping them going. "I'm going to recon the area ahead while you guys take a quick breather." I figure it's best if I get out of here so they don't see me in this condition. I pat Moses on top the head as I stand and prepare to take off. "I'll be back in ten minutes." Moses opens his jacket to tuck the family in close to his body heat, and his heart. I quietly shiver off into the cold crisp air.

I make it to the end of the next alley and see something lying in the street. The lump looks like a dark pile of leaves someone drug in the middle of the street. I realize this may present a possible problem, so I decide to go move it out of the way. I check both my flanks then progress to investigate. As I move towards it, I see small bits of something trailing in the direction it must have come from. These remnants don't look like leaves though. The lump's dark ruff jagged texture makes it hard to identify what it really is. I smell an appalling aroma as I approach the motionless mound. My stomach ties a knot between the sweet and noxious stench. I bend over and use my knife to jab it. It slides easily into the lump as I realize it's not a pile of leaves. I return my blade and observe the slither that came off it. I bring my blade nearer and notice it glistens like a black chunk of coal. I try bringing it close to my eyes, but my nose warns me to through it away. I pull out my

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flashlight and cup my hand around the lens. With my other hand, I balance the object on my blade as I lower my face towards the flashlight. I form a compartment to contain the light and turn my lab light on the specimen. I fight the putrid syrupy stink while categorizing the content. I finally figure out what it is; and I knew I know this smell. This specimen is man. I keep my light covered as I move over the lump's forward area. I flick the flesh and wipe my blade while shaking my head side to side in disgust. I say a silent eulogy for the poor baked being as I humbly try kicking the lump over to the curb. I remove it in sections as it disintegrates with each kick.

I hustle to the next block while analyzing the situation. First, I try understanding the purpose of the corpse. My mind proceeds along with my feet. "Why drag it around unless that is your intent. Why leave it there unless it just can't be drug any further." I make it to the end of this alley and see my backyard fence. It tries to lure me in for a momentary rest by telling me, "I'm just a few houses down." My temporary temptation is immediately interrupted by the echo of the crowd closing in. I sense their evilness and feel their wickedness is very close. I slowly melt backwards to blend in with the blackness behind me.

My only cover is the darkness. I don't have enough time to retreat, so I take evasive action. I sit and bend my legs near to my chest while opening my shirt. I spread it out over my knees and wrap it with my arms. I then hide my head inside my improvised "tepee." I hear their snarling voices turn the corner as I try and replicate the silhouette a dark bush might make. I pray the shaking of my panicky pants imitate breeze blown black branches.

I stare at my knees and demand my chest to stop moving. I begin to understand the imminent noise forthcoming. I notice several different sounds being dragged below the elevation of my hearing. They sound as if they are gagged garbled cries for help. The next thing I hear is, "Irreverent, come and get your friends!" A chorus of wicked laughter momentarily extinguishes the anguish being drug. I hear feet kicking against the coarse sounding texture of rough material. The amount of noise tells me the evil pack is

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right in front of me. "Come on, come and get them." These evil voices dare me, but are not aware I am just a few feet away. My soul tries to slice my shirt open and free my friends from these fiends, but my spirit shakes its finger and warns me, "This is not the time." Evil laughter fills the night as the smell of burlap burns the asphalt. I survive as they pass on by, but part of me dies with those passing cries for help. The shuffle and dragging turns the following corner as their merciless trail of laughter follows.

"Flop, flop, flop..." sounds trudge up from behind me. I detect them echoing up the alley. They stop momentarily to rest, and then the fleeting feet continue. I resume and re-pace my steps in the alley towards the approaching large black mound. A shouting attempt to whisper asks, "Are you alright?" I wave my hand signaling him to "keep quiet," as I hurry to meet him. I squat and observe as Moses joins me. He tells me I've been gone at least a half an hour. "We were worried. What happened?" I pat his big shoulder and give him the abridged version of my encounter. I tell him to go and get the family and meet me here in ten minutes. I tell him, "I'm serious this time; I'll be back in ten minutes. Time is of the essence!" I move out to go check on my house, as Moses moves back to get his family.

His flopping feet trickle away as I come within reach of my backyard fence. I back up and lower my body against it, while taking a quick look around. Everything is still. I turn and face the fence, and then lift my head slowly up over to view the backyard area. Two shadowy figures sit where nothing should be. They're not moving at all, so I'm not sure what the figures really are. They're sitting near my backdoor, which is ajar. Just now, I see what looks like an arm rising up and down. I deduct these shadows are a couple of LD waiting to snare me. If there are two out back there are more out front. I pull my head slowly down by lowering my entire body at my knees. Very cautiously I turn away, and then softly creep away.

As I arrive at the rendezvous point, I peel back my Velcro's to find the excursion took six minutes. I bend behind a bush near the alley intersection and wait for the return of Moses. My mind races

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to figure and alternate plan before the bunch gets here. I know they will be weary, but I will need to keep them moving. "Dear Lord," I silently pray, "Please tell me what to do and how to do it." I urgently stress, "I need an immediate idea!" I hear quick erratic tapping stirred within the consistent flopping sounds drawing near. I rack my head for an answer to this dilemma. Once more I beg God for help. I now see four trotting legs linking this floating shadow. I think to myself, "I got it!" The thought occurs to me as the fatigued family arrives.

Moses and Katie pant while I pull some rope out of my sack. I pull Moses bent over body away from the bunch to inform him about the change in plans. He straddles his slightly bent knees with his hands as he shuffles along with me. I measure off two sections of rope that are each five arm lengths long. I tell Moses, "This is what we are going to do," as I slice free two sections. "We can't make it to the store tonight. There are too many LD vigilantes roaming the streets. Trying to make it to the safety of the store is just plain suicide. It's just too far. My house is out of the question. I even thought of searching for a nearby abandoned house. But, we just can't be sure what's inside. They're setting traps for us. They're angry and want their 'pound of flesh;' and want it tonight." I continue telling Moses my plan as his face cringes at the task ahead. But, we both agree on the ordeal together. Our new goal is get to "T" real, real fast. "This is our best chance of survival."

Moses moves back to his bunch and briefs them on our new plan of action. First, he apologizes to the family for all they've endured. He asks the children, but he stares at Katie as he says, "I need you to be brave a little while longer. Can you all do that?" I give him a few seconds to explain what we will attempt as I continue winding up the two sections of rope around my bent left arm. "Hanna, my good friend Joey is going to carry you a while. You just hold on to him tight and you'll be..., just fine." He gives her a peck of reassurance on her little red cheek. I move closer while winding the last section. Both the kids seem to be already half asleep. I see a lot of eyelid, but little of their eyeballs. "And

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Jordan, you're going to ride on poppas back for a while. If you get tired you just go right on ahead and sleep. Is this okay little man?"

I pull Moses towards me, as his face stares at Jordan's, waiting for his nod of approval. I slide my hand on Moses back instructing him to bend over. Jordan answers daddy by nodding, "Yes."

Moses says, "That's my big boy." He winks and smiles at him, and then I lift and lay Jordan on daddy's back. I grab one rope and toss it two times around the big guy. I hang the loose ends over Moses chest and ask him to tie it. I ask Katie if she has anything soft in her personal belonging's bag. She recollects she might. She abruptly tosses it on the ground and jerks it open. She hands me a towel. I ask her if she has one more in her bag, maybe under the "kitchen sink." My irritating humor temporarily wipes the worry off her face as her hand dives back in. It's replaced with a "half baked" smile and a sideway shrug of her head. She pulls out a second towel while quietly and firmly informing me, "Towels can be tiny blankets, wrapped pillows, an extra jacket, 'first aid' dressing, and to dry off dirty kids." I give her a big quirky smile as a reward for her witty response. I quickly tuck the first towel between Jordan's head and the big guy's back. He stands, and then I bend over. I think how I'd like to meet a woman one day just like Katie. Any woman that jokes in the "face of danger" is my kind of lady. She lifts Hanna on to my back and uses Moses as the template to perform the task at hand. I snug the rope tight and whisper over my shoulder, "Is this hurting you honey?" Katie checks the rope by sliding her hand between Hanna and the rope. Katie tells me, "She's just fine," and then pecks her darling a kiss while sliding her open hand gently across her tiny face. I turn my head back around front and stand, while Katie tucks the towel in against my back, and Hanna's head. I tug the rope a couple times to see if it's still taut, and then hand Katie my rucksack. She quickly stuffs her smaller bag into it, and hangs it over her shoulder. I look around and ask, "Well then, are we ready?" They all nervously say, "Yes." I look at Moses and nod. He gives a quick short nod back. My final instruction is, "We'll move fast, steady, and together." I lead us on.

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I turn left after leaving the alley and proceed to the street corner. A second later we're all together hiding next to a telephone pole. I motion them to "stay here." I slowly move away. I cautiously walk into the adjacent street while observing in both directions. I continue across as I wave my hand, signaling them to advance. I hear their hurried steps race across the pavement as I bend down next to another pole on the other side of the street. I stare into the darkness ahead looking for the next adjacent alleyway, and for any LD. Katie and Moses don't get a chance to rest, as I jump to the next position near the alleyway entrance. I follow a wet reflecting trail up to the alley trying not to slip on it. I turn in the alley and notice the wide strip continues up the street. I know in my sinking spirit what made this mark.

Hanna feels like she's fast asleep. I run off and feel her little legs again uncontrollably bounce and kick the sides of my belly. I hear Moses huffing, and one of them slide on the wet mess left in the street. Their approaching noise tells me they must have recovered alright. I leer in the alley as I try and remember exactly how far "T" is. I stop momentarily just inside the alley and look back to see them approaching. I don't wait for them, but instead I jump ahead to the next hiding spot. I want us to keep moving. I see a spot by a little shed ahead that looks like it may be a good cover spot. I race to it as I calculate we have five or six blocks more to travel. I plant us slightly against the shed and turn to see the couple struggling to make it their last few remaining steps. I whisper to them, "We'll wait here till you catch your breaths." I peek around the side of the shed as they sit and lean their backs up against it. My face keeps watching down the alley as they gasp. I try to pace my breathing attempting to quicken my recovery. I try hiding my weakness of being totally exhausted by trying to remain strong as their example. Their rapid breathing slows enough to seemingly handle a little more lung pain. I turn back to them and whisper, "It's time." Moses sighs, "Yes," and then grabs Katie's spaghetti looking arm, yanking her up.

I place myself in a "racer's starting position," and then dart to the next hiding spot. I don't look back, but I do expect their steps

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to confirm my actions. I think as I run about slowing the pace, but I realize speed is our best insurance against getting caught. The less time we are exposed gives us a greater chance of success. I hear their steps again, so I “push off.” I keep pushing them to keep up as we rush through our maneuvering procedure for the next three sets of alleys. I just hope they can hold up.

I tell myself, “We have to ‘brake’ before we all break.” I locate another shed ahead. I dash to it and take a much needed rest. I turn and look at the shadows “leapfrogging” two stops behind. I notice a window on the shed’s side, and no lock on its door. I decide I’ll sneak a peek while they catch up. It looks dark and empty. It also looks just big enough to hold all of us inside. I grab the door handle and softly press the latch. I tug the door easily as it slowly begins to open. I lean my head slowly around the corner of the door and prepare myself to slam it closed. But, I don’t see anyone inside. I move inside and hold the door open. I see the shadows are almost here, as I watch them force their bodies on. They are close enough to see my hand waving them inside, as I prepare to shut the door. My beckoning hand keeps on instructing and encouraging them to make it. Fifty feet away they notice this is a place of rest and refuge. I hope it gives them the “oomph” they need to finish running here.

Just a few feet away I see the sheen of ice on Moses hair. I suddenly realize how cold it has become. I guess my concentration to hurry has made me numb tonight. Katie’s clothes and hair are gleaming too. I reason, Moses steamy breath blew over the trailing Katie and froze to her clothes. I am able to make out their faces now. I keep waving them on their last few agonizing paces. “Come on guys. Just a few more steps,” I loudly whisper.

I take several steps out and help drag both of them in the shed. They hysterically gasp like someone has suffocated them. I help Katie down in the dark corner and watch Moses bend and grab the wall. They continue deep breathing as I look outside with my head. No one is around or has followed us. I quietly close the door and return inside.

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“Okay guys, we just have about three blocks to go. We move out...” I check the time and tell them, “In ten minutes.” Hanna stays asleep on my back enjoying the heat I must be producing. In a way, she is my tiny jacket. I strain my eyes by constantly rechecking the iridescent minute hand on my dark watch. I keep repeating every few minutes how much time is left. I try encouraging them with, “We’re almost there guys.” In the back of my mind I know it is growing more dangerous. We’re not just battling time, but hope too. I believe all the LD activity may have given “T’s” secret location away. It would only have taken one careless Irreverent brothers to let them know its location. Or worse, one captured brother who’s willing to trade his loyalty rather than accept his awful fate. “One minute,” I tell them. I notice Jordan sleeping on the bent back of Moses as momma comes to kiss both her babies. I say aloud a soft prayer of protection for the remaining journey, “God, please give us swift strong legs.”

No sooner do I finish praying and I hear many far off voices. They still sound like they’re several blocks away, but I can’t tell if they are coming this way. “Come on guys, we got to go!” The voices are faint enough for me to hope I am the only one hearing them. I don’t want the family to panic and run afraid. This will tire them even more while dashing their hopes. Katie gathers herself as Moses gives me a strange look. I think he’s acknowledging he hears the voices too. It seems so by the stare he’s now giving me. It also looks like he’s thanking me for not alerting Katie and the kids. She checks the children and confirms they’re still asleep. I see their tiny limp bodies and think how much exercise they’ve gotten tonight while sleeping. I nod to Moses then dash out. Katie is next as Moses brings up the rear.

I think of another strategy while running. I slow and wait for them to catch up to me. I wave each of them to each of my sides. I keep a steady pace while directing each of them with both of my outstretched hands to their prescribed positions along side of me. I focus straight ahead so they can both hear my plan at the same time. “We’re going to speed things up by forgo our ‘duck and

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cover' maneuvering. I want both of you to stay alongside me. We're going to jog at a pace a little faster than this the rest of the way. We need to get there fast. Do you think you both can handle it?" Katie reluctantly forces herself to say, "Yes," as I see Moses out of the corner of my eye nod his affirmation with his face full of determination. "Here we go then." I increase my speed slightly as my mind drifts to that unconscious place filled with pass thoughts.

The closeness this family has given me tonight kindles memories of a family life long ago. I see my little sis playing dolly and teaching it to swing. I'm on the adjacent swing listening to her tell Miss Polly to hold on tight while she pushes her. I don't have a care in the world, as I try kicking the clouds out of the sky with each closer swipe of my feet. Momma yells out the back door "Joey! Is your sister with you?" I yell back a lackadaisically, "Yeah mom!" I feel so apathetic and happy at the same time. Sis lectures her dolly for falling off the swing, as I fly my jet exploring the world. "Kids, I want you in here in five minutes!" I try and give negotiation a chance and yell back, "Ah mom, how about 15?" She once again yells to us, "10 minutes, and I expect your hands to be washed. We're going to eat dinner." I yell back, "Okay momma," and feel I negotiated an end to all war and ushered in world peace. My heart tells my momma and sis, "Goodbye," as mind forces me to drift back to reality. I soon enter this tired, worried, and worn body; and regain the pain of living once more.

My sight recognizes the area just ahead. I form "starting gates" in front of my replacement sis and momma. I guide them along as I slow my pace. We reach a "quick time" marching pace before I pull their reigns. I steer them with my outstretched arms to the bushes near "T". We calmly stop and bend down in the bushes. I try and hush their noisy breathing by using my hands to orchestrate them to my tempo. "Slowly, slowly," I command, as I try training them to regulate their breathing. My hand moves up as I take in a deep breath of air. I hold it till my hand drops, and then slowly exhale. They try matching this pattern to the tune of my moving hand. It takes about a minute before our breathing

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returns to normal. I try and keep rhythm as my eyes travel around the premise. I untie the rope holding Hanna, and then slowly release the rope. I continue the breathing technique while gesturing to Katie to catch the sliding baby.

I quietly explain where we are going. I point out the stone entranceway next to that pile of rubble; which is on the other side of this open area. I then tell Katie to grab Hanna and hold her tight. I turn to Moses and ask him if he can find his way to the department store from here. He nods a confusing, "Yes." "I'm going to the secret entranceway. I'll wave you on if everything turns out alright. But, if you see anything happen to me, take off fast and as quietly as you can. I'll play decoy in the event the LD are around. You head to the store, but keep in mind the old floral mill as a backup. Do you understand?" Moses forms the saddest face I've ever seen. It instantly freezes into a cold stare. I command him once more, "Do you understand?" He speaks straight ahead into the dark, "I will never forget all you've done for us. I want you to know you are family now. I promise you, we will be together; in this life, or the one to come." I almost shed a tear, but I rub his slick icy head instead. My last words to him are, "I love you too dear." He continues to stare as I lean to get up. Katie almost tackles me with her hug from behind. I hear her over my shoulder, "You gave me the greatest eternal gift. God bless you Joey." I give a slight turn of my head and a slight nod of approval. My heart silently replies to all of them, "You're welcome family."

I advance slowly forward trying not to brush a bush or even snap a twig. I weave my way to the edge of the clearing and begin circling the perimeter. My head moves like a radar back and forth across the clearing, and then returning to the forest. The frosty brown grass crunches under my feet forcing me to take slower thoughtful steps. The darkness reveals a worn path around the stone that the daylight camouflages. The worn area is darker than its surroundings. I continue moving while staring for any unusual shadows or figures in the forest. The night turns every bush into a crouched Demon, and every tree into a motionless LD. I near the

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circle's end without incident. I know the next step of my journey can endanger many lives. I pray I'm doing the right thing.

I slowly spin and observe while taking my final steps toward the entrance stone. Something in me just doesn't feel right. It's that feeling you get when someone is watching. I stop and stare for signs of red dots in the dark, but I just don't see anything. I realize I can't keep standing here. I got to either: return to the bunch and jeopardize them, or try and enter "T," and possibly jeopardize its existence, and the brothers below. I think of the family hidden in the bushes as the hair on my neck stiffens. Haste warns me to take a chance and enter. My subconscious tells me to listen to my dangerous feeling. Logic commands my common senses, "there's no evil here." I decide I'll have to take a chance for the family's sake.

I progress swiftly to move in position and slide the stone away. I bend down close to the ground where I nervously pounce down the secret unlocking key. I hear the click of the unlocking mechanism. I place my hands on the slab's cold frosty surface and begin pushing it away. My worse fear is realized. I hear stamping and snarling sounds charge towards me. Frantically, I try relocking the lid by sliding it back to its original resting position. My shaking hands are sliding faster than the slick stone is moving. I hurry and lean forward in an attempt to apply even more pressure and counteract the stone's slipperiness. I hope the increased pressure will slow the slipping of my hands long enough to beat the remaining stone before they completely slide off it. I win, as it clicks shut. I calmly and purposely stand to face my foe with outstretched arms. I surrender as I watch a dozen, or so, LD preparing to pounce on me. Several have those evil red eyes bouncing up and down, while the rest are like black pearls peering in the night. They are just several feet away as my eyes look to the tree line. Four figures drift away as my heart goes with those shadows. A great peace comes over me right before this doom does.

Chapter 7: Heaven Over Hell

My spirit suddenly grabs my hand inviting me to go to a better place. I am too weak to resist its placid pull. I am surrounded by this most peaceful white mist as I venture forward effortlessly. It feels so warm and moist. It's like being in a warm relaxing shower that cleans and massages away all the worries and pains of the world. I close my eyes and enjoy its sweet aroma of fresh purity. In the distant mist comes a voice. It sounds so familiar and loving. It whispers words I've not heard for an eternity. "Joey, my dear Joey," wanders softly up to my most willing ears. I can barely make out the approaching figure floating with its two faces. It mysteriously travels towards me searching for a person with my name. The wafting whiteness swirls around revealing a glimpse of the intertwined couple. "Momma? Is that you sis?" The inseparable figures unlock and stretch their approaching arms towards me. I fall to my knees in repentance. I cannot fight back the uncontrollable tears as both sorrow and joy overtake me. I lean my head back and bare my naked heart. The cleansing flow washes over my cheeks. Every desire, worry, fear, is spit out of my soul. The only thing I feel now is innocent love.

I am squeezed by unconditional arms that will never ever let

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me go. I close my eyes as I see them, smell them, and hug them once more. "My little Joey," momma comfortably whispers. She once again strokes my hair like she's done so many times before. I remember falling asleep as she'd hum a relaxing rhythm to her soothing strokes. I once again melt to sleep in the longing of my momma's secure arms. My adoring sister tricks me with her soft duplicating touch. Then, she abruptly tickles me back awake. Her devilish side once again shows her natural ornery affection. She begins wrestling me out of momma's embrace while momma laughs. I hear her treacherous giggling that has gotten me in so much trouble in times past. She continues forcing her tickles and pecking kisses all over me. I curl to defend myself against the merciless princess onslaught. How I love this moment. How I never want it to end.

"We've been waiting for you Sonny. We have always been waiting for you." I pull ever so slightly away so I can see their wonderful faces once more. I notice, and then say, "Momma, you're so young and pretty. And, you too sis!" She sweetly says to me, "Oh my dear Joey, you're what beautiful is." I uncontrollably cry some more. She whispers, "Aw, now then. You just let it all out baby." Momma holds me tight as her warm hand swipes small circles on my back that melts every bit of anxiety away. I tell them how much I love them and how much I miss them. I feel my momma telling me, "We always knew inside you would find your way home to Heaven." Sis just looks, smiles, and slowly nods her confirmation up and down. "How I missed you," I tell them in my attempt to hug them both once more.

Momma tells me, "We were allowed to come visit to tell you something." She stops and places the soft palm of her hand against my cheek. Sis continues the statement, "God wants us to tell you He is with you. He is also very proud of the love you have for others." Momma resumes with, "You have to return for a little while more, but know He will be your champion over all evil." I gaze not into my momma's eyes, but into a prophet's. Mom says, "There is coming great sorrow and destruction. You will need to rely on His word, and your strong faith." Suddenly, my momma

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and sister are being peeled away from me as I am pulled backwards into the steamy haze. The last thing I hear as they disappear is, "Remember, always carry our love with you and God's hope." I continue drifting into the misty abyss as my heart receives a kiss of faith. I'm sucked back into the white womb and cry out, "Bye mamma, bye sis! For a little while more."

I am standing in the cold once more. My blurry sight adjusts from the heavenly brightness to this hellish darkness. At once I detect streaks of orange, blue, red, and white within this swirling shadowy tapestry. My eyes begin to focus through this carnival of lights as some strange force holds me still. I am powerless to move. I can only stand and silently watch these puffs of fireworks on the horizon. My consciousness slaps me back to life, rewinding my memory to the looming doom. I once again see the field and feel the fear. But, the field is clear. I rip myself out of my powerless pose and spin around into a defensive position. I see absolutely nothing. The burden of death has fled the field as I stand just confused and in awe.

I hear a loud explosion, and then ringing. There is another even closer explosion, but all I hear still is this peaceful ring. Out of nowhere, I am jerked to the ground from behind. "Is this an LD?" I turn over and am instantly comforted to see it is my brother Gary trying to say something. His mouth is moving, but no words are coming out. He looks like he's yelling at me. I turn my ear towards him so I can hear him better. As I do, I hear a louder ringing overtake the first one. Great flashes blind me as the ground begins to shake. I keep straining to hear as Gary grabs and drags me down inside the chamber. I lay on the steps dazed and paralyzed for some reason. I stare up just in time to see Gary sliding the stone cover back in place. Everything is surreal. I don't hear any sound now; not even the ringing. I am numb and dumbfounded.

Gary jumps over me as the chamber light comes on. It looks like he's in a hurry to go down below. I notice I am awfully tired while feeling funny vibrations coming randomly from the stone steps. I see the last of Gary as he vanishes into the lower

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chamber. I want to follow him, but I can't for some reason. I question, "Why has he abandoned me in my time of need?" I am too tired though to get up and tell him what kind of friend he is. My ear itches, so I pry my left hand from the shaking step to scratch it. There's something like spit on my fingers. I grow angry with Gary as I roll the goo between my fingers. I think he must be "fighting mad" to spit on me. I can't remember doing anything to make him mad though. I recall him yelling at me outside, but I don't remember doing anything to hurt him. I don't remember him spitting on me either. Maybe he spit on me outside? I am curiously intoxicated and angry, but, in a way, kind of wonderful. I think, "What happened to the Demons?" I bring my hand to my face and stare at the glob in my hand. I really try and focus-in on it, because it looks kind of funny. My head is hurting as I think, "Maybe this is why I can't see right, and why I feel dizzy." I squeeze and stretch the jelly mess between my fingers. It feels like spit, but, why is it red? I want to get up and go down stairs with my other brothers. But, I am just too, too tired. I wish I could hear something. I think I'll take a short nap here on the steps.

"You get that side of him, and we'll carry this end," the voices say. I think things are returning to normal, because I can hear again- hooray! I wonder, "What are they trying to carry away in such a hurry? What the heck are you guys doing?" I open my eyes and ask, "Why are you grabbing me?" I feel like I am a rope in a "tug of war" game. I tell them, "Okay, you guys had your fun, so put me down." But, they won't listen to me. I feel myself getting angry and defensive. I sense them running along while stretching me. "Why are you doing this?" I tell them. I am confused because these were my friends. I feel real sad now. I wonder what they're going to do to me. I want to fight them off. But, I am too tired. I think I'll sleep a couple more minutes.

"Joey, can you hear me?" I open my eyes and see Gary. I ask him, "What did I do to make you guys so mad at me?" He leans over me, and, "What the heck?"-hugs me! "You were hurt by the meteor shower," he informs me. My mind race to recall the last memories I have of being outside. As I do, warm wool blankets

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press on me while I am being sucked down into this comfortable cradle. I try and figure out what happened and what's going on. Gary says, "We felt the chamber shaking over and over. We knew something was happening outside.

I ran upstairs to see if I could find out what was going on. I opened the hatch and saw you standing in the middle of the meteor shower. It was like nothing I've ever seen. They were exploding everywhere." I reach to my ear because Gary's voice sounds real muffled. He grabs my hand and tells me, "Your ears were injured. I put cotton balls in them to stop the bleeding." He lets go of my arm as I proceed to confirm the cotton in my ears. I tap the area and feel the soft fibers. I gently squeeze and twist it to identify with my fingers that it really is cotton stuck in my ears. "The explosions became so violent we even thought we'd be destroyed. Everything was shaking down here. Well, I saw you just standing there. I don't know how long you were outside, but it was long enough to injury your ears. Everything else on you seems to work okay."

I tell Gary "My head hurts a little and I am real sleepy." Gary replies, "You take a rest. All the commotion seems to be over now anyways." The last thing I hear is, "Goodnight," as I see the room get dark.

I can't tell if I'm dreaming or awake as I lay in this quiet darkness. I wonder if I'll have permanent hearing damage, while also thinking of what may have happened to the LD. I have a sudden moment of fear realizing they were about to tear me to shreds. I have a lot of questions I just can't answer. Is this a bad dream? I feel my nose and realize I am awake. I think of Moses, Katie, and the kids. My heart becomes excited and yells to me to get up and go help them. I feel half rested, but I know I cannot sleep if my friends are in danger. I grab the sides of this cradle and realize it's really a cot. I push up while wishing I had some light to show me what is in this dark. The cot slides against the stone below and scratches it. I turn and sit sideways to pat myself and see what I am wearing. I identify I have my pants, socks, and undershirt on. I feel around on the floor and find my boots. I

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fumble in the dark but manage to slide each one on. I figure this is good enough until I find some light. I stand and slowly stretch my arms out in front of me and proceed to blindly feel through the darkness ahead. My body follows my probing whiskers that I imagine are moving in a straight line. I step with one foot then slide the other alongside it. This should help me to stay in a straight line. I count four steps and still feel nothing. I wonder if this is the supply room. I rationalize that it has to be, just because of the sheer size of the emptiness. Ah, I feel a flat surface finally. This has to be a wall. I'll try moving left while I slide my hands on it. "Oops," I think, "I just kicked over a box." I reach my hand down and acknowledge it has the feel of cardboard. I run my hand over its top to locate its end and height. I step over it with my left leg as I return my left hand to the wall. I slide my hand further along the wall and lift and then join my right leg to my left. "Ah, finally," I feel the door. I slide my hand down until it thumps the knob. I open the door and can see again.

I turn back inside the room and see my shirt, jacket, and belt. Quickly and quietly, I put them on. "Joey, did you get a good sleep?" my Irreverent brother Sam asks. I see him in the doorway as I finish getting dressed. I tell him, "I can't spend any more time sleeping! I have to help another brother named Moses." I friendly warn Sam not to tell the others I'm up. I'm afraid they might try and force me to sleep some more. I tell Sam, "I can't afford anymore beauty sleep. I got to go. I'm not tired." He tells me, "Well, you shouldn't. You've been asleep for a day and a half." My body's telling me, "That's impossible!" I am still tired. I tell Sam, "I got to go." I grow angry with myself at the thought I would ever leave a family in such dire need. Sam senses my serious urgency as I watch his face staunchly change to a shade of loyal blue. I hurry and buckle up. I kindly shove Sam aside so I can get out of this room now! Other brothers come out of the chapel and ask me how am I feeling? I split the crowd with my hurried departure as I tell them, "Sorry, out of my way. I have to go on a rescue mission." Gary jumps in front of me blocking my way. He tries convincing me nothing could have survived the storm the other

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night. I tell him briefly about the new Irreverent headquarters at the "old department store." I inform him that God is supernaturally protecting it till He returns. "Please tell everyone they are welcome to come live there. But, I got to go find Moses." I start pushing Gary aside as he asks, 'Who's Moses?' "He is like Randy, a new Christian. But, he has a family. They are out there somewhere in the middle of all that evil. So, get out of my way Gary!" Again he stops me. "Hold up a second. I'm coming with you." I think I may need a second hand. This overrides my concern for Gary's safety compared to that of the children. "Hurry, and get your stuff," I tell him. I head to the steps and wait for him under the chamber door. He scurries to get ready.

Gary returns with a rope and with his pockets full of stuff. I want to ask what's in them, but the pressing time won't let me. "Let's go!" I slide this stone out of the way and move up to the next level. We gather under the final stone. I give Gary instruction, "It's very important that you follow my commands as we move along. This mission and your life could depend on it." Gary's sincere nod promises me he will. I unlock and slide the stone a foot to see the overpowering daylight. This bright hue suggests it's about noon. I pull my watch cover to see it is actually 1:15 pm. I peek outside and see all the devastation. The forest is burnt and half the trees have fallen or are shattered. I turn some more and see most of the surrounding buildings are smoldering, and then notice pile after pile of burning debris. I return my head inside and shake it side to side in disbelief. I tell Gary, "It looks like a bunch of nasty campers left their sites without cleaning their mess, and forgot to put out their campfires." I think about poor Moses. I place my hand on top of Gary's head and say a short prayer. Both of us respond with a simultaneous "Amen." I finish sliding the stone the rest of the way, and then step out. There's no sense running for cover, so I just stand in the open and stare at the ruin. Gary slides the stone back in place then joins me. This is one hell of a mess. The last time I saw anything resembling this was war pictures of 1945 Germany. All the distant craters have turned the town view in to what looks like a block of pumice. Gary

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states, "It looks more like the surface of the moon than our town." I wonder if anyone could have survived this. Gary and I run towards where I imagine the alleyway was, as we start the journey of searching for our friends.

We find the dust covered trail resembling the alleyway and begin walking. I tell Gary, "Be ready to 'high tail it'." I explain how the LD should be more worried about regrouping and surviving than going around searching for us. But, we should still be ready in case we come across any LD wandering around. I look up the alley through the streaks of smoke hindering my vision to what maybe ahead. I try explaining what happened the other miraculous night as Gary fights to stay alongside my long strides. He seems diligent to hear my riveting encounter, but all the debris, holes, and smoke force him to straggle just behind. I periodically wait for him to catch up as he tries dodging alongside me. His drooping mouth and shaking head suggests he's not only amazed to what happened, but consumed by my unbelievable encounters. Gary is especially intrigued by the part about finding Katie, and rescuing Moses. I kind of have a hard time accepting it myself. Now, he understands my urgency to find this family.

I see the "old mill," as I quicken my pace. I figure we'll stop by there first. I'm surprised to find the building is still standing after passing so many totally destroyed. I do see it has taken some damage as we draw closer. We step on to the property as I notice a couple dozen chunks of what probably are meteorites strewn between us and the mill's back door entrance. There are long drag marks in the soil caused by the skidding pieces. Oddly, each points their trail away from the building. I have no idea why these trenches would be traveling away instead of going right through the building.

The only thing I can come up with is: the meteors somehow ricocheted off the "old mill." That seems impossible since meteors are rocket rocks made of iron traveling at supersonic speed. They should have went right through the mill. Every possible solution I try coming up with renders more questions rather than answers. We cautiously enter the back of the building as I continue to rattle

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my brain for possible solutions.

I swipe at the irritating dust cloud circulating throughout this large room. I move over to the counter holding captive the cobweb covered cash register. I wonder, "If it could only talk, it could tell me about all the interesting people it serviced, and the wonderful stories it must have overheard throughout the years." I move towards the counter thinking it may be a good place to hide two kids under. I jump over a broken chair and shuffle around a display case that's leaning over. I see it has a hole punched through its glass cover; probably by a past pilferer. "Moses, Katie!" I yell, hoping I might get a response. I see Gary out of the corner of my eye venturing into the adjacent room. I leap over the dirty counter and bend down to check behind it. I find no signs anyone's be behind here lately. Debris blocks me from continuing any further. I retrace my steps back to the entranceway and take a different course of action. I continue to finish checking the rest of the room. I don't find any evidence that anyone may have been in here. I rub my burning eyes and cough several times. I find the air is becoming a toxic mixture of dust and the encroaching smoke seeping through the back door. I pull my undershirt up and over my nose hoping this will reduce some of my ailments. I decide to keep moving, but now as fast as possible in an attempt to limit my exposure. I leave this room and follow after Gary.

I look up as I enter this larger storage area. I am astounded to find a hundred pin holes of light streaming through the tin roof. Tiny streams of yellow lasers illuminate the entire area. I see Gary on the other side of the room bent down. He is leaning up a panel of plywood that was covering a fortress of boxes, cement blocks, and a couple chairs. I call out again, "Moses, Katie!" I journey closer to Gary to analyze his finding. As I do, I journey through the tiny galaxies of stars orbiting over my entire body. As I get close, I hear Gary determining someone was definitely here. I bend over to view the reason for his conclusion. I count four MRE wrappers on the floor of this shelter. I grab one to find it had only been partially eaten. I smell and squeeze the bitten remains to find it's fresh and still soft. This under area is also fairly clear of dust

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compared to the surrounding floor. I agree with Gary's conclusion. "Yep, someone or some bodies were here recently." A spark of hope fills me as we continue to finish checking the rest of the building.

We end up in the main foyer as I think this is where dozens of customers once stood. Now all I see are dirty broken windows, and tumbling twines of dust. I wonder how many anniversary bouquets were sold here, how many Valentine roses were given to lovers, and how many wreaths were made for funerals. I stare through the broken windows at the wooden "Gardener Mill Florist" sign still hanging-half cocked. One chain now holds it as it twist to the sound of a churning chain. It was probably the prettiest crafted sign I ever saw; at one time and long ago.

I look for footprints, but only find waves of fresh driven dust on the floor. I find I am now able to breathe again. The outside breeze sucks out the repugnant air as it swirls in the fresh acidic stench. I see the main door is partially open. Maybe it's because Moses and the bunch had to leave in a hurry, or it was just left that way by a distant looter. Our next stop will have to be the "old department store." "Come on Gary, we're wasting light." We join at the doorway and step out together.

We stop just outside to give a quick look around. This side of the property only has one crater. But, it looks humungous. I can see it is near the "old department store," about a quarter mile away. I also see what looks like half a jet sticking out of the bushes up ahead; which is off to the left. I tell Gary, "Something isn't right," and warn him to stay close to me.

We detour slightly to check the fuselage, and maybe figure out the reason the jet was destroyed. This could prove to be very important. As we draw nearer to it, I see many different size and erratically placed holes. I wonder "Could the meteor shower do this?" I then think "What kind of enemy of theirs would have the power to do this?" My mind recalls the militias forming back east. I reason, "Is it possible they somehow did this?" I stare further at the holes to see what kind of weapon could have taken a fast moving jet down. The erratic pattern in the jet's skin rules out the

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linear pattern machinegun fire would have produced.

We make it to the downed jet as I begin to notice the holes intrude from the topside inwards. The metal seems to be punched down into the jet, proving these holes came from a higher source. This suggests the attacker must have been airborne, and even higher than this jet's altitude. I grab a handhold on its top portion, and then pull myself up for a closer look. I wonder what might have happened to the rest of the fuselage. I take a quick look around the perimeter to see if I can identify where it is. I don't see a thing except that the ground looks to be free of any craters. I store this new knowledge under the category of "that's odd."

I return to checking the perforations in the fuselage. So far, meteors would be the best candidate for the holes, because of the various sizes and erratic patterns. I look for remnants of rock on the jet's skin, but I can't find any.

I decide to investigate further, so I slide down and enter through the broken section of the fuselage. I am unexpectedly overtaken with JP5 (jet fuel) vapor and hold my breath. I search quickly, but find no meteorite fragments of any kind. I do see exit holes suggesting whatever destroyed this jet, packed enough power to completely shoot through it. I also see the stretched metal skin around the holes above me pointing inwards. I hurry back outside and move away. I take a gulp of sustainable fresh air, and then take one more look at the jet's breakpoint. It is a perfect clean break. This is also a candidate for the "that's odd" folder, and I file it under "weird."

I deduct the most likely reason for the holes are from an explosion that must have come from somewhere above the jet in flight. I am still not sure what penetrated the skin. There should be at least rock slithers inside; even if the majority passed right through. Also, the entry points equal the exit points. If I draw a line connecting the two, it would be straight. This proves that either: the jet was not moving, or the penetrating debris was moving faster than the jet. I also figure the holes could not be from the meteor shower without some signs of meteor remnants inside the fuselage. The metal would have surely cut at least a few

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slithers of the rock away. And, the holes could not have occurred after it crashed, unless there were small craters around the crash site. As for the breakpoint; that section looks like it was sliced in half. The breakpoint should display jagged stress marks on the skin of the jet. This would look sort of like a "Shark bite" pattern. But, it is perfectly straight up and down, and "clean as a whistle." The cut also had to be faster than the jet was traveling, or the slice would be diagonal. Yes, it was somehow sliced straight through, and all at once. This all would have happened while traveling at a high rate of speed. That is why the other half of the jet is not anywhere near here. It could have veered in another direction, or just kept going several more miles. My last question is: why hasn't the Guard been here to claim the remains? I don't even see any signs they've been to its viewing. I conclude that I have no idea what downed this jet. I do know something happened to it that I must have never seen before.

"Let's go Gary," I command. Gary finishes circling the jet and wants to know what happened to make it crash. We move out as I reason the best answer to tell him is, "It ran out of gas." Gary tells me, "You're crazy." I laugh at him and continue towards the store. Gary shakes his head side to side mumbling something that makes him laugh. I have this idea that he's not thinking of giving me a compliment. I figure humor is a soldier's best weapon.

I see the afternoon light is turning orange. I peel the Velcro cover to see we have only about half an hour till full sunset. I want to hurry along pass all this debris before it gets too dark. I don't want us to trip into, or on anything, and get hurt. We'd really be bait for the LD then. I figure I'll time our arrival to the edge of the property just as it is getting dark. We move steadily and quietly through the smoky remains the rest of the way.

I look for any signs along the way that would tell me Moses might have been this way. The frustrating noxious haze is making it hard to see though. I again pull my undershirt up and over my nose to keep some of it out. I notice Gary doing the same as we struggle along. The elevation starts to change as we begin walking on the circumference of the large crater between the "old mill"

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and the store. I still can't find anything saying Moses was here.

We travel around the top of the oval mound caused by what seems to be a huge meteorite impact. This gives us a chance to look inside the deep depression. I measure it to be three to four hundred feet across and five to six hundred feet in length. I try and keep my balance while walking as we view inside the eighty foot deep hole. The dust clouds of thick and thin vapor floating near the bottom causes me to strain my eyes. I am astonished at what I think I see at its bottom.

Chapter 8: Mighty Hand of God

I once saw a picture of a Chinese terracotta army buried for thousands of years. The bottom of this pit looks remarkably similar. I now realize the New California Guard was here. But, it rest at the bottom of this ravine. Unlike the terracotta army, this one looks like a giant hand smashed it into the ground all at once. Between the clearing clouds in the pit I am able to identify separate formations of different military units. I've seen this type of battle formation before. It looks to be about a battalion in strength buried at the bottom. Whatever happened to them was so sudden it buried these soldiers in formation, and with no chance of retreat. No one had time to evade the instantaneous attack. I see shattered weapons of all sorts. There are torn limbs still holding their weapons, and small black abyss where their bodies probably once stood. I wonder if they were pushed straight down to Hell. We make it to the end of the impact crater, and I see a soldier's squashed helmet, and part of a rifle lying on the ground. I can only imagine the imposing pressure must have just snapped the remains over here; like playing a game of "tiddlywinks." The helmet displays a stretched "Trinity" brand and part of the New California Insignia. I stick the fragment of rifle in

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the ground and hang the helmet on it. My heart commands me to say a soldier's prayer as we depart. I hear the flag of the flat helmet swaying in the wind as I silently pray, "May God have mercy on all these sorry souls!"

The sound of the helmet rubbing gradually grows dimmer as we near the edge of the store's property line. I see virtually every tree and foliage here has been consumed by various deaths. Some look as if they shriveled up slowly, dying over time. Their trunks are like old men covered with wrinkles of worry. Others are burnt warriors from a more recent battle. And, some became instantaneous casualties that were smashed to pieces. This seems to be the perfect poster child for those opposing war.

I see a good cover spot against a fallen tree. I lean over to pull some of its broken branches away, and then sit with my back resting up against its trunk. The sun has set and we wait for the complete cover of darkness. We sit patiently and plan our next move.

I try and concentrate on the next plan of action, but my mind fights me for some urgent answers. The first has to do with the meteor storm occurring seemingly at the same instant I was to be devoured by the LD. The second is: what caused the catastrophe in the first place? Moreover, why did it happen at that precise moment? Was that what scared the LD away, or was it something I'm just not aware of-yet?

I pop my head up and scope the clearing between us and the store. Everything looks pretty silent. I hear Gary rearranging the bulge in his pockets preventing him from sitting comfortably. I try to imagine what he shoved into them earlier, as I recheck the surrounding forest for movement. I return to my sitting position and ask Gary, "What the heck is in your pockets?" He pulls out a handful of glow sticks from one pocket. There must be about seven or eight in his hand. I think of a reason he'd bring them, as my mind again ponders other questions posed to me today.

What is bothering me most is what caused the crater that killed the army. A meteor should have obliterated any evidence of their existence. The sheer heat from the impact would have

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turned the sand to obsidian, or glass, while frying everything inside the crater. I plainly saw structures intact that prove a meteorite couldn't have caused it. And, the jet's destruction still plagues me as well.

I swipe these questions off with the brush of patience, thinking time will eventually answer them all. I have a feeling the answers will be found somewhere in the supernatural. My main concern now is how we'll get under the store's holy umbrella of protection. If ever we face an LD assault it will definitely be between the edge of this clearing and shortly before the store. I know there are demonic eyes close by. They would like nothing more than to capture an Irreverent under the nose of God. I can feel them lurking. The darkness is quickly descending and reveals to me a possible solution.

I jokingly whisper to Gary if he might have some string in his other pocket. I need some for the diversion plan I'm thinking of. I am surprised by his answer; "Kind of." He fumbles in his pocket filled with stuff and hands me a small roll of "baling wire." I tell him, "Perfect, this may help buy us the time we're going to need." This stuff has tons of uses. It is what farmers wrap around bales of hay. It's also the preferred tool of ranchers, because it bends and twists so easily, but it's really strong stuff. We even used this wire in my old military unit to set almost invisible traps for our enemies. I ask him what possessed him to bring it along. He just shrugs his shoulders. I commend him, because it's just what I need for my diversion.

"Gary, open the glow sticks foil packets and hand them to me one at a time." I then tell him, "But, don't break any and active them." I uncoil a section of wire that seems to be about a hundred feet long, and then slide it through the first stick's retaining device. I move about ten feet along the wire and twist the wire locking the stick in place. I then lay it down and roll off another ten foot section repeating the procedure. After twisting them all on the wire, which actual totals nine glow sticks, I adjust the coil so it loosely overlaps one stick on top the other. I slightly twist one end of the wire loosely to the tree trunk that we're leaning

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against. I twist the other end tightly from behind on my belt and between my jeans's. The diversion plan is now ready to activate.

I tell Gary what we're going to attempt. My goal is to attract any enemy away from us and towards the bait. Hopefully, they'll bite and give us just enough time to get the store. I figure we have 300 yards to run to safety. I proceed by telling Gary, "I want you to slowly and quietly move a hundred feet to my left and take cover. When I'm ready, I'll give you a whistle. When I do, I want you to run as fast as you can towards the store's entrance. Don't stop no matter what happens." I ask Gary if he understands. He nods, "Yes," as I prepare to pray godly protection over us. I pat his head and signal him to move out. He meticulously dances over the debris while disappearing into the dark.

I didn't tell Gary that I'll be his first line of defense. I pray the darkness will trick the enemy into believing there is a bunch of Irreverent running behind me. The line of lighted glow sticks is supposed to resemble a single file of Irreverent dashing to safety. Hopefully, they'll be preoccupied with the line. But, I should be the main course before Gary is.

Everything is peaceful and quiet. I remember the old cliché saying, "its quietest just before the storm." I lean over the coiled sticks and place my jacket over it. I reach my hand in and begin breaking each one to active their green iridescent glow. My other hand presses down on my jacket to make sure no light is leaking out. After I count nine snaps, I tuck my jacket under the rolled pile to seal in all the light. I gently lift my jacket and its contents, and then softly shake the bundle back and forth a dozen times. This will guarantee that the iridescent mixture is fully saturated and at optimal lighting capacity. I set the pile back down, but on the other side of the tree trunk this time. I take a final look around the perimeter to see if any evil might be rearing its ugly head. It seems all is clear, and silent. But, I can smell the stew of trouble boiling.

I lean up until I reach a sprinter's racing position. Very carefully, I slide my jacket from under the roll of lights, while making sure not to let any green light escape. I keep my hand

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grasped to my jacket collar; that I'm bringing with me. Everything is ready to go. I just need to whistle and run for my life. I take several slow deep breaths attempting to slow the nervousness of my heart, and store some extra air in my lungs for the long fast haul. My head shifts left facing Gary's position. I lick my lips knowing this whistle has to be loud and perfect the very first time. I'm ready.

I whistle and jump the log onto the open field. I make it from "zero to infinity" in less than three seconds. The wire sings a song like someone playing a saw with a violin bow. The glow sticks bob up and down, looking like people running in line just behind me. I reach the end of the line as my force tears the loose end of the wire off the tree. The wire holds firm to my belt as the green lanterns chase after me. The darkness hides Gary, but his thumping steps seem to be matching mine stride for stride. The gulping sound he's making tells me he's already out of breath. I just hope he can make it to the safety of the store.

We make it about two hundred feet before I hear what sounds like "King Kong" crashing out of the forest. By the sounds of it, it's coming right at me from my right flank. I turn on what remains of my after burners and run faster than I thought possible. The rushing sound coming from behind me is covering twice the distance in the same amount of time that my legs can cover. I am at the halfway mark with nothing left in my fuel tank. I know in a few seconds I'll be finished. I unfetter my sailing jacket and find its freedom gives me a little more speed. The noise tells me the size of the assaulting regiment must number in the hundreds. I can't imagine so many could hide from my prior detection. The sound is just about on top me, and I still have several hundred feet to go.

Their monstrous green shadows have already overtaken me. I feel the first set of terrible gnashing teeth chomp into my line. The weight pulling at it makes me dip down. It's huge! It feels like I caught a full fledged Demon. It jerks the wire with its superhuman strength slicing my belt right off. The plan worked! I hear it tangle in the twanging sound of the wire. I reach down inside myself for just a little more juice that will allow me to put more distance

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between it. The stampede of thumping feet continues to rush after me. It's like I'm trying to outrun the raging waters of a broken dam. Suddenly, the following sound changes into an avalanche of colliding booms. I determine the herd must be piling up on the first tangled Demon. I judge, I have only a hundred feet to go as more thumping begins chasing me; now from both my flanks. The bones in my legs feel as if they're turning to gelatin. I just know I'm not going to make it. I see Gary pass me as I get ready to collapse. I reluctantly release my fears into the fog of my mind. The only thing left in me is the satisfaction that Gary is going to make it to the safe area. Finally, it ends. I trip myself in exhaustion, and bury my face in the grown. "God, help me!"

The dirt in my eyes blinds me, but I can still hear that Demon slowing. The height of his snarling tells me it is a giant. I'm not sure if its fear or my instinct to survive that causes me to dig at the dirt with my hands and feet to pull myself away. All of a sudden, I am pulled violently backwards; feeling like I'm being stretched apart. In my agony, I helplessly stare at the store that is sadly oh so close. This monster twists and squeezes my legs, tenderizing my entire body. I suffer as it laughs. I know this excruciating pain is just a taste of the torment coming. I grab at the ruts I'm making, hoping somehow to pull myself away. But, it all seems useless. I cry in the dusty dirt, as it drags me off to my demise.

"Let go of him!" a man's voice commands, while galloping towards me. I tell myself that I know this voice. It's my dear crazy friend Moses. I try telling him to go back, but my parched throat will only expel a couple coughs. Moses fearless command must have intrigued the Demon enough to make it slowdown. I make out Moses bouncing silhouette, which is close enough to grab. Moses screams, "In the name of Jesus, let go of him!" The mention of this holy name forces it to drop me. Moses snatches my right arm and frantically drags me in the opposite direction. I see this army of shadows behind Moses rushing towards me with outstretched arms. They are all yelling just one word, "Jesus!"

Pastor Paul jerks my left arm and races Moses toward the

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store. The army passes us as they shoot their shouts. I turn my dragging head to see the beast behind. My army stands firm in their defensive line, as the Demon growls furiously in pain. We make it to the point I fell previously, and then brush past it. I sense victory approaching, but I see the beast jump the line and make its final assault. My feet try to assist both brothers as they push at the dirt. Two columns of light appear as we race between them. I hear the sound of a jet and see the blinding brightness of the sun as my brothers pull me inside the safety of the protected store. The last thing I remember before peacefully passing out is the words, "To Hell with you!"

I smell coffee in this dream. I can almost taste it. I don't want to ever wake up again. I just want to stay safe awhile in this wonderful dark dream and smell this coffee. "Hey, you awake?" I try and identify this whispering voice, but I know thinking will force me to wake up and steal my dreamy coffee.

"Hey Joey, I made you a cup of coffee." I don't see Dave, but I know his voice. I wonder where in the dark he's hiding. "Is this really a dream, or did I die?" I start remembering the feeling of being safe. I remember Moses and Paul pulling me. I remember the awful monster tearing at me. But, I was pulled to safety! I ask myself, "How can I be dead?" All this thinking is killing me. I know I just want that coffee! I remember now that my legs were hurting real bad. Maybe, the Demon tore my legs off and I bled to death? Maybe, I did die? "How is he?" Hey, I know that voice too. How did Moses get here?

This is a weird dream. Why do my legs still hurt if I'm dead? Why is there an earthquake in this darkness causing my head to shake? And, why is Moses saying, "Wake up?" Maybe I am alive? Maybe, I'm just dreaming? I feel the shaking again and hear the words, "Hey buddy, it's time to get up." The pain in my legs slaps me and reminds me I am really alive. I open my heavy eyes to see a smiling Moses as his hand moves back from off my shoulder. I see Dave half sitting on my cot holding a cup of coffee over my chest. I try and grab it, but leaning up causes sharp pain in my legs. "Lay back Joey, you got some really bad bruises on your

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legs," Moses explains.

"Don't worry though, there's no permanent damage." Dave moves the cup close to my chin as Moses helps lift my head. I feel him tuck a rolled blanket under it. "Ahhh, I finally get my coffee."

I watch Dave flail his arms in excitement as he asks me, "Wasn't last night amazing?" I look at Moses as he turns to walk away and ask him how Katie and the kids are doing. He stops and turns around. I see him welcome Hanna and Jordan under his outstretched arms. "We're all fine." Moses shoos the little darlings towards me. Their outstretched arms cover my chest in their attempt to hug me. Their cold little arms warm my heart. Jordan tells me, "I'm glad you're alright Mr. Joey." Hanna just bobs her tiny head into my belly. I see Katie sneak in the picture; as Moses magically grows a set of arms that rub his chest. Her head peeks around his shoulder while telling me how happy she is. "Thank you Joey," Katie cries. I watch her tears roll down as she mutters, "We have so much to tell you, but you need to get better." She waves the kids off me and instructs them to follow her. "Jordan, Hanna, come on, we'll go over there and play." I see her stare and smile, saying, "You just get all better. You hear!"

Pastor Paul maneuvers around Katie as she departs. "How are you doing Joe?" He moves closer and stops almost alongside Moses. Paul reaches his hands up from behind Moses and places them on Moses shoulders. Paul tells me, "I don't know where you'd be if it wasn't for the strength of this big guy?" Moses face begins to blush with and "oh, shucks-it weren't nothing" look. The only thing I can say to them is, "Thanks guys for holding on." Moses informs me, "Katie is right. You need some more rest. I got to let you know Joey how happy I am right now. Thanks for saving me and my family. I love you man." This tough strong face that's been through so much shows signs of cracking. His eyes glaze over as he retreats towards Katie.

Dave seems to be going crazy trying to get a word in. I see Paul getting ready to speak as I get ready to sip. I lift my free hand slightly to signal Paul to wait. I tell Dave to go ahead and tell us what's on his mind. "Did you see the Angel? Did you see those LD

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flee when he sliced the thing to pieces? The Angel was huge. I was so scared of it, but he stopped the Demon in its tracks!” Dave fills me in with all the emotional aspects on what happen last night. I fill in the blank spots left in my memory with his explanation. The blast of light last night was what Dave recalls as a huge fiery sword. It caused an explosion as the Angel struck the evil beast. I figure that’s the natural reaction of holy meeting evil. I see the exciting pressure discharge from Dave’s face as he finishes telling me this fantastic story. Pastor Paul patiently waits while nodding his affirmation. Dave looks to him checking to see if Paul continues to agree with his recollection of his story. Dave finally remarks, “That was awesome!”

Dave returns to his sedentary posture waiting for our reactions. Paul nods up and down as he comments, “It’s amazing what God can do.” Dave asks if I need a refill, as Paul’s mouth pauses in the open position sucking air. I hand Dave my cup and tell him, “Filler up buddy.” He grabs it and moves away. Paul asks if anyone told me what else happened here the day I left. “No,” I tell him. “But, I am sure interested to know about the downed jet and the enormous crater.” Paul sits on the edge of my cot knowing this will take time to explain.

“Well, a short time after you left here we were attacked. That downed jet you saw tried to bomb the building.” I remember a jet flying over me in this direction when I was going after Moses. Paul continues with, “I heard the roar of its engines soaring nearby. I went to the top of the building just in time to watch it finish circling and head straight at us.” I shake my head knowing something fantastic is coming next out of Paul’s mouth. “The jet starts diving downwards. Then, out of the sky appear these magnificent creatures. One had eyes covering its whole body, and even its wings. It was gigantic; simply huge. The one with eyes all over it leaps above the jet, and out of nowhere his sword appears. It was so bright that I could hardly bear to look at it. The creature swung its sword and chopped the jet right in half. The front half shot straight upwards and the back half just dispersed into a rainbow of colors.” I remember concluding that the jet was sliced

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in two after observing the downed jet. Paul continues explaining, "It raised its sword and flung beams of light at the front half of jet causing it to crash really fast. The flinging light turned into flaming bullets as it passed through the jet. Right after it crashed I noticed the New California Army that had lined up on the edge of the store's property." This is the part that really intrigues me. What kind of weapon could kill all those soldiers the way I found them? Paul states, "I heard a command come over a loud radio transmission to 'Attack'. The two remaining creatures flew fast upwards and raised their open hands towards the heavens. Then, they quickly swung both their arms, dunking this swirling void down towards the army. A second later, there was this enormous crater followed by one large boom. I couldn't see what the Angels threw, but in a way I could."

I ask Paul if he might know what caused the magnificent meteor shower. He tells me he found the emergency radio in the box-I discovered. During the storm he turned it on and tuned it in to different shortwave emergency frequencies. All the stations reported similar messages about the shower and its destructive power. I learn this was not a local event. Paul describes listening to places as far away as Europe and Africa, telling how they were experiencing the same catastrophic event. "I went to the roof and saw a million fireballs falling from the sky. They were exploding everywhere except right here." I just stare at Paul in total marvel. I realize exactly everything we both have seen these last few days. It surely was the mighty hand of God.

Chapter 9: Step of Faith

I remember reading a 1960s dictionary definition for the word “compassion.” Back then there was no concern for “political correctness,” or the worry of offending those sensitive to the Christian religion. Its definition is one I will remember the rest of my life. It simply stated: “Compassion is the feeling of distress and pity originating from the action of Jesus Christ as he hung on the cross, often with the desire to alleviate his suffering.” I look out from the roof top over the town and feel this same type of desire. I know there are still Irreverent out there who need to be saved. I stand in the satisfaction that I have been able to help some so far. But, my spirit yearns to find every soul who would be saved. I shake my head side to side in disbelief to all that has happen recently. The revelation in my mind of what lay ahead weighs my head down with both worry and pity. I fear a higher calling that’s pushing my chin up towards Heaven.

It has been two weeks since my legs were injured. I’m now able to hobble around without the handmade crutches the guys made for me. They are still bruised badly, but I’ll live. I stiffly descend the roof access ladder back into what looks like “Noah’s Ark.” The brothers and sisters have organized this place into a

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large home filled with lots of love. The women have given it their special touch with witty ways of decorating it. It's the first time in years since I've seen children safely playing and heard them happily laughing. I stop halfway down just to marvel at this phenomenal family, and adjust the swinging crutches strapped on my back-which I still carry just in case. In this moment I thank God for all He has done for all of us. I kind of feel this is what Heaven will be like.

I see Amanda waving to me while she converses with her two friends. I finish my descent and head over to say hello. During my previous mission Pastor Paul took Amanda and several brothers out to the edge of town and rescued Jerry and Ruth. These are the same two people that were traveling with Amanda and her brother Jimmy before they were captured. They seem fairly fit now, but the group had to drag them back here. They found them badly undernourished and unconscious. They had not eaten or drunk water in a week. They seem to be in high spirits living here in their new home.

"Hey Joey, do you got a second?" Scotty yells. He's waving me over to a group of adults on the far side of this large room. I hand signal Scotty with my index finger, meaning I'll be over in a few seconds. I detour around Amanda, Jerry, and Ruth while telling them, "We'll meet up later. I have something important to do now." I head towards Scotty's beckoning call alerting me that it is time for the daily briefing. I am forced to slam my brakes on along my venture and give the right away to a wild pack of racing children. I feel my legs being spread forcefully from behind. I am surprised by this kid's sheer determination as he runs through my legs and after the others. I tell the tiny tike those eternal words of wisdom my momma passed down to me many years ago.

"Patience is a virtue kid!"

I carefully cross the intersection and proceed on course towards Scotty's continually coaxing hand. There is a small excited group of gossiping women that I try and run over, but they have the reflexes of birds on a highway. I limp through and excuse myself as they part for me. I notice my interruption never causes

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them to lose a single beat of their chatter. "Ladies," I tell them, as I hurry to hear the real news from the men on the other side of them. I shuffle pass them to the meeting area. "Sit over here Joey," Scotty instructs me. I follow his advice and find myself sitting in the front row of this creative bleacher of boxes. Dave tries to squeeze his rear in between Scotty and me. He pats my shoulder with a combination "hello" and a "scoot over." I think how nice it is not to have to worry about the noise I make, or the LD crashing through my front door. Dave hands me a cup of coffee as I tell him, "Thanks buddy!"

Kenny has been given authority to oversee and delegate details devoted to our everyday living needs. He leads off the discussion by showing us his new creation. It is a "details list" drawn on a large section of cardboard. He finishes his class by explaining how to read the thing, and how to understand our assignments. Moses steps up next. He has been put in charge of all the supplies. Everyone voted him Quartermaster because of his enforcing size. I think it was a good choice. At the end of each week he tells us how much food we used and how much is still left. He also gives accounting of the total population. This has changed recently, as almost all the brothers of "T" have moved over here. Moses tells us the grand total is now 167. I expect that to change dramatically in the coming days as more find out about this supplied safe haven. A couple other brothers give accounts on their assigned, less relevant, positions. I sit through their lethargic conversations while anxiously waiting for Pastor Paul. His job is to monitor the shortwave radio, and-of course, to also give us inspirational advice. He is our link to the outside world. He knows all the real news. We remorsefully begin clapping for the final departing speaker, and then joyfully for our approaching Pastor Paul.

"Will everyone bow their heads," Paul says. "We thank you Lord for all your blessings and your divine protection. Please lead us towards the kingdom and reveal what you would have each us do. Amen!" Solemnly, I lift my head to see a sea of grace filled faces repeating their appreciative "Amen." Paul places his daily

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activity report on top his podium of supply boxes, while several brothers politely instruct everyone to be quiet. I sip my coffee while I tentatively await the news.

“First of all,” Paul states, “I have new information on the devastating meteor shower. I overheard many request for more military medical supplies. It appears most of the military armies across the continent had numerous casualties. I was able to determine there is a major outbreak of disease among their ranks. And, it seems to be spreading fast.” I turn towards the interruption caused by the clamoring stares. Each one is worrying these plagues are heading our way. Pastor sees the distress and reassures us God has led us here for a holy purpose. He opens his Bible to Palms 91:1 and reads, “For He will deliver you from...the deadly pestilence. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.” I remember this passage that I often repeat. I call it my “911” call for help. Paul comments, “The food of faith is the word of God!” This calms this crowd of believers.

He continues his report stating other related effects caused by the meteor shower. “Several New California transmissions suggest the military is having problems protecting their own bases of operation. It seems Irreverent forces are assaulting some of the smaller installations. I was able to decipher that the weaken Guard is having troubling defending them. What I think is really interesting is even starving LD are attempting to loot these supplies.” I figure this is good news to some degree. Although we all have suffered much devastation, it has caused Irreverent to unite against the EVIL in this world. I deduct it won't be long before the news reports the Irreverent militias are here.

The “lunch call” has been sounded by my brother Randy. “Lunch is served!” he yells. Pastor Paul reminds the hungry multitude he will have a Bible study in one hour, and a sermon this evening. I hear his itinerary and make a mental note, but it's my growling stomach I am listening to. “Come youngsters,” Randy barks, “It's good and hot.” Dave taps the side of his pot warning us to hurry, because, “It won't stay warm forever.” Katie and the

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kids hustle behind me in line. I tell her I can't see who's ahead of me. I lazily turn, in my daily ritual, acting like I am hypnotized by other events. It is my way of letting her and the hungry kids cut in front of me. They sneakily snicker as they duck and scoot under my raised right arm dedicated to rubbing my chin. Katie smiles and asks me if I know what's in the pot. I lean up to see and report, "It looksss like we're having whole grain rice, andddd gravy, andddd that's it." I think it's not much, but it's a feast when you're with friends. I hear Dave amusingly ask, "How's Captain Ahab doing?" It's his way of making fun of my current limp. He chuckles while I ask, "Rrrr, have you seen my real leg? This peg leg is killing me. I know where it is. Dave cooked it and put it in the pot!" Katie smacks my arm as the kids yell, "Ewww!" She salutes me with, "Darn you Joey!" Randy holds his laughter trying not to acknowledge my bad behavior. But, he smiles as he slides his hung head side to side in disapproval. I tell everyone, "At least its real meat for a change." Once again I'm clobbered for my ruddiness.

I watch Katie as she retrieves four helpings. I grab the extra serving knowing it's for Moses. "I'll bring it to him," I tell her, "You go sit with the kids." She smiles her "thank you" at me while herding the youngsters off. Randy, in the meantime, finishes plopping a portion on my plate. I hobble off heading to join Moses who's trapped in the confines of the supply chamber.

"I brought you some lunch Moses." I lean over with his plate onto the board running across the entrance way of the supply room. I watch as Moses appears out of the freezer room heading towards the aroma coming from his lunch. I swing the board up and step into the restricted area to meet him. We find a spot to sit, next to his desk made of MRE boxes. I notice the list of supplies on it flutters as we sit. "Thanks Joey," precedes Moses extending hands. I remark, "I never got a chance to find out exactly what happen that night. So, what did happen after you left 'T'?" I watch as he hurries to gobble down his first bite. He grabs another portion with his spoon and chews out, "We made it just past the 'old mill' store just as the meteor shower started." He

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takes another bite and rushes to swallow. "I saw little explosions begin hitting the ground all around the area, so we turned back into the 'old mill'." He takes another spoonful and prepares to devourer it.

"This was right before we made it in the building being bombarded. I could see through the open door that the floor inside was glowing, while I heard them hitting the tin roof." Moses forces another spoonful in his mouth just beating his teeth dedicated to continuing the conversation. "I looked up and saw several big ones headed straight towards us. I didn't have time to even move, but I thought, 'Dear God,' and they immediately change their directions." He swallows and says "They somehow reflected away from us and shot into the ground. It was like some invisible hand was swatting them from hitting the building. We ran inside to the big room. I made a little chamber out of stuff I could find in a hurry. We all slid under it, but all the meteors stopped hitting the building the moment we got inside." The big guy stops eating and hangs his jaw in a moment of reflection, and then he slowly sincerely states, "It was a miracle Joey."

One more week has passed, and my legs feel almost "good as new." I know my time to continue my mission is about ready. These last three weeks I've discussed and reasoned my plans with a select few of the brothers. New news during this time has helped me to decide what action I need to take. Come to find out, the meteor shower poisoned much of the world's exposed water supply. The radio reports the oceans and seas are a soup of floating dead fish. It's about the same in the fresh water rivers and lakes. "Trinity" announced it will be using the term "Wormwood" to identify all contaminated sources. They have charged their affiliates to mark those bitter sources with that term. Our water here seems to be fine though. It comes from a well deep below. Plus, we have stored a fairly large supply by filling all the available containers.

I anticipate things are going to get a whole lot worse. Thirst and starvation are just two of the contributing factors. Toss in chaos, madness, and evil, and you'll see why. I know there is only

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one thing that will keep a sane soul going through the times ahead. It will take more than logic or reason to survive. Its believing there's something eternally better; where all is good and right. It's a place where we'll find perfect unconditional love. It's hope in something not yet seen. You just have to ask one person, and speak one name. He is faithful to forgive us for anything. That's His promise, and that is my mission in the days ahead. It's to spread this simple "message of the cross." Pray for my success dear eternal brothers and sisters. And, pray for all those lost souls that they can be found in the name of Jesus. This is my faith, and this is my hope! This is surely my destiny!

A month has now passed and I'm "fit as a fiddle." I've grown stronger in my upper body through the mishap. I dedicated this injury "down time" to doing a lot of pull ups and other various upper body exercises. I know this new found strength will be necessary searching for and retrieving Irreverent. I've also made some useful tools to bring on my missions. I'm going to spend the rest of this day packing, planning, and praying. A good night sleep, then I'll be heading out at first light. This is something I've got to do alone. I am going to need to move fast and react fast. I won't have time to worry about someone else. It's possible I may even have to go into Hell's very mouth. This is my calling and my cross to bear.

Morning has come as I marvel at the beauty of this sunrise. I've always felt there was something mysterious hidden in the crack of dawn. I lean my elbows on the dark cold ledge of the roof as I bring my homemade binoculars to my eyes. I stop just short of them so I can ponder the last few stars gracefully submit themselves to the gobbling blue velvet light.

A childhood memory overtakes me in the moment as I hear momma tell me, "This stuff between the darkness and light is where wishes are answered, and where dreams come from." I guess this is why I always love breaking dawn and twilight so much. I finish placing my new found tool to my eyes, and search over this sea of destruction. I am checking over the route I'll be taking along my mental map. I'm looking for any type of activity

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while recording any obstacles in my path. I notice several distant pockets of possible disturbance in the far off distance. I just wish these glasses could tell me whom the movements belong to. This is the area where I'll be heading.

This first mission is devoted to finding those pockets of Irreverent still holding out and holding on. My goal is to identify these pockets for a future rescue mission. I've packed some basic essentials that will aid them in surviving until this can happen. First, is some little plastic bottles of bleach that contain instruction on how to decontaminate and purify stagnate water. Just a few drops per gallon will do the trick. Second, is giving them multivitamin pills; courtesy of the former pastor of "Project T." He made sure he left a large supply of these. This will help restore the essential strength they'll need for the arduous trip traveling back here. Third, is some high protein bars. I'm bringing these because they're easy to carry and they're loaded with what the body needs most. All this stuff was found or made by my brothers the last few weeks. Pastor Paul prayed blessings over all this stuff; that it may all be divinely directed and delivered. These supplies have been secured inside discarded wrappers of MRE. There are two more things tucked inside. One is a general hand drawn map of town pointing out the best possible routes to the store-which has been renamed by the brethren as "Project Hope." The other is the most important thing I'll be giving. It is a mini handwritten scroll with key Bible passages that the women put together. It details healing, inspiration, protection, guidance, and salvation scriptures. Most important is the "Good News" on how much God really loves them. It's the food of faith that will keep them alive. Every little package is tied together with a string. The women decorated each package with the words "Project Hope," and painted a sparkling cross on the intersecting twine with fingernail polish. The final touch was the kiss and prayer each woman gave each special package.

I fling my rucksack over my back and make my way towards the side of the building. Slowly I lower my rope and proceed to repel down the wall. I'm not worried anymore of being suddenly

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attacked, but I am worried about alerting the LD to my existence. They have suffered several great blows recently, and are probably more concerned with recouping than finding me. This gives me a slight advantage for at least a little while more. I'm just trying to stay out of the way of these Sharks path. I can see my bent shadow rushing to keep up as I make it to the edge of the former forest. The morning light is changing towards a blend of pastel pink with a harsh yellow. I have about five to ten minutes to make it to the alleyway heading east before real light reveals who I am. I hurry along using the morning silhouettes to temporarily hide in.

The air is fresh and tingly crisp today. The cool morning moisture kind of tickles the hair on my arms by the breeze of my brisk pace. The approaching alley hides dark figures in it leaving me unsure to what they really are. Are these residual from the departing dark, or actual moving living specimens? I cautiously enter the alley while donning my heightened sense of awareness. I use this departing gift of darkness to obscure my movement. Quietly and quickly, I dance from perplexing shadow to shadow, politely interrupting each new partner with my invisible presence. I suddenly realize there's a secret hidden in a sunrise. I never notice before all the noise of the waking sun. I persist in this dance of the masquerade two more alleys before the light rudely rips my mask off. My vision improves as this dream dissolves, revealing what these mysterious things are really made of.

The warming sun causes the dew to slowly lift a wafting mixture across my path. The smell is indescribable. It is a fresh cut bouquet of chard wood mixed with the fragrance of rotting remains hidden somewhere amongst the abundant piles of debris. I maneuver back and forth towards the next section of town, as my stomach moves up and down. Slowly, the arid heat renders aid allowing the consuming dust to swallow up the stench. I am gradually relieved of the pain produced by the persisting pestilence.

I have seen no movement of any kind so far. It's like I'm walking on the lifeless surface of a dead planet. I constantly kick and slide on meteorite fragments ground into the chewed

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pavement surface. It's making it hard to detect distant fainter sounds that could alert me to the living. I do hear something, but the direction is distorted under each crunching step. I decide to take a rest and dedicate my body to just listening. I see an old abandon 1950s beat up "pickup" three quarters of a block ahead, and figure this will make a good observation station.

I approach it finding all the windows have been broke, and its dusty dented body filled with holes. I open the driver side door and dust off the concoction of glass, dirt, and fragments before sitting. I peer over the steering wheel and begin meditating in my serious listening state. My eyes temporarily interrupt my concentration by a zephyr of wind forming this unusual pattern on the dusty hood. In a weird way it looks like a deformed shape of the former United States of America. This old "pickup," along with this mysterious occurrence, touches a patriotic nerve still residing somewhere in me. My thought is interrupted by a dry cough expelling the inside dust I've inadvertently swallowed. I remember why I am here, and command myself to be silent and listen up.

I resume my concentration and patiently perform my listening. I fight through the symphony of sounds sorting out the natural and obvious from those identified as likely human made. I hear one or two off in the distant. One sounds like a stack of lumber falling over. The other is definitely a scream. Each noise is coming from contrary directions. The scream sounds further away. But, I make a choice to follow after it first; knowing it is really a cry for "help!" I change my original plan to travel due east. I'm now heading due north. I make a mental benchmark of the other sound's approximate location. I figure the noise to be near my old house and remind myself to check it out later. I target the scream and "move out."

I take a shorter more direct route over a hill of broken wood where a house once stood. I squat down on this highpoint and observe the best path to take. Sadly, I hear the scream again, but luckily it helps me pinpoint where to look. It is about five blocks up and one block east of my present location. I cautiously crawl down the jagged remains and begin dashing across the street

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littered with pot holes. I have a small problem. I am forced to walk a half a block along the street in the open because of all the debris piled on the street's sides. I don't detect any local noise, but I move along hesitantly cautious.

I make it to the corner and turn right attempting to link back up with the alleyway system. I have another problem in my way. I have a half block to go, but there is a large deep crater stopping me from getting to the alley. I can either double back, risking another block of being in the wide open, or maneuver through this fifteen foot deep crater. I spend a few seconds and think about the time difference of taking both directions. My goal is to get to the scream as quickly as possible. I decide to chance the path through the crater.

I make a sliding lasso with my rope, and then hook it around a chunk of asphalt extending over the crater. This type of lasso will allow me to retrieve my rope when I'm finished. I lean over the crater and pull down on the rope to check the asphalt's strength. It passes the test. I toss the remaining rope down and grab hold of the section of rope nearest the asphalt overhang. I swing my body around and descend down. Dust kicks out of the holes under the pressure my feet are making, as the glassy veneer side of the wall fights to expand back to its original position. I retrieve my rope, and then slowly crunch across the charred remains at the bottom. As I cross, I continually break through the layer of obsidian made by the intense heat of the impacting meteorite. I pray every step of the way this crater will choke these cracking echoes. Pristine silky soil wisp up under the force of my intruding steps. This irritates my eyes alerting me to pull my undershirt up over my nose. I make it across the bottom and look for a place to lasso my rope to get out of here. I can't find any spot protruding far enough out to hook my rope onto. I go to "Plan B."

I remove my rucksack and pull out a pair of leather rancher gloves. I slip both my rucksack and gloves on while thinking where I'll start. I lay my rope over top my sack, and then proceed to jab two holes in the obsidian lined wall. I dig the first one as high as I can reach. This is for my left hand. The next one is waist high, and

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is for my right foot. I find the sides of the crater are covered with a much thicker glassy surface than its floor. Hopefully this will help support my ascending weight. I place my right foot in its designated hole, and then pull up with my left hand in its hole. I jab two more holes for my other hand and other foot about the same distances above my right foot. I step with my left foot into the next slightly elevated position, and then grab hold of the right hole with my right hand. Firmly here, I reach up and punch out two higher holes. I maneuver up to the next set of holes and repeat this process one more time. I hear the obsidian start cracking under my feet. I think, "This is not good!" I reach methodically up and finish digging out one hole and placing my right hand in it. Quickly, I pull up to relieve the pressure under my feet. I reason that it seems to be working. I make one last hole by forcefully stabbing my extended left hand straight in and grabbing hold. I immediately remove my left foot while pulling up with my left hand. I see a large section give way just below where my feet are. I reach up and grab hold of the asphalt edge of the crater with my right hand that's followed instantaneously by my swinging left arm. The second I grab hold tightly, the entire precipice under me gives way. I swing freely but I remain secure holding on to this piece of black "life saver." I manage to hoist myself out and hurry to the alleyway entrance before collapsing from exhaustion. I just hope no LD heard all the noise I made.

After several minutes of controlled panting, I gain enough strength to carry on. I lean over and look up the alleyway. I see someone walking this way! My mind goes into a frantic state, but I calm it with the realization that I still have some time to hide. The person is still at the other end of the alley. I look around to find a hiding spot, but find only that I have another problem. I can't locate any spot between me and the crater. I see a good spot across the alleyway entrance, but I'll have to risk detection crossing over. I notice a perfect place, but it requires me to go into the alley about 15 feet or so. There is a gap in a fence just big enough for me to climb through; and the entrance can only be seen from my direction. I again lean slightly over to see if the

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approaching figure is looking this way. It is! I toss all these options “out the window,” and I decide again to go to “Plan B.”

I remove my rucksack and open it. My hand quickly feels through the supplies looking for the roll of baling wire. I locate it and silently thank Gary for this present he gave me before I left. Next, I rip open one of the supply bags and pull out a squeeze bottle containing the bleach. Quickly, I run to the mouth of the crater and stop. I look to my left and then my right to find two anchor spots for the wire. I move to my left and wrap this end of the wire around the base of fallen tree trunk. I run backwards across the street while unrolling the wire. My internal ticking clock warns me where the approaching being should be by now; and I have to hurry. The rational part of me says, “Be steady and calm.” I make it to the other side of the street and find the fence post. I swirl the wire several times around it making sure to keep it about a foot high off the ground. I twist the wire and dump the excess spool behind the post. The next step will require timing and courage. I need to bait my trap. I run back to the middle of the street and stand between the wire and the edge of the crater. I double check my internal clock and it says the being should be about ready to exit the alley. I take a deep breath then try to exhale out all the tension. I firmly grasp the tiny bottle of bleach in my right hand and conceal it. I freeze and stare at the being now staring at me!

He steps rapidly out of the alley onto the street, and then stops and stares directly into my eyes. I can tell immediately the man twenty feet from me is definitely a LD. I don't feel that revolting creepy presence a demonic infestation would cause me, but my spirit is overwhelmed with the pathetic loneliness it radiates. It's hard to spot, but I think I see his brand on his hand. He seems to be confused. He begins tilting his head as his penetrating eyes slowly scan me. I remain standing perfectly still as I gaze in his black empty eyes. They make me feel like I'm standing all alone in a large cold cave a mile underground with absolutely no light. He seems confused. Maybe he's wondering why I don't try and run. He asks me, “Who are you?” Now I am

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confused. I know he's close enough to sense my spirit. And, I know he can see I don't bear the brand. Why would he care who I am? Again, he asks me, "Who are you?" I simply say, "Joey." All of a sudden I understand what's happening.

I recognize the LD. "Top, is that you?" I see in his eyes something I've never seen in a LD before-remorse! I swear he'd cry if he was capable. Being an LD has changed his appearance. His face structure is much longer than I remember. I guess the lack of hope over time does that to a LD. Top was my "First Sergeant" in the U.S. Army years ago. Everyone called him Top because he was the highest ranking sergeant in my company. We were real close. He was the kind of guy I wanted defending my back in battle. He was tough, but always kind. "Ahhh Top, why did you do it?" All at once, my soul sinks and my heart breaks. I stand here looking at this loyal soldier and comrade, and I do what he can't. I cry for him. Fear fills his face caused by being in my presence. My spirit reminds his where it will be forever in the future. For, both of us know his soul is eternally damned!

I have a thousand questions to ask him, but I realize this thing is not Top anymore. Anger and resentment now challenges the fear in his face. I shake my head in disbelief while my pitiful love dies for him. This LD is aware of my warrior skills and senses a possible trap. He becomes violent and begins pacing left then right, but he does not advance. This tells me the wire is invisible to him. I know I got to get him to attack me before he figures out my trap. I tell him, "I'm a Christian." His restraining chain of reason breaks and releases the beast inside him. He charges me as I squeeze a fifteen foot stream of bleach directly into his eyes blinding him. His anger and pain fuels his progression, as his blind fury searches me out. I squat as far down as I can while watching this LD trip over the wire. I grab the shoulders of his approaching airborne body and roll backwards. I push my legs up-into his thighs, and then flip him towards the crater. He snatches my shirt at the last possible second, pulling me along. His body disappears in the hole, except for the arm still holding onto me. He profanely roars his threats as I listen to him claw at the wall to get out. His

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weight, strength, and determination strangle my body with my own shirt. I can feel the movement of his body swinging, as it saws my shirt into me. He terrifyingly tugs at me, trying to drag me down. I agonizingly think, "He just will not tire." The only thing keeping me from following him in is the perfect balance between the dead weight of my lying position, which is counteracting the gravity of his swinging body. I am slowly being dragged in an inch at a time though. I want to try and pry his hand loose, but my finger tips are preoccupied to scratching the asphalt, slowing my progression towards the hole. If I move, I'll probably slide right in. If he continues to hold on, I'll slide right in. I lay trapped in his grasp on my back!

I hear the flame of hope in this beautiful song approaching. Flicker's voice makes the LD super violent. The LD increases his aggression as my blue buddy lands on my chest. He stares at my horrified face while calmly tilting his little blue head. It's like he's saying, "Relax, have faith." I start sliding faster, with my head now hanging over the crater's edge. Flicker jumps onto the LD's hand and pecks it. His little head moves so fast that it turns invisible. It takes just several seconds for the LD to let go; before Flicker chops it off. I slide quickly away from the hole as the LD's body makes a sickening sound. I take a deep breath and smile at my lovely little friend. Flicker calmly struts right up to my chin while staring at me. It's like he's telling me, "You're welcome." Then, he pecks me right between the eyes! Before I have time to say, "Ouch," he flies off. I think, "Thank you too, buddy!"

I am quickly reminded about my current objective. I hear the scream again of a lady off in the distance. I push myself up, and then run to grab my rucksack. I retrieve my wire and store it. After my chores, I walk to the edge of the crater carefully listening for any activity. I look down and find what made the gut wrenching sound. Top's body lies on its back with his head tucked under it. I'm glad he died this way. I would hate to carry the picture of his horror-struck face as he saw the gates of Hell opening in his final few seconds of life. As I turn away, I ask God to have mercy on his soul. I start walking and reverently whisper, "You shouldn't have

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Top.”

I reach the alleyway and lean my head past the corner fence to check inside alley. This time it's clear. I try and hurry in my travel to make up for lost time. I begin marching at a “double time” pace. I notice the asphalt surface is in fairly good condition compared to everything around it. There are just a few areas with small pits. The houses and buildings to my right are ninety percent demolished, but everything from the alleyway towards my left looks like little has happened to them. As I proceed I think that the meteor shower must have poured down in an east to west direction. I think, “This is odd.” I was under the impression meteors came straight down. This fact gives me hope that there may be pockets of Irreverent unaffected by the devastation.

Entering the next alley I hear a robin singing somewhere. This is a rare treat ordered right off the endanger spices menu. Its song sounds sad and lonely. The little fellow seems to be calling to its friends, hoping it will receive a return call. He stops momentarily, and then sings again in a new direction. The only response he'll get is his echo coming from this lifeless cavity. I pity the poor fellow. I know he walks the rope connecting sheer determination to insanity. But, he's just a bird. What the heck do they know anyway?

I make it three blocks without incident, but I run out of alleyway transportation. I see a manmade barricade half way up the next alley. Two rusted vehicles end to end sit at its foundation. It's fortified with wooden planks, rubble, and tires. I can't tell who created it, but I figure they don't want anyone to come through this alley. It looks as if it was made post meteor storm, because the building material isn't shot through with holes like Swiss cheese. I make a mental note as I turn right, and then proceed via the preferred mode of transportation of my enemy- the street.

I hustle to the corner and hide behind a utility pole. The three, or so, blocks east of here are totally flattened. I think to myself this is how Hiroshima must have looked. The only things taller than two feet are several reinforced concrete monuments

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marking this graveyard of destruction. The only good from it is the unobstructed view. Suddenly, I hear the reverberating scream of a lady again. I turn north along the street and head towards it.

I make it to the area it came from. All I find are mounds of charred debris. I cautiously and reluctantly climb the highest pile for a better view. I know I stand more exposed, but it's a risk I feel I have to take. The last scream sounded like it may be her last scream. Ironically, I pray she will make one more cry for help so I can locate her. I slowly spin around on the summit trying to find any evidence of where she might be. I grow more fearful every second worrying I'll be detected. I say to myself, "Come on, come on." Out of the dead calm comes the sound I've been waiting for. I hear a loud moaning about three or four stacks northwest of here.

I arrive at the approximate location and search the debris in this area. I determine; if she is here, she is somewhere under it. I bounce my stare in a pattern of observation trying to identify anything unusual in that particular sector saying she might be here. But, I just don't see anything that could help. I cry inwardly, "God, help me find her." My apprehensive heart urgently reminds my mind of a story that might help me. It was about a boy who lost his dear departed grandfather's watch somewhere in a barn. During his frantic search to find it he becomes very tired and falls asleep on a stack of hay. In his dream his dear departed grandpa tells the sad sorry child, "I want you to do something very special for me. Promise me when you wake up, you'll lay still for five minutes." The boy wakes up and remembers his promise. He lays still and stares at the barn ceiling. Soon, he hears a tick, tick, tick. He follows the sound till, behold, he finds grandpa's watch. This is what I'll do.

I remove my rucksack and lay uncomfortably on top this pile. I attempt to relax with several slow deep breaths, and then exhale. Silently, I lay here and listen. I begin hearing erratic breathing coming from what seems the bottom of this mound. I very lowly follow the sound and find an opening between the debris. I place my ear to the darkness below and identify the source of the breathing. I silently shout to myself, "Thank you Lord!" I grab my

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flashlight while whispering into the dark void, "Is anybody there?" I hear two deep breaths, and then, "Help me, please help me!" I think she has limited air causing her to react in such manner. I shine my light in the small crevasse and see her face five feet from mine. Her pretty big eyes react to my bright light by squinting. She looks like a teenager. I see that her head is free of the brand, as I alert her I too am Irreverent. I start lifting and sliding the wood and concrete debris as quickly and as quietly as I can. I feverishly work to remove her while hearing her repeat, "Thank you!" I whisper to back, "Please be quiet. I promise I'll get you out soon." She becomes quiet and still in her dark prison patiently waiting for her rescue.

I soon realize moving the debris will take much longer than I hoped. Much of it is compounded by the weight of overlapping debris. "My name is Joey. What's your name honey?" She shyly states, "Tiffany." I check the time and see it is after noon. I continue methodically moving piece by piece every piece I can. I am careful not to release any debris into her captive cavity. As I grow frustrated in my determination, I ask Tiffany if she might tell me how she got down there. I figure keeping her mouth busy will take her mind off her situation, while keeping her spirits high.

She states, "The explosion destroyed our house and burnt our supplies." I discern from the word "our" there is another Irreverent someplace out here. She continues with, "Two days ago I slid down this hole, and the debris fell over it sealing me in." I ask Tiffany what possessed her to climb around on this stuff to begin with. She explains as I continue digging through the rubble, "Daddy and I were living in our basement when we heard the explosions. I was reading and studying like always. Daddy was listening to the shortwave radio, like he did every day." I ask, "How long did you live in the basement?" She replies, "About three and a half years. Daddy knew the day would come we'd have to live there, so he fixed it up with everything we'd need years before. You see, my daddy was a doctor and a real smart man." I hear Tiffany begin to cry. Talking about him must be the reason. I rationalize something bad has happened to him. I got to

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figure out a way to make her stop crying before a passing LD hears it. The hole is acting like a megaphone amplifying her sounds. Her hunger yells to me a possible solution to this current dilemma. I ask, "Hey, are you hungry?" Her sobbing slowly stops as I shine my light to the side of her cave, and then drop down a protein bar. I continue to shine the light and watch as she shoves the entire bar in her mouth. Not only does the food change her perspective, but it corks her loud uncontrollable crying.

I ask her if she is thirsty while I pull my canteen out.

Her parched mouth seems to dry for her to form a word. I tell her to hold her mouth open when she is ready to drink. Quickly, she finishes chewing, and then struggles to swallow. She opens her trembling mouth, and then tilts her head slightly back. I slowly and accurately begin to dribble a small amount of water into her mouth. I listen to the pitch of this tiny void filling as her lips quiver for the life giving juice. She closes her mouth to let me know it is full, and then she abruptly gulps it down. I watch the little streams caressing her cheeks over flow their banks as she strains to swallow. "Honey, do you need some more?" I ask. She again opens her mouth as I once again aim my dribble. I notice during my pouring her pale complexion. I wonder how a doctor's daughter could become so nutrient deficient. I don't dare ask about her father and risk her crying again. Maybe it's due to living in the basement without sunlight for so long?

I check the time and see it is mid afternoon. Gauging the time I've spent on what I still have to remove, I determine I'll never beat the approaching dark and coming cold. Something inside me tells me, "Keep at it." I wrestle away several heavy concrete fragments while asking her what she was studying. "I was preparing to be a medical doctor. It was either that or becoming an astronomer. I use to love looking at the heavens."

I remove one more piece of concrete to reveal there's rebar joining two monoliths of this mausoleum. Momentarily I stop to lubricate the lump in my throat with my tears made of saliva. "Is there anything wrong?" Tiffany asks. I tell her I got a metal splinter in my hand, but it's alright now. I am hopelessly frustrated

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while offering up a silent prayer for divine assistance.

I hide the impossibility of this obstacle by telling Tiffany, "I love the stars too." As I try and figure out how to proceed, Tiffany replies, "Daddy and I had a fourteen inch Newtonian reflecting telescope. We would spend time looking at the heavens and think of all the possibilities out there. How I miss my daddy."

I sense another whimper coming on. I try and avert another crying outbreak by asking, "What is your favorite constellation Tiffany?" She goes in to detail on her devoted love for the constellation of "Orion." I quickly learn the Greek mythological stories surrounding all the constellations, and the reason "Orion" is her favorite. Being the fine historian I am, I asks her if she knew the constellations origins actually came from the "Hebrews." My statement seems to stifle her. I figure this is a good thing. It will keep her mind off the encroaching cold as the late afternoon temperature drops. A curious, "No, I didn't," comes out her darkened cave. I proceed to give her a little history lesson, starting with the Bible passage at the beginning of "Geneses."

I finally clear away enough debris to permit enough light into her chamber to allow me to see her wrapped arm blanket. It seems my history class is preoccupying her mind to overrule her will to shiver. "Yes, God created the heavens and the earth, moon, and sun for several reasons. One reason was 'for signs and seasons'." She recalls hearing this before, but she didn't know this is where the Greek's stole the zodiac from. I cover this exploit while watching her become politely irritated with this flagrant plagiarism. "Yep, the only thing the Greek's really did was give pagan stories to them." She seems quite upset with the Greek pretentious idea. I comfort her with the thought that most people are ignorant to this fact. I finish my lesson with, "Yeah, it seems time has a way of replacing the real truth."

I take my jacket off and hand it to her through the gap I just finished making. I look around through my exhaustion to calculate my next move. My rude shadow now covers her, blocking the penetrating warmth. The only thing preventing me from pulling her out is this darn stupid rebar connecting her prison roof. I wish

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I had brought my “bolt cutters,” but even that probably would not cut this thick piece of metal. All of a sudden I remember something. Randy packed me a present. He told me it might come in handy sometime. It is a diamond wire saw from his broken survival knife. I rummage through my sack to find it, as Tiffany finishes her fight to wrap my jacket around herself in her restricted confines.

My original desire was to be already enroute to “Project Hope” by now. I know the most dangerous time of the day is coming soon. I am also afraid of the realization that I am not real familiar with section of town. The darkness will only make things worse. I push this thought from my mind and focus on cutting this prison bar. While holding the abrasive strand, I feel its abrasive teeth. I reach back into my sack and don my leather rancher gloves. I return to work as I see her youthful innocent smile, while I reassure her to trust in me. She bobbles slightly up and down in her anticipation of her rescue. The coolness kisses her reminding her “Not just yet.”

I’m so close I just want to yank her out. I wrap the saw around the bar as close as I can to one of the megaliths, and begin pulling the line back and forth. The saw seems to be doing a fairly quick job. I hope I can remove this bar with one cut by using leverage. This is why I decided to leave as much of the bar as possible. Little sparks sprinkle down over Tiffany in the growing darkness. “Honey, would you mind pulling your jacket over your face to protect it from the falling metal filings?” She reluctantly obeys my request acting like a child scared of being left alone in the dark. “I reestablish a lifeline of comfort by explaining everything I’m doing. I figure I am about halfway through the bar now. “Joey, do you think it will take much longer? I’m getting cold and scared.” I ask Tiffany if she would do me a big favor. She replies, “What’s that Joey?” I ask her if she wouldn’t mind holding my flashlight so I can see what I’m doing. “Sure,” she says. I grab my light and hand it down along with another protein bar. I tell her to shine the light horizontally, and warn her not to point it any higher. I think the last thing we want to do is to send any LD directions to

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this location. "Be careful honey with the light." I watch her juggle between dinner and her attentiveness to the light. I believe the light will help give her some security too.

I take a few seconds to relieve the pressure off my hurting neck and back by momentarily stretching backwards. I see it's completely dark out amidst these thousand twinkling stars. I hurry back to sawing faster. I make it to be about seven pm now. I feel the night air swipe at my cold sweat. My shivering body reminds me it's not fully spring-yet. I continue to harness the heat of my action in sawing Tiffany free. I have just a little bit more to cut away. "So how old are you young lady?" I see her focusing on the spot of light being steadily drilled into the side wall. "Fifteen, well I'll be fifteen this May." I notice a far off voices drift across this wasteland and pray they stay away. Right now, I am more afraid that Tiffany might hear them. I pull at the saw even faster and harder. I notice her voice slurring, thinking she maybe fighting symptoms of hypothermia. I try and limit her conversation in an attempt to keep in as much of her body heat as possible. So, I take over the conversation while looking around.

"Do you want to hear a story Tiffany?" Her teeth chatter, "Yes," while I saw as fast as I can. "Once upon a yesteryear, there was this kind and generous goblin. She would always be willing to help anyone in need. She even had magical powers. Some were to make it rain, or make it sunny, or make the moon shine." The hot wire saw is pass the point of cutting off circulation in my hands and is beginning to shred my warm leather gloves to pieces. The tan color is being brushed over with pink pain. "In return for her good weather throughout each year the town folk would throw an Autumn harvest festival in her honor. It was their way of saying 'thank you' to the kind goblin." Tiffany's bobbling seems to have stopped. I hope she is captured by the current story, and rather not becoming catatonic due to the looming cold. "Well, one year the farmers complained that their harvest was not as bountiful as the year before. They attributed this insufficiency to the lack of sunshine and rain. It was really their selfishness and ignorance causing the problem. They tried to grow more crops than the land

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could sustain. Well, the farmers decided they could not spare any of their harvest to have the annual Autumn festival. They believed they had only enough food from their crops to sustain them through the upcoming winter. This angered the kind goblin." I finally cut through the thick bar and feel great relief. As I catch my breath I notice my bloody hands dripping down on top Tiffany. The release of the saw's pressure, and constant heat cauterizing my wounds, causes a bloody trickle down affect. I grab the hot bar near the cut and prop my body in position to bend it up. I knock some loose debris on top her leather roof provoking Tiffany to ask me, "What's going on?" I want her to concentrate on the story and not on my progress. So, I start where I left off. "That winter the goblin hid the Sun and made the daytime short. It got so very cold all that winter. She then sent the rain." I ask Tiffany, "Do you know what happens to rain when it freezes." I see the jacket bounce slightly as she responds to my question. "Yes, everyone knows it turns to snow." I continue with, "Well, it snowed and snowed, and buried the village. Many children got real sick because of the cold. And, the townsfolk also got real sick; that is sick and tired of the evil goblin." I finish taking position and then pull the bar with all my might. I pray, "Dear Lord help me!"

I feel the bar slowly bending, and not a second too soon. The far off voices conversing seem to be drawing closer. I faintly whisper, "Well, Spring finally came. One day the angry goblin overheard children singing wicked songs about her from her hill top hideaway. They skipped and danced to songs of hatred as they played; all except one little girl. She refused to hate the goblin." The stress of the bar bending or my supernatural willpower causes the bar to snap off, finally allowing me to free Tiffany. I kiss the saw and toss it back in my sack as I grab my rope. I see Tiffany's leather roof shaking the dust and mixing with my drizzles of blood. I begin unrolling enough rope while searching for the best possible position around the hole for leverage purposes. "That Fall, the townsfolk had the harvest festival as the poor old goblin pouted and cried all alone in her hide away. She cried so loud, and so many tears, it caused it to

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rain on the party. And, the rain sounded like this.” I lower down the end of my rope and tap Tiffany’s leather roof several times. She immediately slides the jacket from off her head revealing her joyous smile filled with gratitude. I tell her to quickly tie this around her belly as she hands me the flashlight. I shine it down into the hole as she fumbles in her cold numbness to secure the rope. I figure I’ll continue the story in an attempt to warm Tiffany another way. “The kind little girl heard the goblin’s sadness and decided she’d go visit her. When she got to her hideaway she called out ‘oh kind wonderful goblin won’t you let me in?’” I see Tiffany finish tying the knot in front of her. I ask her if she’s ready to get out of the hole. “Please” she responds. I pull her slow and steadily up. The noise we’re making causes me to alert Tiffany to be as quiet as possible. I give a soft, “Shhh,” to her as she gets closer to me. She reaches her arms up and clutches around my neck clinging to me like she’ll never let go. I stand and swing her to the safety of my side while I embrace her with my warm hug.

She begins crying and refusing to let go. I give her a few seconds to enjoy the heat of the moment, as I observe where the approaching voices might have gone. Tiffany whispers, “Will you please finish the story?” My concern is to get us to the confines of safety as soon as possible. I think the security of the alleyway might be a good start. “Sure honey, but it will have to wait till later.” I set her down, and then don my rucksack. I hold Tiffany’s hand and lead her swiftly away.

Chapter 10: Return to Hope

I hear the voices following behind us. It sounds like there maybe three or four LD out there. I'm getting that eerie feeling again, sensing there's a Demon close by. We walk rapidly through, and over the darkened debris, eventually making it to the street. We have about a half block to go before we reach the protection of the alleyway system. I let go of Tiffany's hand in my attempt to gain speed. I tell Tiffany to stay real close and follow every move I make. What's behind me does not worry me as much as what may be ahead. I believe the EVIL group has discovered the spot I rescued Tiffany from. I can't make out their words, but they sound angry. I hear lumber slapping from the direction we just exited, as if it's being tossed in a fit of rage. I think they might be upset. We probably left some evidence at the site telling them who we are, maybe its footprints or a wrapper. It might even be my blood. There is something we left that they found to make them react so aggressively. Tiffany must hear the commotion they're making by now. I look over my shoulder watching her concentrate on me though. "She's a smart soldier," I think. She's turning her fear into something useful-determination. We hustle into the alley and "double time" it. I want to expand our lead and put as much

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distance between them and us as promptly possible.

We make it to the end of the alley and turn right. I want to move over one entire block and re-enter the adjacent alley. This “zigzagging” effect should confuse any LD following us to our exact whereabouts. Tiffany and I are breathing pretty hard now. We make it to the intersection and dash across it. I don't stop to look, but I give a passing stare in both directions. I do not notice anybody. We continue running till we're well in the confines of the next alley. We slow to a fast pace walk as I listen for possible footsteps following us. All seems quiet. “Stay with me just a little longer,” I tell Tiffany. I determine this quick pace should keep us “on track” of putting optimal distance between us and them, while giving us a chance to catch our breaths. I don't want to stop just yet. I want to be at least five blocks away from them, with as much random trail covering our tracks as possible.

We again turn right at the end of this alley and chance going two blocks straight this time. I keep Tiffany at my side as we move together in a duck, cover and observe maneuver. I whisper as we approach the intersection, “We'll rest as soon as we make it to the next alley.” Tiffany has been really great keeping up and following everything I've done. We stop momentarily at the intersection and hide next to a utility pole. I see it's been snapped in half with the other part dangling ten feet to our right. I don't see anything in this direction except some small craters in the street. I look left and see movement that startles me. It takes my mind a second to distinguish that it is the shadow cast by the swinging utility pole. I grab Tiffany's hand and move across the intersection. My heart's still racing by the sudden scare.

As we near, Tiffany begins to steer me into the alley. I whisper to her, “No honey, we have one more block.” I see the exhaustion on her face and the drops of cold sweat streaming down her face. I reinforce her fortitude with a “thumbs up” and a quirky smile. Her pace hastens in her determination to keep up with me. She looks at me as if she wants to ask me something important. Instead of acknowledging her urgent request, I give her the

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“shhh” sign with my finger over my lips warning her to be extremely quiet. The reason is that we’re approaching the next intersection. She bites her lip and ducks with me next to a covered heap of something. I peek out past it to observe my right flank, while getting a good whiff of the pungent remains under the tarp. This section of street seems clear, so I look left. All I see are just more craters and debris. I pull Tiffany away, and try to leave the smell behind. I have a good idea what is under the tarp rotting, but I block the thought from my mind for now. Tiffany is breathing heavy again as we make to the alleyway. I immediately begin looking for the closes cover for us to rest.

I find a big dead bush that has a gap between it and a stack of discarded bathtubs. We scoot in between them and sit. I can barely see anything except our dark figures. I take my rucksack off and use it as a pillow for Tiffany to lean against. She continues to breathe hard and fast, so I use my controlled breathing technique to slow it down. My hand proceeds to slide into my sack and fidget for the canteen while I ask her what she was trying to tell me earlier. She is still too out of breath to talk. She leans slightly forward and unties her shoe, and then removes it while pointing to the answer to my question. I hear her responds as she dumps her shoe out. Several fairly large pebbles bounce off the asphalt as Tiffany nods her head up and down in the dark. I tell her, “What a trooper,” while feeling guilty for the pain I put her through. I decide we’ll take one more minute to rest. In the meantime, I do some calculations while Tiffany catches her breath.

I place us around fifteen blocks away from “Project Hope.” The chill is setting in as we cool off. I am getting the shivers and think it’s unusually cold tonight. I check my watch to find it is a little after eight. The current chill at this time of day suggests the temperature is going below freezing tonight. I look at Tiffany and see the waves of body heat floating up. My leather jacket she is wearing is tough and light, but it’s not design to keep the heat in. I try not to let her know just how cold I am without my jacket. After evaluating the situation, I decide there’s no way we’ll be able to

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make back to "H" before hypothermia sets in. I rise up and immediately start looking for the closes place to bed for the night. I turn and tell Tiffany "It's time to 'move out'."

A fog is forming. It's hard to see the fog in the dark, but I can feel the dark dampness floating over me. My soaked undershirt tingles with the thick moisture, and I smell the fresh bite in the air. Tiffany stands and reacts to the cold by wrapping her arms around herself. I conclude this must be a fast moving cold front suddenly moving into town. We start walking as I pan the surroundings for LD and a place to stay. I don't know how long it will take to find suitable cover for the rest of the night, so I keep my intentions a secret. It's better to keep moving for now. The asphalt is slick with dew that is helping soften the crunching sound of the meteorite fragments.

We travel two blocks before I see a possible spot. The fog is getting real thick now. Visibility is down to a half a block. I just wish it wasn't so darn cold. This would make perfect cover to travel in. It's also a perfect setting to come across an unexpected Demon. We stop then stoop in the alley, as I see a small dwelling through the missing fence slats. "I want you to wait here while I check on something." Tiffany sits, and then pulls her knees' in while leaning her head over her bent legs. She looks like a giant hairball in the dark. I set my rucksack next to Tiffany, and then cautiously step through the gap in the fence. I proceed to very quietly sneak up to the small dwelling. I silently chuckle to realize what the fog disguised as a small building. I bend down to view inside this fairly large doghouse. "What a perfect bed and breakfast," I whisper. I return to retrieve Tiffany from out of the cold foggy darkness.

"I found us a place for the night girly." I grab her cold clammy hand along with my rucksack. I observe and judge how hard this place might be to detect from the alley as we cut our way through the ubiquitous cloud around us. I whisper as we arrive at the doghouse, "Welcome to my humble abode." I can't tell if she is shaking her head in disbelief, or if it is due to the chill. I reach

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inside and turn my flashlight on to see cobwebs, dust, a cloth mat, and a metal dog bowl. I toss my sack towards the back wall and quickly wipe the webs away with my twirling arm and flashlight. "Come on in," I whisper, "And make yourself at home." I prop the flashlight so it faces towards the back wall, and then open my rucksack. I tell Tiffany to wait at the entrance, so she'll block any light from escaping. I center the smelly mat in the middle of the floor. The wet air brings back the mat's memories of a wet dog odor. But, it will help keep us warm.

I reach into my sack and pull out a roll of 30 gallon black plastic trash bags, courtesy of Scotty. I inform Tiffany these things have many purposes. I tear one off the roll and make a door cover to seal in the light and our body heat. With a English accent I state, "I figure the doghouse is six feet long by four feet wide, and," I raise my hand horizontally to guess a measure. "And, four feet high." I try and keep Tiffany's mind off the cold by using my favorite secret weapon-humor. It has gotten me through many hard times. I hand her the canteen and a protein bar while opening one for myself. "Drink," I gently command her. I want to make sure she stays hydrated. I place the protein bar in my mouth as I grab the dog bowl. While chewing, I use my other hand to grab a "Tuna" can concoction I made back at "H." "This, young lady, is our heater for tonight. This is what you call homemade 'Canned Heat'." I light the can and set it in the dog bowl in the middle of the floor. I proceed to give her a survival class, while I rip off another trash bag. "The can contains rolled up corrugated cardboard soaked with melted coloring crayons, and a dab of vegetable oil. Melted paraffin works best, but candle wax is hard to find now a days. This little baby will burn about four hours, heating this fine establishment in no time." Tiffany seems amused at my repugnant but eloquent English humor.

The light from the "Canned Heat" allows me to save the battery life in my flashlight. I tear three holes in the next bag, and then quietly shake it open. I watch her nibble the remaining portion of her protein bar as I tell her, "Excuse me madam while I dress for the occasion." I slip my new plastic jacket over my head

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and on my body. I fumble my invisible tie while asking her, "Is this tie suitable with my suit?" She almost chokes laughing. After placing hole in another bag, I hand it to her and tell her to put it on under her jacket. I inform her it will keep moisture out and more of her body heat in. I unroll two more sheets and rip them from the roll. "Here my precious is your Egyptian cotton sheet." I tear another two sheets off the roll and tell her, "And, this is your copious plush blanket." I lay it over her legs and slide it up till it covers her chest, while shaking it slightly. "Yes my lady. If you wouldn't mine; please hold this." After she grabs it, I spread my sheet of plastic over me and proceed to brace myself up against the opposing wall. In just a few minutes we are warm as toast.

"On a more serious note," I state. I cautiously and compassionately advance in asking her certain questions, but I am curious to know how she survived the last month alone. "I'd like to know more about how you got inside that hole." Tiffany starts explaining where she left off. It seems Tiffany and doctor dad were abundantly prepared for the end of the world in their basement. By her description though, it was more like a house underground. She tells me there were loud explosion one day, followed by their place being torn apart. I figure I know what caused it. I remember the jets shooting missiles that day. Tiffany cries as she explains how she survived, but daddy didn't.

I'm not able to figure out if this bombing was intentional, or if they were just random casualties of the New California Air Guard assault on Irreverent. I am able to figure out the basement was not designed to be a bomb shelter. I learn that she eventually was able to crawl up and out of the rubble she called home. The first thing she saw was the entire smoldering neighborhood flattened. She had no place to go so she just hung around surviving on the little food and water she rummaged out of the debris. I reason, she must have been living that way for over a month. I guess she was foraging when she slide down a pile of debris into the hole. It seems this caused the pile to loosen and avalanche the surrounding rubble over her, sealing her in. She believes she was

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trapped in her cold dark confinement two days before I found her.

Tiffany's recollection takes a toll on her emotionally. She tries not to cry, but I can see the flood gates opening. I slide alongside her and toss my right arm over her shoulders. "Don't worry honey; I'll take care of you." I inform her we need to get some shut eye. I help her to lie down on one side of the heater, while I lie down on the other side. I pull my rucksack under my head, and then prop my hands behind my head. I prepare myself to rest rather than to sleep. I want to be alert to any unusual sounds. As for Tiffany, she tucks the plastic in around herself, and then asks me, "So, what happen to the goblin?" I quietly smile and think how she is still a child at heart. "If you promise to go to sleep, I'll tell you." She rolls on her side and slides her "praying hands" pillow under her head, and then attentively waits for my finale.

I tilt my head slightly towards Tiffany and say, "Now, where was I? Was it at the snowy part or the rainy part?" I reach my left hand around and begin tapping my index finger on my chin acting like I'm trying to remember. "It was the part where the kind little girl went to cheer the sad goblin," Tiffany emphatically states. "Shhh, you go to sleep," I warn her. "Okay then. The kind little girl knocks and asks, 'Won't you please let me in nice goblin?'" I continually stare at this fine young lady as I tell the story. My heart feels her sorrow and her pain. I think how she might possibly be about the age of my daughter; if I ever had one. "The goblin grew tired of her bothersome knocking and honored her request by opening the door. The kind girl thanked her and said 'We're sorry for treating you so mean'. The goblin's pitiful tears soon changed in to ones of joy and tenderness." I watch Tiffany's innocent eye lids tucking in her tired eye balls slowly "goodnight." I softly speak, "The goblin hoisted the little darling to her shoulders and proudly proceed to the harvest festival. Along the way, she made a giant beautiful Harvest Moon for all to enjoy." Tiffany looks as if she is sound asleep. I lean over and whisper, "The townsfolk welcome her with open arms and hug her. They had a wonderful time together. From then on they always remember to pay tribute to the goblin." Real softly I whisper in

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her ear, "And, all the world was right." Oh so softly, I kiss her head and whisper, "Goodnight honey."

I lay here and listen to the sounds in the night. I meditate in the stillness supplicating my prayer of protection to God. There are distant sounds amidst this extraordinary quietness the fog brings. I figure the laden drenched dew is causing teetering debris to lose its battle with gravity. The occasional intermittent sounds are preceded by a symphonic concerto of subtle screeching sounds. The lurking clandestine evil mixture of the night makes me feel like I am the ghost "Eric" from "Phantom of the Opera." I try fighting to remain alert, but the sirens of the mysterious mist sweetly serenade me to a finer time.

I find myself floating free through this temporal tunnel in time. I stand at attention on a sunny summer's day. I hear the General end his ceremonial speech with, "You should be proud of your achievement soldiers. Will you please help me in congratulating these top graduates?" I stand perfectly still in this darn heat wondering when I'll be able to swipe the sweat burning my irritated eyes. Then, the applause and pride tackle me in a joyful sea of cap tossing cadets. I improvise and turn my cap in to a handkerchief before I exalt it to the sky. I feel the pats, and grasp hands slaps, as I stare off towards the distant shore. I see joyous family members ride the crest of this approaching tsunami. A multitude of outstretched chaotic arms are flung, or flinging, to rescue my fellow comrades with their hugs and kisses. I brave the wave and push through it, as I am blinded by the bright blaring sunshine sparkling off a million small brass mirrors. "Mom, Sis!" I call to them. I watch helplessly as they are caught in the undertow of the floating frenzy. I twist, turn, and struggle through the wave that's battling to keep us apart. I raise my arms as a guiding beacon to let them know, "I'm over here!" Again, their wonderful faces bob up from the approaching surf. I hysterical hoist them a tow line by tossing my right arm, and open hand over the top the wave. "Grab my hand momma!" I scream. Firmly secure, I tenderly pull momma and Sis towards my embrace.

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“Honey, I am so, so, so proud of you” momma tells me. I can hear her quiet whimper vibrate off my chest as this sea constantly roars with loud pounding voices. My sister tries repeatedly to tell me something, but she is frustrated in the futility of her drowning words. I see off in the distance a peaceful island. I hold tight while jerking us in and out of the waves towards this secret secluded paradise.

We finally reach this tropical bastion surrounded by the shady underside of the bleachers. Sis yells, “I tried to say-I knew you could do it!” She abruptly wraps her present of love around my formal wool attire. This is surely a treat, and something I’m not use to from her. I want to return the appreciation, but she refuses to retire her salute long enough for me to embrace her. Mom joins the festivity finding just enough room to maneuver between us and the bleacher. I surrender in the serenity of this surreal memory. A strange sound permeates the moment. I hurry to reach under their embraces and secure them. I will never let them go, but this ruthless noise behind me tears me from them.

I see darkness and feel my cold hands rubbing my eyes awake. I hear a voice and several footsteps coming down the alleyway. I freeze in fear within the cold dark damp quiet. I’m very careful not to make a sound. The noise stops. I hear a slow creaking sound and the rubbing of moist wood sliding on a lubricated surface. I now hear a slow crunching sound; similar to the sound of footsteps on fresh packed snow. I promptly determine the dead grass is frozen outside and someone is coming through the gap in the fence. I remain still hoping we’ll go unnoticed.

The steady stepping of the crunching sound slowly encroaches upon us. “Think, think!” I tell myself. I try and formulate a possible weapon, while I frantically joust with the decision to wake Tiffany, or not. Swiftly, I decide “no” to the latter, and my flashlight and penknife to the former idea. The sound is creeping around the doghouse as I prepare my weapons. I methodically maneuver into position at the entrance. The sound stops on the other side of the plastic curtain. My whole body is in overdrive of its “fight or flight” nature. I elevate my shaking flashlight, preparing the first part of

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my plan. Hopefully, I will temporarily blind it long enough to stab a vital part of it. It just stands there waiting.

Leathery fingers move to my side of the plastic, and then slowly pull at it. I see its legs are covered with unusual fine material, immediately confusing my logic. I patiently wait for that most opportune moment when the curtain reveals the face of this foe. I time turning on my flashlight. I see a dark face appear from behind the plastic. I shine my light at it, and then I stab at it. I blind it and see it fall away from my swipe. It slams backward on the ground as I hear Tiffany jump up. I race to leap on it attempting to cut its jugular vein. I shove my light in its face and pause. I don't see a brand on his head. I just see someone who looks as scared as me. "Who are you?" I demand! I hold my cold steel blade against his throat as I force my light further in his face. Shaking under my restraint he mutters, "I'm Irreverent Militia."

By this time Tiffany is standing next to me with her own weapon posed to afflict it on the intruder. She is holding a stone in the air ready to smash it down. I signal her with my hand to wait, as I offer him my hand to this stranger. "My name is Joey and this is Tiffany. We're Irreverent too." I assist him up and silently instruct him to follow us back inside. He tells me, "By the way, I'm Doug." We move back inside the tiny cramped cold quarters and fight to find a spot to sit. I replace the plastic door and light another heater. As the light and heat grows, I ask Doug questions while he explains why he's here.

"I saw muddy footprint heading up the alley leading to the hole in the fence. I knew the tracks were fresh," Doug informs us. I figure the moisture and all the meteorite dust gave us away. He goes on telling us how he's part of a group going around town trying to find others to recruit. The fog seems to have provided them a good opportunity for their purpose. There are six others with him that are currently searching some house near the intersection a half block away. He saw the footprints and thought he'd investigate.

I tell Doug about "Project Hope." I tell him about its purpose

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and mine. He informs me that he is actually from Liberty Falls. I never really thought about the name of the town before, but it is kind of ironic now. This is a town approximately fifty miles away. That is where the headquarters of their operation is located. They have only a few weapons to defend themselves, but they've made swords and knives. They are in contact with another Irreverent militia further north. That militia has been able to pilfer supplies and weapons by ambushing "Trinity" military affiliates. They're stock piling the weapons until they have enough Irreverent to take on the enemy.

I hear several people crunching this way on the asphalt as Doug peeks out the plastic. He whispers towards them, "Over here." I ask him if he has military experience while we wait for the others to arrive. He laughs at me, and then tells me "No." His specialty is homemade steam and methane powered electric generators. Doug explains how he helps hiding Irreverent by creating electricity for pumping well water. He tells me he uses abandon satellite dishes covered with foil from things like empty potato chip bags. He then glues it to the dish surface. This concentrates the Sun's heat on any hanging black metal container full of water. He also uses a pair of bottle bottoms, broken off and adhered together to make magnifying glasses. The dish and magnified reflected sunlight gets the pot to over 212 degrees. The intense heat forces steam out a nail size hole on top. The steam turns PVC blades installed on any direct current generator creating electricity; much like what Moses built. He also makes methane powered generators out of lawnmower engines. This type of DC generator is powered by capturing methane gas from the tops of septic tanks. He tells me he'll show me how it's done sometime. I tell Doug sometime I'll show him how to put a "sleeper hold" on someone and knock him unconscious in less than ten seconds. We agree with a hand shake while saying, "It's a deal."

Doug slides over the plastic curtain to show his approaching brothers our location. I can see they are all fairly well dressed for the weather, wearing really decent clothing. I ask him what they

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have on. This strikes me as odd. I haven't seen anyone with clean new clothing in a long time. Doug opens his black rain coat and shows me he's wearing the old olive drab U.S Army fatigues. He explains they were able to gather a load of military wear from the big surplus store in his town. "And, that's not all," he tells us.

We move outside and introduce ourselves as quietly as possible. One of his comrades sees me shivering and compassionately gives me the sweater he's wearing under his jacket. I hurry and slide it over my plastic bag; a.k.a. jacket, and rub my arms with its supplied body warmth. I check the time and find that the sun will be rising in about an hour. The last two of his militia walk hurriedly towards us as I put on my rucksack. Tiffany slides the extinguished heater back in my sack then tries patting her hair down in place. One of Doug's associates alerts us that he heard voices coming this way. They sound as if they are still about three blocks away. We all hustle down the alley while slicing the cold fog in the opposite direction of those voices. We say our goodbyes at the intersection of the alleyway and the street, and we plan to meet up later at "H." They are traveling south, and we're heading west.

The fog seems even thicker here. We make it to the intersection of the streets as the fog temporarily reveals the name on the street sign. I remember my grade school was just a few hundred feet down from this intersection. I take this thick fog in to consideration and decide it's too dangerous to travel. We're likely to fall in a crater, or come upon an LD before we even know it. Plus, I think the school might be a place to pick up some rudimentary things I've been wanting. I decide we'll hide at the school till the fog lifts. We turn and head towards the school.

I swing open the rusty wrought iron gate that's been unlocked for many years now. I immediately feel the rush of so many good memories flow over me. Now this place looks like the decrepit mansion on the hill from "Citizen Cane." We maneuver up the shattered concrete steps leading us inside the main corridor. I shine my light carefully towards the floor and look around. The

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roof is gone, for the most part, and many of the walls have caved in. I try and locate the stairwell that leads down to the place where I am hoping will have what I am looking for. I look at Tiffany and notice she is barely able to keep awake. This will also probably be a good spot for her to nap for a few more hours. I see the lower entrance exactly where I remember it, but it is mostly hidden by leaning broken book cases in the main hallway. We slide carefully behind them and attempt to descend to the lower level.

There is just one obstacle hindering our descent. It's nothing that will stop us though. The hand rails are missing, but all the stairs are still intact. The metal stairs have fared much better than any part of the building I've seen so far. Tiffany asks, "Where are we going?" I tell her, "To the 'Janitor's Room'."

We make it down to the bottom of the stairwell. I face the flashlight towards where I remember the room being. I recollect it being at the end of this hall just past this litter of broken desks, and the protruding roots sticking out from the cracked walls. I try not to say anything that might scare Tiffany, but this feels like a horror movie. It looks like a crucible filled with grabbing arms reaching out trying to snatch us. I get the "he bee gee bees" walking around these things. I pray along the way the thick metal door to the "Janitor's Room" is unlocked. I sigh in relief to find it is.

I open the door to an orchestra of screeching violins and tell Tiffany to wait here for a minute. I proceed inside while wiping away a zillion cob webs with my spinning arm and flashlight. I carve a path down the steps, and then call Tiffany to come in. I shine the light up to the door to watch Tiffany reluctantly descend the darken flight of metal stairs. "Yep, just as I remember it," I tell her. "I use to come here and talk to old George the janitor. This is a combination room. There are the boilers," I move my flashlight to show her, "And, there is George's nap room." I walk behind the boiler to the closet not expecting to find anything, but I see the bed old George would hide out and nap in. I think about him every now and then. He might have been a bit lackadaisical, but

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he was a superfluous body of wisdom. He took me under his wing teaching me a lot of wise things about life. I reach in my sack and retrieve some "Canned Heat." I light it and place it on a small end table next to George's old napping bed. I invite Tiffany to rest as I swipe the dust away from the bedding. I cough, but she seems too tired to care. "Sleep," I tell her. "I'll get you up in a little while." After I help her get situated, I head out to find some goodies.

I try and remember where the school supplies were kept as I journey back towards the stairs. I stop in one of the old classrooms along my way and find the first ingredient on my "wish list." I see the chalk that is still in the slot at the base of the chalkboard. I gather all I can find, and then place it in my hand. I see the teacher's overturned desk and check inside it. I find three unopened boxes of the white stuff, and a "baggie" to put it in. I think, "Life is good!" I continue gathering all of it while placing it in the "baggie." I seal it, and then slide it into my rucksack. I stand here a moment reverently recalling my childhood memories of a sweeter time before moving back out into the dark scary hallway.

I jostle by the debris in my attempt to make it to the far end of the dark dirty corridor. I occasionally stop in other classrooms along my way checking for items on my list. I find more chalk and crayons, and eventually the supply room. "Ah, rock salt." The school stored bags of the salt to melt winter ice off the exterior steps. I also find "air conditioning filters." They contain activated carbon. I fill a bag full of the rock salt and place it in my sack. I proceed to tear open a couple filters to scrape out the black gold. I collect all of it in the other "baggie," and also stash it in my rucksack. I decide this should about complete my mission.

I return to the "Janitor's Room" and see the first morning light as I pass the main stairwell. I check the time and see it's just after sunrise. I begin feeling the toll from yesterday's activity and the excitement of this past night. I clang my way down the short metal stairs while coming to the decision to catch some "shut eye" myself. I find a spot next to the old boiler, which I'll use as my pillow for the next couple hours. My exhaustion relaxes me to

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sleep in this most uncomfortable position. I cross my arms and close my heavy eyes for a short nap.

I hear laughter and someone calling me. "Joey; I'm over here." Out of the dark comes this tall old black man who I immediately recognize. It's old George! He's waving to me to come and visit him in his office below. I see him smiling and giggling with anticipation as I approach him. "How are you doing my little friend?" His guiding arm wraps around my tiny shoulders, and then accompanies me down his polished steps. This place always smells so clean with its mixture of pine scent and cleaning supply perfume. I notice the buffed shine of the boilers and feel their perfect warmth radiating throughout George's comfortable office. "So what cha learn today?" he asks me. I reluctantly reply, "I don't know." He immediately reminds me, "Every day is a wonderful gift from God." I look at his starched and well pressed overalls, while I ponder his words. I always feel like more than I am, around George. He is like the father I wish I could have. Mine died when I was a baby. "You're gonna be a scientist, or a doctor, or some fine author. You're gonna write books and change the world one day. You just wait and see. So, don't tell me you didn't learn anything today." George opens his metal lunch pail and retrieves a pair of small cakes that I can see through the cellophane wrapping. He opens the pack as I stare in wonder at the whiteness of his name tag. "I couldn't eat all this sweet stuff today. Would you help me finish these cakes? Mrs. George will get mad if I don't eat all my lunch. She'll think I didn't like it." I happily oblige his request by jutting my hand out offering my acceptance to help him with his dilemma. "You see this bag of rock salt?" My eyes trace the trail his pointing finger is laying. "That stuff is actually a chemical compound of calcium and chloride." He then points to the chalk mark on my pants that I got from leaning against the chalkboard earlier today. "That there is another compound called calcium carbonate." I nibble my cake and marvel on every one of his words. George was magical and full of passion. He could make anything interesting to learn. "Yep, these can be used for a lot of things. That's how life is. They can be used to make medicine or

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poison. They can be used to help people or hurt people. They can be used for good or bad." I finish my cake, and then lick my little fingers clean. "It seems everything is that way Joey." He raps his knuckles softly on the top of my head then rubs my hair messy as part of his daily ritual. "It's all up to you what you do with it," he reminds me.

He looks up at the clock and tells me, "You better be on your way before your momma gets worried." I grab my backpack loaded with books and swing it onto my shoulder. Old George helps me up from my chair. He hurries to write down on his clipboard my "word of the day." He tells me as he writes, "You remember this. You can do just about anything, or be anything, if you work hard enough. I expect big things from you Joey."

I rise and turn to see the clock and realize momma's probably waiting out front of the school by now. George shoves the folded paper in my pack while pushing me up the steps. He tells me, "If you don't know where you're going in life, it don't matter which path you chose." I run up the "Janitor's Room" steps, then dart down the hall just in time to hear the final school bell ringing. I wave over my shoulder to old George, and feel his warm spirit follow me. I turn and dash up the main stairwell as I hear his words echo, "Bye Joey. You be a good boy and listen to your momma. And, learn everything you can! God bless."

A cold chill stirs the dust in this room waking me into another world of wonder. This world is not so pleasant. The faint yellow light permeating the room warns me to get up. I stretch while attempting to rip back the Velcro cover on my watch. The color of the morning light tells me the fog has lifted. My fuzzy eyes force their stare towards my bouncing watch face and determine the time is now 10:14 am. I immediately notice I don't hear any noise. This suggests Tiffany is still asleep, and we are still safe. I take a few seconds and allow my brain to wake up, as my mind rummages through the remnants of my dream. Suddenly, I have an epiphany to what George wrote for the "word of the day." It was this simple word with a complex meaning. I unravel the

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neatly folded paper and read the small word. This gem has made the biggest difference in my life. It simply reads “grace.”

I stand and complete my stretching exercise as I remember scurrying through the front door of my home to look up the meaning of the word. This tiny word has numerous definitions, but I figured out which one George meant for me to learn. It is the one that deals with the free gift of forgiveness that is not deserved or earned.

I can see well enough now to find my way without the assistance of my flashlight. I manage to maneuver to Tiffany’s bedside while hearing her slightly snore. I stand and stare at her thinking of the kind of life she’ll have. As I do, I feel a sense of guilt by not honoring George’s high standards for my life. But, maturity immediately slaps me with his true intentions. It was to encourage me to achieve. It was not to present a bar filled with impossibly high standards to hurdle over. I think about what standards I can give Tiffany, but they all just deal with the art of survival.

I reach down and slightly tug at her telling her it’s time to get up. She reluctantly compels herself to assume a combination sitting while waking up position. I give her a few seconds to regain her faculties, as I finish straightening out my rucksack for the journey home. She attempts to finger comb her hair with one hand, and covers her yawn with the other. I pull out a protein bar and split it in half in the meantime. “Good morning. Eat this, and then we got to get going.”

We make our way out the front entrance way and see the devastation the fog and the night hid just a few hours earlier. Various size craters adorn areas of the dead brown ground. I found the missing roof from the school lying shattered on the former play ground. Oddly, a section of it resembling the shape of a “swing set.” It fell exactly where I used to play. It spurs a fond childish memory as we scheme along the walkway towards the main gate of the former schoolyard. I motion Tiffany to wait while I check the street for LD. I look both ways, then down the path I’m currently charting in my mind. I don’t see any signs of life; rather I

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just hear the sound of that lonely bird returning to sing his distant desperate song.

We turn right at the intersection and begin crunching our way towards the alley. The warm sunlight is drying the moist fragments, causing louder pops with each further step. We turn in the alley and attempt to make our way back to "H" by way of the alleyway system. I see a body strewn across the far end of the alley. I warn Tiffany to follow close behind and to stay alert to my every command. I find a long stick as we approach the body. I plan on using it for my examining tool while also checking to see if this might be a trap. I walk around the body looking for visible signs he might really be ready to jump us. But, all I find is his forehead brand standing out past his pain filled face. I slide my stick under the body and rock it up to check for attached wires. I do this at several different spots along his body and conclude he is not hooked to any improvised explosive device. I return to a position near his head and decide to poke his eyes with my stick to find if he has any involuntary reflex reaction. I realize the eyes are the most sensitive organ in the reflex system, and it is impossible to hide the defensive movement the body must make to protect itself from my jab.

He does not react in the slightest to my invasion. I don't need to go any further in determining he's definitely dead. I remember hearing Paul's report about the possible outbreak of plagues, as I proceed with the utmost caution. I motion Tiffany to stand behind me as I stare at his carcass. My first thought is he just keeled over and died on this very spot. I progress in probing the body for possible signs of its demise. I first check for any external signs of intrusion or trauma. I don't see any puncture wounds, blood, or bruising on the body. I use my stick and move its arm to find rigor mortis has not fully set in. I figure death was within the last few hours. I press down on his chest with my stick and find it is rock hard. I return my stick and use it to lift open the victim's eye lid. The white of his eye is blood red, suggesting something was in his system to cause capillary vessels to break.

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I spot a trail of puddles just past his remains. We move towards them and immediately notice the overwhelming acidic stench. I try and kneel to get a closer look at its contents, but the smell is just overpowering. We step back and take one last look around and at all the evidence. My mind inputs all the observed information while attempting to contrive the most likely reason for its death. It seems Tiffany has been analyzing the situation along with me. I hear her whisper in my ear from her studious position just over my shoulder. Her diagnosis confirms my conclusion. He was mostly likely poisoned!

We leave the remains and hurry back towards our main objective. As we move closer to "Project H," I sort out certain poisons that are not probable candidates, while storing those most likely on my "mental list." Tiffany's staunch stare tells me the inherent doctor in her is doing the same. I am also thinking of a possible motive for the victim to ingest this poison. Was it intentional or accidental? Tiffany latches her eyes onto me, but she walks along in a hypnotic trance dedicating her mind to finding proper solution. I concentrate on getting both of us back safely, as I guide her through the rough terrain we once called home.

We make it to the property edge at "H." I pan the perimeter for enemy, while planning our path into the building. I keep alert and notice Tiffany's attention has snapped towards me. I pull out my pocket knife, and then tilt the reflecting sunlight up and down several times directing it towards the roof of the building. I see the "Ok, I am checking" code blink twice at me. Tiffany asks me "What's going on?" I reply, "It's a code we recently established to let the "Watchman" know we are returning Irreverent. He then scans from his high position to make sure there are no LD sighted on the property's perimeter. The blinking light lets the "Watchman" communicate certain important information. I see him blink two more times which means the perimeter is "all clear." I tell Tiffany, "It's safe. Let's go." We run all the way through the now open doors to "H."

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Chapter 11: The Message

There is a combined presence of brothers and sisters waiting to welcome us in. We are propped up with friendly embraces that give us a chance to catch our breaths. Immediately, Tiffany feels the unconditional love of her new family now engulfing her with their open arms. After I compose myself, I introduce Tiffany. "This is our new sister Tiffany," I inform the inquiring minds. In my heart though, I will always have a secret spot that will regard her as the daughter I never had. I watch as the ladies warmly whisk her along in their procession of questions and comments; and to help attend to her needs. In the excitement Tiffany looks over her shoulder and finds me. I see her weeping and know this time it is tears of happiness. I realize these tears will purge the loneliness and fear she's felt for so long, as the river banks of her heart overflow with this new joy and love. I signal Tiffany "its okay." Now I know how the first day of school must feel for a father. Now she knows a mother's love.

Scotty and Gary heel alongside me impatiently pleading for details. I am eager to eat, cleanup, and rest. All they want is news. Pastor Paul is coming to join me, as I move towards the make shift cafeteria. "Where did you find her? Did you see any LD?" Scotty

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asks. I approach Dave and Randy and request a cup of coffee. Gary attempts to speed the information process by telling me to sit, while he gets me food and coffee. "I see we have a new member," Paul cordially comments. As I sit, he continues by stating, "I guess we both have new news to share." I swipe the approaching coffee cup out of the hurrying hands of Gary. They're all eager to hear all my remarks, but "Ahhh" are my first words after downing a gulp. "Brown rice and gravy again," are my next, as Gary sets my lunch plate down. Paul seems anxious to give us the latest news he heard while monitoring the radio. I ensue eating and drinking amidst Paul's heralding huddle.

Paul tells us amazing news. The internet that was knocked out over the entire North America continent during the EMP blast will again be active soon. Paul found an automated message repeating over and over on several different shortwave radio bands. "Trinity" is in the process of reestablishing the internet, and will begin transmitting next week. At first, this seems wonderful, but Paul thinks something dastardly is up. The first broadcast we have to look forward to is being called, "The Message of 'Trinity.'" The repeating advertisement gives the web address along with dates and times the message will air. "Trinity's" intent and desire seems crystal clear. They wish to indoctrinate the world to their message of salvation; which is really damnation.

This idea raises many questions. Do they think there are enough Irreverent with working computers on the continent to receive their message? Where do they expect them to get the electricity to power it up? Do they think we will risk detection to hear their message? They must realize some of us know these signals can be traced. Some good has come out of this. While shortwave is an entirely different animal when it comes to cutting through the airway static, receiving internet requires higher frequency. The airwaves must now be clear enough of residual electronic distortion for them to broadcast in these higher frequencies. And, they must have found a way to restore the satellites needed to broadcast. If they can use it maybe we can

too.

Paul overheard other news worthy information. He monitored alerts about plagues breaking out in pockets seemingly everywhere on the planet. He intercepted intercontinental communications from “Trinity’s” worldwide operations. Paul explains he was able to determine there must be a new type of plague. The entire rotting dead, due to the meteor event, is only part of the contributing plague problem. Request for new types of virus medicine suggests this sickness must be different.

Evidentially, the current medication is no longer able to work.

Either the viral strain is mutating, or this plague is due to something new all together. Both are extreme reasons to worry. But, we realize we have divine protection here.

I finish my meal as the brothers discuss keeping this new information “under our hats.” We figure it will only excite everyone, and there is no need to know—at least for now. My main concern is how I might increase getting the “message of salvation” out to the Irreverent still out there before the plague hits here. We decide to have a secret meeting later to discuss what may lie ahead. I finish the conversation by telling the guys about how I came to find Tiffany. They are fascinated to hear about her miraculous rescue. This event helps reassure us God is on our side.

“Fellows, I need to go wash up, and then get some sleep.” My announcement briefly interrupts their continuing conversation as stand up to leave. “Oh, glad to see you made it back okay!” Dave yells at a distance. I wave my salutation back to him as I venture off for some much needed “shut eye.”

I feel like I just fell asleep when I hear a friendly voice waking me. She gently slides her fingernails over the undershirt on my back. “Come on Mr. Story teller. It’s time to get up.” I turn over slowly while stretching the sleepiness from my weary bones. I manage to squeeze out between my yawns, “Well, hello stranger.” I see Tiffany sitting on the edge on my cot patiently smiling. I wonder how long I’ve been asleep as I rip open my watch cover. She informs me I’ve been out for eight hours plus.

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My watch confirms this by showing me it's 9:45 pm. "Did you get some rest?" I ask. "Not as much as you, but I'm fine." I force myself to sit up and spin to the side of my cot. "Did the ladies take care of you?" I see her hair looks clean and brushed. She also smells pleasant. "Yeah, I made a lot of new friends. I really like Katie though. She helped me set up my own private living area and decorate it." Tiffany seems excited and happy. She invites me to come "check it out," as she grabs and pulls me up. I'm in no mood to refuse the young lady.

Tiffany's holding hand is leading me to the area called the "Singles Quarter." It is sectioned off with walls of anything the women could find and join together. As we approach Tiffany's cubical I see its walls are a combination of old boxes, wooden pallets, and several pieces of worn and torn carpet. She pulls me into her private section while looking at me to see my reaction. I immediately notice her improvised dresser displaying most of her neatly folded items. She points to it and explains what each compartment of the stacked milk crates are for. Next to her bed is a nightstand made of boxes. It holds just two items. One is her hairbrush. The other is a picture of her father. She gives me a funny look as I bend to get a closer look at his picture. I compliment her on her living arrangement and then tell her, "I expect you to keep this place neat young lady." She doesn't say a word; she rather wraps her arms around me and squeezes me tightly instead. "Thank you Joey. I will." I see on her cot a small plush animal. I bend down for a closer look at the creature while Tiffany states, "His name is Joey Junior. A lady named Amanda gave him to me." She grabs the dirty critter and cuddles it in her rocking arms. I ask her if we can sit and talk for a few minutes. I turn and sit while patting the top of her cot with my inviting hand. She turns and joins me.

"I have a little present for you Tiffany." I hand her my spare tiny "New Testament Bible." She tenderly retrieves the book from me and immediately notices the fresh smell of the paper pages. I ask her if she knows why it smells so sweet. I inform her it's

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because the pages contain God's breath. She tilts her head cockeyed wondering what I mean. I ask her what she knows about Jesus and a place called Heaven. What she tells me saddens me. She believes it's a place where good people go when they die. This is what her father told her. I am afraid to inform her that daddy was wrong, but I have to give her the true message.

"Honey, would you let me see your Bible?" She hands it to me as I fumble through the pages to "Ephesians" 2:8.

I ask her what she thinks good is. "I don't know. I guess if I do more good things than bad things in my life then I'm good." I try to explain how God is perfect and requires us to be perfect. "No one is perfect!" she abruptly commands. I figure I hit a nerve that is causing her to realize where her father maybe. I comfort her with a hug and the words, "Honey, you're right. None of us are. We can never be good enough for our perfect creator God. We can never do enough good things to please God. He requires perfection. He requires holiness. He regards our good works to be like filthy rags in value to Him." My heart sinks as I watch all her new found joy turning into a sea of tears. "What are you saying Joey? We're all going to Hell!" I increase my grip of comfort. "No honey, not at all! There is a way to get to Heaven. There is a perfect way to get there."

I proceed to read the passage that explains the way to gain God's perfection. It is the message of grace through faith, and not by anything we do. I explain, "God cannot be in the presences of sin. Anything that we've ever done wrong in our lives is called sin. It separates us from a relationship with God. Even if it is just one tiny "white lie" in our whole life we are covered in sin. But, God loves us so much that He decided to pay the penalty for every one of our sins. The only way to remove sin is with the blood of a perfect sinless sacrifice." I go on to explain how the Son of God named Jesus loves each one of us so much that He was willing to pay the price and conquered the eternal separation from God. He is the only one able to meet the perfect requirements established by God. His terrible crucifixion and wonderful resurrection are the final acts in conquering sin. I finish by explaining that "God's

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perfect justice was served through the sacrifice of Jesus.”

“Would you like Jesus to give you redemption? If you truly want salvation you just have to believe his promise, and ask Him to come into your heart.” I tell her to repeat after me. “Jesus, I am sorry for my sins. Please forgive me. Will you come live in me forever and ever? I want a special relationship with you and to live with you forever in eternity.” She repeats those heartfelt words humbly and asks, “What’s next?” I give her a big hug and say, “Listen to Him by reading His word called the ‘Holy Bible’. This will instruct and guide you in your relationship with Him. It’s not what you do from now on, but whom you trust in. This is called faith.” She stares with such surprise in her eyes. “Is that it?” I just nod and smile, “Yes.” I watch her face as she feels His Holy Spirit filling the void that once filled her empty heart and life. “Welcome Tiffany. You are now what most would call a Christian, or a Christ follower.” She smiles at me through the simplicity of it all. I realize this one act of faith answers those questions we all seek: where do we come from, why am I here, what is my purpose, and is there anything more. The inherent nagging of our hearts seeking answers to these epic questions disappears with the only answer that really matters. “Yes Tiffany, you are now saved for Jesus Christ, because you put your faith in what He did! Heaven will be our eternal home.”

I kiss her forehead and tell her not to worry about trying to understand everything that just happened. “Just remember to always have faith that God now lives inside you. He loves you. Even if you mess up he is faithful to forgive you. He will not condemn you, but rather convict you to repent.” I suggest that she start reading in the first gospel of “Matthew.” I inform her that this book will show her the life of Jesus and the message of the cross. I leave her with a, “Goodnight honey,” while watching her curiosity to learn about Jesus take over. I smile with joy and fulfillment as I depart. I take with me the feeling that this is one of those perfect moments.

I stop by my area and grab some stuff from inside my

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rucksack, and then head out to the dining area. I empty the bag of chalk on a spread out plastic bag I placed on the table. I proceed to crush the chalk into a fine powder. I hear Dave approaching asking if I might want a cup of coffee. This is immediately followed by “What cha do’n?” I tell Dave “Yeah please, I’ll take a cup.” Which I follow up with: “I’m making medicine.” After pulverizing the chalk I proceed to dump the bag of active carbon that I collected from the school’s air conditioning filters. I slightly crush this and swirl both ingredients together. I ask Dave if there is any water nearby. He quickly brings my coffee and a tin soup can of water. “Perfect” I reply. I add a pinch of rock salt to the mixture and separate half of it by scraping it back into the bag. The other half I slowly add water to, creating a gray paste. I swirl it around mixing it into a slurry substance. Dave leans over my right shoulder observing, while taking mental notes in my science project. I section off teaspoon size amounts, forming individual squares. Then, each square is split down the middle. I reply to Dave as Randy approaches, “Done!” I reiterate, “Well, at least till it dries and hardens.” Dave asks me, “How is this medicine?” I explain how carbon’s amazing absorption properties removes gases and poisonous chemicals. “The chalk and salt also help neutralize adverse effects, but are mainly to hold this fabrication together. This is great for helping to relieve diarrhea, and many other types of digestive track illnesses. It is also great for absorbing ingested poisons. One last thing, it’s good for filtering chemicals, gases, and biological substances from things like water.” I hear the “ease dropper” Randy reply with, “Wow!” Dave asks, “Where does active carbon come from?” I tell him, “It’s basically charcoal formed by heating wood or other organic compounds. Coconut shells and hardwoods work best.” I warn the guys to let this stuff sit untouched overnight. I tell them I’ll collect it in the morning. I ask the guys where Pastor Paul is. Randy instructs me he is on the roof pulling “watchman” duty. I grab another cup of coffee and refill mine before heading up to visit Paul.

I carefully ascend up the ladder straddling it with using my

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right hand, while my left balances the jiggling cups of coffee. I make it up through the hatchway while staring at the perfect night sky looming way over top of me. As I peer through this portal, I notice the stars seem extra crisp and sparkly tonight. I make it onto the roof and see the pastor leaning slightly over the side of the building. He is staring off towards the distant northern sky. I quietly approach him, trying not to startle him. As I approach his position, I whisper, "Paul, it me Joey." He jolts his head around and sees the dark cups steaming between us. I hold his out to propose he take the gift. He smiles and obliges my offering. I scurry alongside and turn to share with him the star filled sky, my coffee, and my thoughts. We just wonder for a moment at this awesome spectacle of God's amazing creation.

Paul continues staring as he comments, "It's hard to believe there are Angels surrounding us at this very moment." I lift my cup in a salute to thank the invisible warriors. Paul nods his head up and down and says, "Thank you God." The cold moisture begins to set in as I feel the tingle tickle my neck. I shake with an unintentional shiver while sounding an unequivocal "Brrr." My sympathy requests that I know how much more time he has to stay up here. Paul informs me till 1:00 am. I check my watch and see he still has another 45 minutes before his relief comes. He seems dressed warmly enough; as the cold air reminds me that I'm not. I decide to quickly discuss some important topics on my mind before I freeze and catch a "cold."

Paul beats me to the punch and states, "I talked with Tiffany, and it seems she has very high regards for you. She told me all about your excursion, and her life story." I slowly nod my sincere affirmation. I explain the need to step up my pace in finding Irreverent. "I know there are more out there like Tiffany." I remind Paul that the plagues are coming. Also, the water supply is becoming poisoned, and "Trinity" is escalating its deception. He replies, "I know." He reminds me that the Bible predicted all these things would happen. I stand as he tells me more about future events that are still pending. I take mental notes and realize I have

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so much more to do before the situation becomes too impossible. These things beginning to happen now are just a shadow of God's wrath still to come. We embrace in a shared prayer of conviction, divine guidance, and the faith to do His will. We turn back to star staring and find solace in sharing the big beautiful night sky. Paul bends down and retrieves a small blanket just in case he got too chilly. He hands it to me, and we spend his remaining time just gazing and wondering at God's creation.

I wake early to retrieve my homemade medication before the morning crowd moves into the dining area. I retrieve some MRE wrappers I find in the dining area trash can. This stuff will work great in protecting my carbon medication. I find each untouched section on the table, seeing it has dried and harden perfectly. I take the individual pieces, pairing and wrapping them together in their own individual foil. I proceed to bundle it together using a thin slice of wire to secure the wrapper by twisting it tight. I place each packet in the small plastic "baggie" it originally came from. I conclude by determining I've made enough for sixteen doses. "Just in time," I tell myself, as I hear the rumble of the waking crowd. I return to my area and stash the medicine in my rucksack. This way I'll be able to bring it with me on future missions. The remaining powder mixture I decide to leave here. I make a note to brief Tiffany, who is the best candidate for medical officer, on how and when to use it. She'll need to know this before I take off on my next mission. I smell the fresh aroma of coffee and head back over to the dining area for a chance at the first cup of the morning.

I see Randy leaning over to take a whiff of the large brewing pot. He slowly and cautiously stirs it with his homemade ladle, so not to kick-up the coffee grounds lying along the bottom of his large pot. I venture close enough to remark, "I see Dave must have elevated you to this honorable position." Randy says nothing in response. He just smiles and stirs while taking a deep sucking breath through his nose. I see Dave appear, as he returns upright from his hidden bent over position. He asks, "Have you seen the 'Powdered Eggs' bag?" Randy shrugs his shoulders informing Dave

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that it's probably where he left it last. Dave is not real happy with his wise comment.

I feel a strong hand come from behind me and squeeze my shoulder. It is followed with "How's my buddy doing?" I turn my head and see the owner of the large pawl come into sight. "Moses! A 'God' morning to you too!" Our morning salutation is interrupted by Paul inviting the congregation to an early morning meeting right after breakfast. I have a feeling I know what he's going to announce. I hurry to drink my coffee while observing the alarmed faces reacting to the urgency of this meeting. Everyone clamors to guess what it will be about as they huddle around the dining area. I proudly gaze at Dave and compliment him on handling the prevailing pressure so well. He nods his head and hurries to finish making breakfast. He flips his scrambled egg creation and says, "Thanks buddy."

I finish scraping the scraps off my square plate, that was formerly a ceramic floor tile, and then hurry to the meeting area. I want to see if I can talk to Paul first about what he plans to announce. I make it over and find Tiffany alone on the front row seating area patiently waiting. "God morning to you," I tell her. My gesture temporarily removes this mysterious worry covering her entire face. She replaces it with an ingenuous smile. I move to sit by her as she tells me, "You're going out again, aren't you?" I see the concern she has, as my sincere compassion rises. I cannot lie to her, but I don't want her to feel the way she does either. I stare into her eyes, dumbfounded for the words I should say. She places her hands over her eyes and begins to cry. Then, the words automatically pour out of me. "Honey, don't worry. I have supernatural protection. Nothing can happen to me unless God allows it. I am on a mission for God." My words have a mild calming affect that stifles her whimper. "I'll tell you a little secret." She refuses to lower her wet hands, but rather leans her head into me, beckoning for my next words. I whisper, "You're the first person in a long that cares for me so much." She drops her hands and immediately tackles me in her embrace.

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Tiffany emphatically states, "But, I don't want you to go." I tell her, "Well, maybe accept for that old goblin." I feel her pressed embrace jiggle up and down as her head stays buried in my chest. I recognize Pastor Paul's voice approaching as it comes with several other familiar voices. "Please don't go," she implores me. I pat her back, and then hug her. "Tiffany, I want to tell you another secret. No matter what happens to me, we'll always be together in eternity. When I get to Heaven I'm requesting my own space craft. I plan on exploring this incomprehensible vast universe, and I'll need a first mate. Will you be my science officer?" She looks at me like I'm crazy, but she knows in her heart I am serious. "God says 'No man knows, and no eyes have seen the wonders I have in store for those whom love me'." I ask her if she believes that. I tell her, "Move over Captain Kirk, there's a new pilot on deck." She reluctantly laughs, "No Joey, you'll be my first officer." I stand to go greet Paul while respectfully replying, "We'll have to work on that honey."

My attempt to intercept Paul before the meeting fizzles into the flood enveloping him. I stop and return to sit at Tiffany's side preparing for the developing news. Paul takes the podium and prepares for his announcement. The roar of the clamoring wave soon settles on the shore of boxes. Swishing sounds of "shhh" blow over this harbor of apprehension. Paul's tidings turn the tide to a dead calm, and then warns this crew of the approaching storm. "There is change coming. In view of recent events I've had to reconsider our position. Until now, our concern has been on surviving in the sea of turmoil. We've been trying to ride the crest of the wave till Jesus returns. That has got to change." The crowd is so quiet I can hear their hearts' beat. "Our goal is not found in this world, but in the one to come. I've made excuses to God and myself. I believed that a Sheppard should be concerned with his safety in order to protect his flock. And, you are my flock." I look over this earnest sea of heads as they solemnly bob up and down, assuring the pastor of their affection and devotion. "That was my mission, but it is no more."

This smashing surprise causes submerged emotions to

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surfaces. They lash out and clash on the rock of this church. I hear among the congregation rumblings of, "What are you saying pastor? Are you leaving us?" An eerie quietness emerges among these floundering eyes searching out their beacon of hope. Paul continues on saying, "These are the last days as we know it. All of our purpose should be dedicated to saving all those drowning souls. Therefore, I refuse to stay safely anchored in this harbor of hope and watch eternal death and damnation wash over those lost souls any longer!" Paul's intimidating charisma leads him to ask, "Who is with me?"

I watch as every hand raises, and hear every voice rise in agreement to this truth. They realize it's not Paul they are agreeing with, but the very Spirit of God. For, who can argue with God's truth? "I hope to organize four different search parties to travel in all four compass directions. After that, I'll be traveling with Joey!" I look into his staring eyes and am astounded by the veracity of his proclamation. He reminds me of his authority by stating to the audience, "This is not open for debate!" My thunderstruck jaw drops as Tiffany embraces me and the idea by stating, "At least you won't be alone." I feel like I've just run 99 yards and been tackled just before the goal line.

I accept this inevitable transition and prepare a new strategy to accommodate the both of us. I decide to wait till tomorrow before implementing it. This should give me enough time to devise a plan of action and employ a system to accomplish it. Paul adjourns the meeting by issuing a request for brave volunteers, asking, "Who is willing to take up his cross and follow me?" I watch as the congregation responds to Paul's request by seeing many humble men come forward. Moses pries himself away from Katie's clutch, while kissing her forehead before advancing forward. I can almost hear his voice telling her, "Darling, this is something I just have to do." I see off in the distance Dave dropping his ladle as one of the crying wives explains to him what's going on. I proudly watch him abandon his post, and defiantly desert it with the heart of a lion. I see Scotty, Kenny,

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Jerry, Gary, and Randy march past their fear. I watch six other brothers from the former "Project T" file forward. They mingled in with six more of my new brothers advancing. Even Amanda wishes to join the ranks. I see her bolting between the behemoths with the bravery of a raging bull. Twenty heroic souls now stand near the pastor as he asks, "Ready to be soldiers for Christ?" Every volunteer joins hands as Paul leads us in a prayer of divine providence. We finish the meeting by reassuring one another of our sincere faith. We seal our promise to serve through our congratulating embraces. We take the rest of the day to reflect on our decision with family and friends. Then, we sleep on our decision to serve.

After breakfast, the volunteers head to the meeting area. I am summoned to the podium as the clamor turns to silence. Paul pats me on the shoulder and introduces me as the "Head of Operation." "Joey has the experience, knowledge, and proven dedication to lead us. Everyone, listen up and follow his commands." I turn to Paul and tell him how thrilled I am that he would allow me to so vigorously volunteer. He just smirks at me then pounds my back several times with his hand. I inform the congregation, "My first directive is to ask everyone to choose a partner." I think it will be best if they pick their own mate. This wisdom will alleviate the possibility of any future regret towards authority, and will allow them to pair up with someone who is most like them. I always found like minds work alike, and get more accomplished in like manner. We'll need to exploit this advantage to stay ahead of the demonic forces. I inform them that we will be traveling in teams of two towards the four different compass directions. "Eight of us will start our missions on even numbered days, and the other eight will start on odd numbered days. The first group of eight will be called the 'Alpha' squads. And, the second will be called the 'Omega' squads. The other four remaining individuals will coordinate the missions and handout the next day's assignments. They will also act as replacements." After pairing, we flip a coin to see which of the ten pairs will become part of the "Alpha" and "Omega" squads. The

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pastor and I lay claim to "Alpha E" for east. Each of the remaining candidates is assigned the next available clockwise compass direction. This will help identify each pair and give order to each assignment.

After choosing the teams I give a short class on "how to maneuver through the terrain unnoticed." Then, we discuss what signs we should look for that distinguish possible Irreverent from the LD. This is followed by a quick class on navigation and recognizing your surroundings. Between classes, I send Paul off with a list, to see if he can get some of the ladies to make some needed equipment A.S.A.P. (as soon as possible). Lastly, we discuss the importance of their mission, and what they will carry with them in their journey. The rest of today's itinerary is then dedicated to mission preparation, open discussion, and rest. I finish with the command, "We move out at first light, so be ready!"

Pastor Paul joins me as we head to the supply room to see if Moses can fill our list of needed supplies. We stop at the entrance and observe as Moses instructs Katie how to take over his supply room position. She seems more occupied to just being with him these remaining hours than learning the supply room trade. I interrupt Moses by handing him the list of things we'll need. I watch as he reads the list while scratching his head. Katie's arms magically appear from behind him, and then wrap around his mid section. "I think we got all this stuff?" Moses replies. I tell him, "We'll stop back a little later to pick up whatever you're able to assemble." We leave the couple alone to spend this remaining special time together.

A thick cloud of nervousness, weighed down with stirring anxiety, hangs over the main living area as we enter. There is no laughter or even arguing, just a steady heavy monotone of sincerity everywhere. I feel invisible as we pass our friends. Everyone seems hypnotized in helping their loved ones prepare. We make it over to my sleeping quarters as I invite the pastor to sit beside me on the cot. I ask him if he has someone to replace

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him while he's on the mission. Paul explains that he has three volunteers who will take turns monitoring the radio. He instructed them to start monitoring and recording anything unusual in around the clock shifts, which they'll also be doing seven days a week. This drastic change in venue tells me the pastor feels the same change in the wind coming as I do. He finishes by informing me the replacement spiritual leadership will be handled by Brother Sam. Moses arrives with a big box of supplies telling us, "I did what I could." He sets it down on the floor as Paul and I abruptly start rummaging through it. We begin checking off our list as Carol, who is Dave's new replacement, sounds the diner alert with Ruth, her new assistant. I look over towards the dining area and see there is no real rush to eat tonight. Katie joins us and grabs her big guy's arm, and then pulls him along to diner. He asks if we're going to join them. I tell him, "Save us a couple seats. We'll be over in a few minutes."

I continue searching through the box and am amazed to find two real rucksacks inside. I ask Paul, "Where did these come from?" He tells me that several brothers went and moved most of the supplies from "T" to here. He informs me "They found them when they shuffled the boxes around in the supply room." Just below these are five improvised travel backpacks. I notice a black "Hello Kitty" decal on one. Paul and I have a welcomed tension relieving laugh. I notice the ladies must have tried to dye this kid's backpack black. Four other handmade backpacks are sewn together from a painter's canvas drop cloth. I realize the ladies must have found the canvas lying around. "These will have to do." I find seven rolled sections of rope, seven bags of basic essentials, seven homemade "first aid" bags, seven water bottles, seven small Bibles, seven homemade knives, thirty two protein bars, and sixteen glow sticks. We hurry to divide the stuff and insert the proper portions into the seven sacks. I reach in my rucksack and take out the medicine I made earlier. I toss equal portions in each basic essential bag along with handwritten instructions on how and when to use it. As we seal the sacks I hear a loud growling sound. Paul informs me he was fasting for divine guidance. I tell

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him, "Right now God's telling us to go get some diner."

We arrive at the dining area to see Moses and Katie have already gotten each of us a plate, and a spot to sit. I thank the pair and give Moses a special recognition for gathering all the much needed supplies. He informs us it was "No problem brothers." I smile seeing the little praying hands stabbing the crack between Katie and Moses. They turn outwards and try to pry the couple apart, revealing the desire of little Hanna to sit between mommy and daddy. Young Jordan sits next to Moses and leans into him, challenging his short arms to wrap around the big guy. Every member of the family is tied in this clutching ball of emotions. It looks like a scene "Norman Rockwell" might have painted. They act as if they all know daddy is leaving in the morning.

Pastor Paul invites us to join him in the diner blessing prayer, which carries over in to a special blessing on the family. Paul and I feel their love pour over, and their anguish.

Both of us quietly agree to give them some much needed solitude by hurrying to finish eating. I stand and pat the couple while telling the children, "Sweet dreams." As I prepare to leave, Paul swallows his last bite and tells us, "Goodnight everyone. And Moses, we'll see you in the morning." I just wave to Paul as we retreat to retire.

The morning comes fast as I am abruptly awakened by the repeated shrugs of my dark arm alarm clock. Paul alerts me, "It's time to get up." Before I have a chance to ask him what time is it, I see his green floating aura follow his face back-off-into the dark. I manage to comprehend he is making his rounds to wake all the teams. My fuzzy mind yells at me "Go back to sleep!" It causes me to think, "Maybe it's still too early." I struggle to read my watch, but it informs me it really is 5:03 am. I force myself to slide around sideways on my cot, and attempt to don my socks and boots. I stand and finish dressing, as the green floating face returns. "Just in time," I whisper to Paul. The closer he gets the more I notice the flock of faces floating in the dark just behind him. I grab a sack and lift it near the approaching light while

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telling Paul, “Hand this back.” He grabs it as I repeat the process until all three teams are equipped. I toss my rucksack on my back, and then tell the group to move out. We head up to the roof for one last meeting before leaving on our missions.

Chapter 12: Star of the Morning

I finish leading the pack up the ladder and move to an observation position near the dark ledge. I take a couple protein bars from my sack and offer one to Paul for breakfast. We share the last moments of the night stars while chewing and waiting for all the teams to ascend. Quietly, we continue grinding, staring, and waiting for the pretentious Sun. Out of the corners of my eyes dark figures begin forming this last line of defense. There are no words spoken; just the joyous noise of wandering faces covered in moonlight. Moses gnawing silhouette slowly fills the dark void between Dave and I. I smile a morning salute. I feel strangely relaxed in this embrace of shared anticipation, and slip back in time to a warm memory. I was twelve and anxiously waiting with my family and friends for the finale of that year's Fourth of July fireworks celebration. Suddenly, the dark sky erupts with rainbows of sparkles and explosions of "Ahhhs!" I feel like I'm in that mesmerizing moment again. We all rest at attention, and patiently gaze into the cool east air.

Paul whispers, "There it is-the 'morning star'-Venus." We ponder the planet playing in the first sign of Sun life. I marvel, as the dark blue churns the black velvet back. Every second

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transforms this living tapestry with swirls of colors. Entranced, we glance at the dark scarlet shoving the indigo shade of blue further up. The bright twinkling's wrestle in this war of the waves. The dim colors wash over the stars, making their final stand, but are plucked up and cast out into the outer darkness. Gentile golden finger tips begin peeking up and tickle the burgundy sky with its pretty pink crimson feather dedicated to painting the pink puffy clouds. In my seclusion I consider, "I've seen this sight a thousand times. But, I can't imagine one more amazing." My heart shouts at me to envision that one son rise two thousand years ago. I admit to this deliberation, and gratuitously nod my head in respect. "Please be with us all today," I pray. "I know in my heart you truly are the 'star of the morning'."

Each team checks their sector of travel for any sign of LD. We then disband and race to beat the sunrise back down the ladder. Gary stays on the roof, and will act as the "Watchman." The rest of us shuffle through the dark towards the store's entrance. Once there, we wait like paratroopers for the right moment to leap. I hand out three improvised compasses made from caps that came from three old furniture polish cans. Inside each is a magnetized piece of two inch wire that's stuck through a makeshift cork. I jammed the cork into the cap to lock it in place. I hand each team one, and then explain they'll need to add a little water for the cork to float. This is a north-south pointing compass. While they pack them, I decide to send one team at a time across the dark property.

I wave Moses and Scotty up to the door. I double check the property area for any unusual outlying movement. The shadows in the broken forest are making it hard to detect the difference between the wind and the possible dark dancing devils. I lean out and check with the "Watchman." I see Gary waving that the "coast is clear" sign. I determine it's safe and pat Moses on the shoulder while whispering, "It's time. God go with you." The team moves out and stumbles along the terrain till they disappear in the dark. I wave Dave and Randy up next. I repeat the same message, "It's time. God go with you." I smack Dave's back as the

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pair dashes away into the dark. I realize in this moment, I have never felt this proud of Dave. Amanda and Jerry shuffle in to position. I order them to wait with my hand. I stare at the pair while listening for the "Watchman." Once again I say, "It's time. God go with you." I watch them dash, while saying a special silent prayer for this team. I turn my head briefly and ask Paul if he's ready. I feel him attempting to remove my rucksack off my back, as my eyes turn towards the departing team. I watch them also fade into the shadows of the morning as Paul whispers, "We'll share this load." I find great comfort in those words for a change.

We line up as I check our flanks. I check left while Paul keeps an eye on his right. "How's everything looking pastor?" He pats my shoulder twice letting me know that the coast is clear. Side by side we make our move to the edge of the property, maneuvering through the duck and cover system. I hear the flopping sound of Paul's rucksack, knowing it needs to be readjusted tighter. The hurried pace is causing Paul to breath hard. We make it to the darken tree line and find a spot to sit and rest amongst the slithering shadows. I lean over to assist Paul as he tries to tighten the sack on his own. I try and assist him while taking a quick observation of the eastward sector. I look at Paul's mouth and see his breathing is returning to normal. I ask him, "Are you ready?" He nods his affirmation as we stand. I tell him, "I'll lead and you follow my hand signals." I move just far enough ahead to where I believe he will be able to accurately distinguish the difference between my hand signal and the moving morning shadows. I wave to him, commanding him to advance. I turn to look ahead as Paul races towards my position. I see the alleyway entrance, sensing the security it can offer. As Paul meets me, I wave him to continue on. We dash side by side the rest of the way into the alley.

I see a good cover spot inside the alley and steer us in its direction. Paul appears in the path of my peripheral vision. I see he's breathing faster than his legs are moving. We finally make it to the cover spot behind the dumpster just in time for me to watch Paul fall in exhaustion. I stick my head out to look up the

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alley corridor for any signs of LD. I again give Paul a minute to catch his breath. I hear his gasping begin to slow, while wondering how the other teams are doing. The brilliant contrasting shades and colors on the horizon hypnotically force me to gaze up and see the last remaining stars dissolve into the effervescent blue yonder. A peace comes down to me, amidst this chaos of racing shadows.

The morning camouflage of Paul's striped face is illuminated just enough to see him telling me he's ready to travel once more. I make a decision that we'll travel side by side forgoing the maneuvering ritual. The cover of the shadows and the darkness of the alleyway will be our protection. I whisper to Paul, "Keep alert," and then shake my hand several times toward his right side; designating this as his sector of observation. I walk alongside methodically checking ahead, and to my left. I hear the steady crunching of fragments pulverizing, and then shoot out from under our advancing feet. We vigilantly stare for pot holes as we hurdle the morning shadows helping to hide them. Paul suddenly slips and skips over a small crater his eyes failed to detect. We both immediately stop and listen for possible reaction that his stomping feet make. The echo of his dance slowly fades away into the silence of this morning. We cautiously continue on.

The light begins unmasking the scenic view of the purple mountains lining each side of the alley. Stripes of gold divulge the true identity of the irregular shapes. Large jagged chard splinters stab the mounds between us. These purple facades were once someone's home. Rarely do we pass a structure that is still mostly intact. This is the first real experience Paul has of the town's devastation since the meteor shower. The warm sun gradually begins to bake the lumps leavened with rotting corpses. The sweet scent of the fresh dew evaporates releasing the blanketed reek. Over the next ten blocks I notice Paul's face turn from awestruck and disbelief to reverent numbness.

We turn right at the end of this alley to go check the area around my former home. My mental note pad reminds me of the loud noise I heard the day I found Tiffany. For some reason the

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sound struck me as being manmade. We convert our strategy back to advancing by duck and cover; now that we are in the well lit open. I signal Paul to wait, as I move to the intersection of this street. I look left and see an overturned burnt military truck torn in half, blocking the street. A fairly large crater near it tells me it was the result of the meteor shower. I am startled by the light breeze swinging the decimated driver's side door slowly open. Its scratching noise unnerves me. It's like finger nails grating over a chalkboard. I check my right flank and become aware of a distant figure on a mound at least a block away. This clear path through the destruction allows me to see a dark figure bending down just in front of a partial front of a house; as if it is looking through the blackened debris. I just have this gut feeling we should investigate this despairing entity.

I wave at Paul to advance. Paul stoops behind the tree I'm hiding behind, as I silently signal him to wait here. I whisper, "I'm going to check this out. If I'm not back in three minutes, take off and head back home." I peer out reestablishing my line of sight to see the figure now sitting on the mound of debris. I stare at it watching the sorrowful figure repeatedly jiggle up and down. The moving light slowly exposes its tattered attire dangling in the breeze. My compassion is confused. Should I go help? I continue to watch this scene of utter misery and desolation. I can't be sure if this is a possible straggling Irreverent or a roving LD. It just sits in the open in front of the facade. I reason that it must be LD due to its lack of concern towards concealment. I pan the perimeter for proof of its possible companions. The only things detected are the slow movements of the shortening shadows. All my reason tells me just to move on, but my spirit invites me to take a closer look.

I check constantly side to side for LD as I move up the street towards the object. It seems to be sitting with its arms pressing against its legs and head. I cut a path through the debris piles and sneak up near to it, while gathering information as to its existence. I am fairly safe, as long as it stays seated facing away. I continue to move quietly. I turn on my first line of defense found

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in my spirit sensing ability. I don't feel the eerie demonic presence, or the radiating abundance of emptiness always associated with the evil pair. I hear a male voice emanating from it. It seems to be conversing with himself. I manage to maneuver just twenty feet, or so, from its position. I hear it strain to whimper between its self imposed questions. His scratchy voice sounds worn from excess crying. The only words I can make out are "Why?" leading off each of his sentences. I decide to move just a few feet closer to hear what it may be saying. I accidentally crush a small fragment sounding the alarm of my presences. He at once turns, stands, and prepares to charge me.

I shift into flight mode and turn my body away. My eyes stay glued on him while preparing to adjust to his next move. He extends his arms fully outward unveiling himself to the full morning light. I freeze in my frenzy allowing me to see he is not LD. There is no brand on him. It is like he thinks I am a LD waiting to attack him. He just stands there with closed eyes offering his self up to me. "Psss," I whisper, "I'm Irreverent!" He collapses as soon as I finish saying these words. I turn before ascending the pile and see Pastor Paul's head leaning out pass his hiding tree to take a peek. I immediately realize I've been gone way past the three minute mark, but Paul still remains. I wave to him to advance to my position as I proceed to this fallen man's side. I turn him over and see his thin red face is covered with the salty sediment of dried tears. I figure it took every ounce of his remaining strength to stand up to me.

Paul slips on a loose plank while climbing the pile to assist me. The plank slaps out a sharp shrill that reverberates throughout this basin of wreckage. Paul stares up at me as if to say he's sorry, but I know we got to get moving before we are all sorry. I signal him to hurry alongside me. We each grab the man's arms and drag him down the pile, and then back towards the tree at the intersection. We stop briefly behind it employing its cover and silently observe. Paul turns towards the alleyway to observe, and I turn my face back towards the heap. I see three outlying shadows materialize on a mound far away. They disappear and resurface a

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few seconds later atop a closer mound. This suggests they're on their way to investigate the source of the sound. I hear one yelling something vulgar and feel its hateful demonic spirit.

We head for the safety of the alley as fast as we can. Carrying this man proves to be too much for us. I start looking for a possible shelter big enough to hide all three of us. Both of us begin praying very quietly as we continue. We make it into the alley as I notice the dragging trail we're leaving in the dust. I tell Paul to stop, and then grab his legs. As he repositions himself, I see a set of horizontal basement shelter doors hiding between two dead bushes. We hustle over the fallen fence leading into the backyard of this property, breaking a few slats in our effort. I set the man down and tell Paul to grab his shoulders. I brush the bushes back, and lift the doors open. A cobweb curtain mixed with leaves prevents me from seeing inside the chamber. Approaching voices warn us they found our trail. I rush through the sticky net and pull it with me into the black abyss. Paul follows me dragging this man right behind him. I dump my sack and run back up the stairs. I lean down and tell Paul, "Use the flashlight in my rucksack. I'm going to through them off our trail." I shut the doors, and then push the bushes back over the doors. I hear Paul's voice reverberates against the underside of the doors, "No!"

I leap over the fallen fence ending up back in the alley. I turn and run away from the LDs' encroaching voices. At this moment, they turn in the alleyway and immediately identify me as Irreverent. I reach in my pocket and pull out a handful of weapons. I rush away while tossing a few of the homemade "caltrops" over my shoulder. These are four pronged spiked objects that always land with one point facing up. I made them from large "jacks" I borrowed from the girls playing back at "H." I soaked them with lubricant for maximum effect. I hear their thumping steps gaining on me, but one seems to have fallen in pain. I hear a scream and smashing sound resembling a pile of lumber falling over. I sprinkle several more "caltrops" along the alleyway exit, as I run and gasp huge breathes. I turn on to the

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adjacent street and attempt to initiate the “zigzag” maneuver. I head towards the intersection and hurdle several pothole size craters along the way. I stay to the left side of the street to shorten the angle of my approaching left turn. I prepare to turn left and drop the remaining “caltrops” right before the intersection. The inertia causes their tingle to spread evenly across the entrance to the intersection.

I detect at least two sets of tramping feet still chasing me. Grinding rock and the sharp pitch ting of the metal scratches the pavement a half a block behind me. A deep voice curses at me as I finish my intersection left turn. These evil things seem to be immune to pain, as they persist in stomping along with one inch of the “caltrops” stuck in their feet. I can tell now they are rounding the alleyway on to the street by the skating sound of the metal skidding on the asphalt. I suddenly hear the sound of wood slats snapping. It's as if one LD ran through a fence. I assume it failed to negotiate the alleyway turn onto the street. I hear loud agonizing groans confirming there is now only one chasing me.

The last beast is truly possessed, and furious! The thrashing sounds of its loud steps quicken along with its cursing. The menace shifts gears from metallic jingle to the crushing of pavement under its feet. I know what it is doing. It's a wounded soldier's trick. It is using its pain and anger to fuel its feet. It speeds up chewing up chunks of the asphalt that each of its steps spit out, and then slide across the roadway. Futility and exhaustion finally sets in. I can no longer run. I gasp and hear the approaching words, “I got you now!”

My momentum carries my outstretched body flying forward, as the Demon grips me, and then anchors me to a stop. “I'm going to enjoy tearing you to pieces,” it spitefully snarls. It twist the center of my back bunching my jacket in its death grip. It squeezes and chokes all the air right out of me.

My eyes feel like they're bulging out of their sockets. The evil thing lifts me with one arm off the ground and asks, “Where is your cursed God now?” I cry out in all desperation the holy name, “Jesus!” It laughs hideously at the pain God's name causes it. I feel

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it bend slightly absorbing the blow, and then it punches me right in the kidney. This shot to my body is so violent. I instantly vomit and choke. I feel it lifting me up higher, while tilting me back; as to show me captive towards Heaven. The putrid runs down my cheeks, as I continue choking. It shakes me sadistically and yells toward the midday Sun, "You stole Heaven and gave me Hell. I'll steal this soul and give you Hell!"

I feel the sword of the word enable me. A great peace envelopes me shoving out the pain of doubt. I hear the sound of a speeding freight train barreling down right at me. "Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there anything too hard for me?" A bright blast of holy power explodes and blows me and the Demon off his feet. The evil loosens its grip as I fall on top its trembling body. It screams in anguish, "Get off me!" It frantically and tremendously pushes at me, but it cannot budge me. I pray the one word weapon of choice, "Jesus!" The weight of His holy name shoves me effortlessly downwards. The horrible breath of the beast is thrust out, as my benevolent weight squishes it. Its rugged structure slowly snaps piece by piece under the power of my words. I yell the holy name again, "Jesus!" Again, I am shoved downward. The body below me balloons out, and then burst into oblivion. I feel the evil spirit shatter the enslaved body, and then flee into the security of outer darkness; where damned souls go.

Both joy and sorrow come over me while lying motionless on its remains. I lift myself off and thank my God for this victory, but I am reminded of His great compassion. The thought enters me that two of His eternal creations are forever lost. In this knowledge I too weep bitterly.

The energy lingers in me as I stand. I feel the holy adrenalin still at work. I turn to head back and help Paul, but I see two approaching bodies a half block away. They look at me strangely, as their faces fill with wonderment. I watch patiently as the dirty ragged pair cautiously steps nearer. I sense they are scared, but they are being drawn to me. The puzzled look on the thin lady's face turns innocently into a childlike smile, while the thin man's face turns grimmest. I smile at these Irreverent souls for their

bravery.

The first words out of her mouth astonish me. She giggles, "Why are you glowing?" I kindly reply, "I am not aware that I'm glowing." She reminds me that I am, while she tries touching what she perceives to be my aura. "It tingles," she tells me, while she continues to prick at several spots on my arm. The stern gentleman instructs her, "Lucy, you're loony!" I have many questions, but I feel the Holy presences telling me to be still. I believe God is working in my silence. She gazes firmly into my eyes and asks, "Are you God?" My spirit causes me to laugh and speak, "No dear, but I do know Him." The man inserts his opinion, "You're both crazy." A soft quiet voice fills me with the realization that misery has softened her heart, but has hardened his.

I ask them, "Why would you risk coming to me out here in the open?" The angry man commands, "We saw what you did to that mad man, and we want to know how you did it!" Lucy interrupts me, as I prepare to answer him, "Because, he's an Angel." Her innocence continues to overwhelm me, and my thoughts. I laugh and inform her, "No, I'm not an Angel either, Lucy. But, I do have a message from God." The man warns me, "Stop filling my wife's head with that garbage!"

I ask the pair to follow me to a more secure place to discuss the matter. Lucy seems excited to follow, but her husband is determined to get his answer. I tell him, "It was the power of Jesus that destroyed the evil man. I just have faith in His word." Lucy shakes her head leisurely side to side in awe to hear there is a greater power at work. I see tears of hope swell up in her eyes, as his turn angry and red. "You're crazy! The whole world is crazy!" he proclaims. He grabs Lucy's arm to pull her away, but she wrestles his grasp free. "I want to hear more," she cries. He turns, and tugs at her again. At once, I project my protecting arm between them. I stare into his eyes and sternly warn him that he is wrestling this very moment with the very Spirit of God. Fear replaces his anger, as he ceases battling me. He turns his back on me, and then slides his loose hand along Lucy's arm while walking away. His rejected spirit pitifully announces to Lucy, "If you're

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coming, come on." Lucy cries to him, "Henry!" I reach in my back pocket and hand her a small New Testament Bible. The immediate joy on her face turns urgently back to the misery she is facing. I whisper to her as she battles between the message I have, and her love for her husband. "Go, Jesus loves you." I smile at her as she runs after Henry. Her tattered clothing streams behind her that arouses a childhood memory of the streamers I had on my bicycle. I watch sweet Lucy run after her Henry as she clutches the tiny treasure pressing against her heart. I pray that they both come to the saving knowledge of Christ. I take this prayer with me.

I feel powerless to move until they disappear back into the piles of debris. I knew there was a reason I felt led to underline certain passages in that Bible last night. They've been given little messages of hope, love, faith, and salvation. I also drew a map leading to "Project Hope" on the very last page. I pray they heed the message of the cross.

Chapter 13: Great Signs and Wonders

I begin my journey back to Paul via the street way. I don't want to chance facing the fallen LD I left behind near this end of the alley. That's if they are even still around. I make it a half a block and hear the song of that lonely bird once more. I experience an unnerving peace as I listen to its song. For some reason I feel like it is trying to tell me something; rather than just calling to its lost mate. I stare up ahead and see it perched on top its lonely pole. I continue toward the intersection nearest Paul's location and see it swiftly fly off.

All of a sudden, I hear a rumble coming from everywhere. My legs tremble slightly as I stop to observe what may be causing this vibration. The noise grows as far off buildings begin crashing down. The shaking quickly intensifies making it much harder to stand. I hurry to look for the closest unobstructed open spot to sit. All the water in my body violently gyrates, pulling me in its ebbs and flows back and forth, and up and down. Being from California, I know this is an earthquake. But, this is not like one I have ever felt before.

I sit, and then lay back on the pavement. I extend my arms to fight the increasing waves rolling under me. Utility poles begin

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snapping and crashing to the ground, as the house nearest me collapses. I hear fountains of water shooting out of the ground and the smashing sound of the returning asphalt slide across the street. My hands and back begin to heat up. The frequency of the rolling pressures the street to melt. It smells just like roof tar being poured on a hot summer's day. I see out of the corner of my eye several suspended snapped utility poles dancing up and pounding down, over and over, pulverizing the concrete sidewalk below. More buildings around me collapse causing dust clouds to bellow up polluting the air all around. I hear the surrounding debris piles snapping, as the immense shaking shuffles their slapping lumber around. I fight to breathe, as the oxygen around me sucks back and forth. Snapping, crashing, rolling, and screaming reverberate from every direction. I lay disorientated and prostrate to the power of the unending event. I fight the jolting motion with my clutching hands. Jutting splinters shoot just over me into the forming fog of steam. I pray, and pray, for this to end.

The spot where I am laying immediately ceases to move, but I can see everything around me continues as it was. I sit up in my fascination and see a fissure forming in the street. I find myself helpless to the terror running straight at me. It looks like it will split me in half. Suddenly, it turns, and then cracks the pavement while running around me. This "Angel of Death" proceeds past my position while quickly swallowing the middle of the street. The mouth in the earth opens its jaws wider and wider, gulping down the entire road just past me. Everything continues shaking and screaming, except right where I am seated. It seems everything that can be shaken is shaken, and everything that can fall has fallen. I proceed to stand in my bubble of protection and turn around to view the madness of this moment. Ironically, this murderous event is causing everything to come to life.

I decide to place my right foot outside my calm area into the misty misery still viciously vibrating. The bubble of protection seems to follow my foot, as the shaking immediately settles in that particular spot. My curiosity causes me to bring along the

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rest of my body, and braving this first step into this mayhem. The surrounding chaos turns to clarity and calmness. I clasp my hands and thank my God for His holy presence that goes before me. I step again, and again with the same results. I hear the roadway give way where I laid a few seconds before. The large chunk falls like a great glacier breaking off, falling into the lava ocean below. Residual pieces of the street follow. They skate down the crevasse, shattering towards the fire inside. I turn back to look and hear the belly of the beast explode, spewing out a fountain of red hot liquid. I run away wishing not to test my supernatural protection.

I can see about twenty feet fairly accurately. Everything past that point is an indistinguishable moving mess. I try and make my way back to meet Paul. I become aware this must be the longest earthquake the world has ever seen. It's been at least five minutes since the quake started. I fearfully step on a mosaic web of cracks that settle under my feet. I watch the surrounding debris chewing more debris into smaller and smaller pieces. Churning piles on both my sides are swirling whirlpools, sucking slats of lumber and hunks of concrete down into their middles. Dust shoots out their centers, as they shake then gobble the debris down inside their gnawing mouths. Liquefaction ponds spring up and fill the lowest areas surrounding these monsters. They drown all the floating debris trying to escape. I journey along, realizing how I need to pray for my brothers and sisters are alright; especially Paul.

I finally make it to the double door storm cellar. It is no longer hidden by the dead bushes, but is now covered with a fine film of dancing saw dust. I grab hold of the doors and pull on them, only to find Paul must have locked them. I pound the doors with the sides of my fists, but can barely hear the loud drumming sound I know my fists must be making. The rumble of the quaking and the noise of the moving debris are much louder than the pounding on the steel doors. "Come on Paul, come on and open these doors!" I see them slowly begin to open and say, "Thank you Jesus." I instantly notice Paul's awestruck facial expression to what's going

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on. I am surprised that he seems surprised. I watch his mouth form a, "What?" as his response to this trembling revelation. He moves down allowing me inside while his face remains frozen upwards. I hurry to scurry down to the safety of the descending steps.

I see the man is sitting by himself on a bench in the back of this small chamber. Paul shouts, "I thought something happened to you." I bend down to light the "Canned Heat" container I find on the floor. Paul hurries to secure the outer doors. As Paul descends the stairs he states, "I've been praying a hedge of protection around you, but I was worried about you being gone so long." I tell Paul, and this gentleman sitting on the bench, "Thank God you're alright." Paul tells me, "The LD took your bait. They never came here." I tell Paul, "I'm not talking about the LD; I'm talking about the earthquake going on." He replies, "Is that what I saw! I thought it was a really bad storm." I try explaining how the world is shaking apart outside, even as I speak. It seems hard to believe, sitting in the stillness of the storm cellar. I finish by stating, "It's amazing how God is protecting us." This realization leads Paul and me to pray, thanking God.

"Hi, my name is Joe." I lean over the flaming can and offer my salutation with a hand shake to the strange man. Out of the shadows his face and hand appear. As we shake hands, Paul announces, "This is Mark. He's been searching for his wife and sons." I watch as his worn worried face returns to the darkness, and then begins quietly chewing. Paul sticks out his hand and offers me a protein bar, but I wave a "no thanks" to him. I ask Mark, "Is that what you were doing on that mound when I first saw you?" I make out his darkened head is nodding "yes," but I feel he is too drained to physically talk. I believe he is somewhere between the states of utter exhaustion and hopelessness.

Mark leans against the rear wall while bracing his head up. It's like he is forcing himself to eat with each slow struggling gnaw. "Can you tell me anything about your family?" I hear the protein bar fall on the bench. Mark suddenly reappears in the light, as he thrusts his head into his hands. I hear his elbows thump off his

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legs onto the bench, and then search for a more secure place to support his heavy head. His body silently bobbles, crying the tears his eyes are too dry to produce.

Paul interprets Mark's intentions, and explains what he has found out so far. "Mark told me he has two sons. Aiden is the oldest; he's eleven, and there is nine year old Abraham." Paul's introduction settles Mark, as the intervals of his bouncing silhouette slows. "A group of men came by Mark's home several days ago. Then, Mark's house was still standing. They wanted him and his family to come with them, and join their Irreverent militia." Mark interrupts Paul by crying out, "My boys!" Paul continues by stating, "Mark said he refused their offer, but one of the men threw a piece of paper at Mark right before he left. He saw it had instructions for joining their militia. The paper also contained the militia's purpose along with directions to its location. He thought that would be the last time he'd see them." "My Peggy," Mark cries in his hand, "They took my wife Peggy!" Paul continues by stating, "Mark was told by this man about this other place he could bring his family. They offered free food and shelter to anyone." Paul stares at me, as we both shake our heads in acknowledgement. We both know that place has got to be "Project Hope."

Mark fights to lift his head and interject his personal views in our conversation. He stares cockeyed towards the floor, which illuminates just the corner of his left cheek and mouth. It's like he's ashamed of himself. "I abandon my babies!" Mark proclaims. "I left them alone while I went to check out this rumor-firsthand. Shortly after I left, I heard this loud noise. I ran back, and my house was destroyed, and..., and my family too!" He returns to the dark wall behind, and then leans the back of his head against it. His throat sounds too dry to cry anymore, so he just coughs several dry scratchy coughs instead. I ask him if he knew what caused his house to collapse. He tells us he could not figure that out. I ask Mark what he was looking for this morning. He replies, "It was for that piece of paper with the directions to the militia." He checked through the pile, and there was no sign his family was

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inside when it fell. Mark figures that the militia has something to do with them disappearing.

I see Mark grabbing his stomach while his body jerks in agony. I ask him if he thinks the pain is being caused by hunger, or something else. He reports having diarrhea and gas pains the last two days. Mark complains, "I can't stand all this pain!" I ask him, "When was the last time you drank any water?" Mark states that it's been two days. I find out that's when his symptoms started. I reach into my rucksack and pull out two pieces of my carbon medicine concoction. "Mark, swallow these. It'll make you feel better." He leans forward over the light and grabs it. I also hand him my water canteen and tell him, "Take several swigs, it will help you swallow the medicine." Soon after, Mark's pain is relieved. His irritable condition, causing to squirm, subtly turns more melancholy. I make a mental note that the local water source is probably poisoned, and it's the reason for Mark's illness. That is most likely what made him sick, and what killed the LD I found in the alley.

I ask Mark if he has a personal relationship with Jesus. Mark immediately gets angry and barks out at me, "I don't want to hear about that god thing. Where the heck was he when I lost my family?" I think Mark would probably try and take a poke at me if he wasn't so worn-out. I pray silently, "Dear Lord, give me the message you would have me say to change his hard heart." Mark repeatedly rocks in frustration, into and out of the light. He slides his hands over his face, and then combs them through his hair all the way to the back of his head, repeating this process over and over. I feel the last thing I want to do is push him over the ledge by forcing my beliefs on him. "When you're ready Mark, I'll promise you a way to find your family." Mark mightily makes an untrusting lunge at me, stopping his face just inches from mine. Angrily and powerfully he musters all his strength to condemn and test me with his one word sword, "How?" I sense Mark's reasoning is waiting to slice my throat, if my next words don't agree with his logic.

I realize both sides of this blade only seem to oppose each

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other. But, in reality, it is where the metal gets its real strength. The razor's edge of "reason," and the steel of "faith" are just two different parts of the same blade. The shank of true wisdom is what holds the temperament together. I appeal to the whole sword with, "When your heart is ready, I'll tell you how." He just stares deep into my eyes, waiting for me to flinch in my faith. But, my faith is strong.

I decide I need to pop my head out and give us all a fresh breath of air. I move out and ascend up the stairs to release the excess tension outside these doors. I pan the perimeter and see everything is still shaking. It's like looking through the beveled glass of a blender with my eyes fixed even with the liquid horizon, as it churns on high speed. I check my watch and see the shaking has been going on for over two hours. There is nothing standing anymore. I think this must look like the flat plains of Kansas during a cyclone, or a view of the "badlands" on a "Santa Ana" windy day. All I see are tornados of dust, steaming black clouds, vibrating debris, and dark gray spewing fountains fixed along the distant horizon. It seems everything that can be shaken apart is now apart, and everything that can't be is still standing. I pray, "Dear God, let all my Irreverent family be safe, and the other "Alpha" teams too." I shut the doors and return to find everyone napping. The only thing we can possibly do right now is sit here, and ride the rest of the quake out. I decide to join the fellows in a much needed nap.

I slip off into the calmness of my rest as the peace of darkness covers me. A fresh wave of sweet smelling honeysuckle, orange blossom, and lilac warmly wash over me. I feel a loving hand supporting my heavy head, as the other hand gently bathes me in the cleanliness of innocence. I hear splashing on both my sides while I rest in this pond of protection. There is a familiar melody humming all around me, which I've heard over and over before. This beautiful music pours over me, as I playfully pat this puddle. Everything is wonderfully warm and bright under this Sun of all possibility. Giant wet velvet hands slide me up into the newness of the light. I am astounded at the things ahead of me; things I

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never ever seen before. This stranger connected to this string of music circles me. Her soft voice and warm wool robe softly brushes over me. I somehow recognize this beautiful kind woman. I don't know who she is, but I feel I do know her. In her protective presence I just feel happy and carefree. I hear something strange that alerts me something is happening, so I try and lift my head up to see what all the commotion just ahead of me is all about. I hear laughing and giggling, and see running and leaping. Small little people circle this large man and laugh at him. He leans down, "shooing" them into his outstretched arms. I am so enticed to know why he is making this roaring noise, scarring these little people. The beautiful woman humming comes between me and this intriguing event. She shoves her face towards mine; scarring me! Big blue eyes stare into mine, and her moist lips begin pressing at me. She starts on my head, and then moves to both sides of my face. She continues down to my chest, and finally onto my flailing hands that are attempting to frighten her away. I just can't find the words to tell her, "Please move out of my way!" I don't understand why she is so attracted to me. I cry out in anger, and try giggling lose from her overpowering embrace. But, she just holds me firmly tight.

Finally, she allows the light and the scene to return. I think she too must be attracted to the event. I watch her head turn towards the commotion, as she lifts me to her shoulder. I want to tell her, "Thank you for this advantageous new view point," but, I just can't find the words. I see a dust cloud forming below, as this lady holding me swings me quickly away from it. One of the small people that made it emerges, running to attack the large man that's roaring. I watch as he taunts the little people with his wicked laughter. I think this tiny herd must be under his evil spell, because they freely welcome his clutching arms. They run into his trap lassoing them; and even grab his arms, pulling the snare even tighter. This just makes the tall man tilt his head back and forth, and roar even louder. I think he is very bad, as this lady holding me oddly laughs at him. This makes me upset, and I cry. She makes this sound to me, "Shhh," and then tries bouncing me. I

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don't understand why she thinks this will help the situation. This just makes it even harder to see the giant monster man. I cry even louder, yelling in her ear to stop. This makes her yank the cloth she is wearing further over her head, while she too stares at the beast. I think it may attack us, because she begins holding me very tight.

The whole world grows mysteriously quiet in my epiphany. Suddenly, I can understand this man in the funny white tunic. He stares at me and smiles. "Oh, all my lovely children, come to me." Every little person sits, and then patiently fidgets against his flowing tattered white fountain. A benevolent breeze blows tickling threads across their giggling faces. He asks, "Who wants to hear a story?" I want to scream the words the children are screaming, "I do, I do, I do," but, I just can't find the words. He starts his story with, "Who knows who the wisest man whom ever lived is? This includes the past, the present, and the future to come." All of us, including the lady, are speechless to answer. "I'll tell you. His name is Solomon." This monster man turns and smiles a particular personal smile that he bobbles along to each and every small person sitting in attendance. I want to yell to him "How about me? I'm over here!" But, I'm at a loss for words. I don't know why it is so important, but every part of me yearns for him to just briefly acknowledge my small existence. A film blurs my vision, as I experience this great sadness of my rejection. I stare at his eyes, but I feel they'll never see me across this vast ocean of distance. Then, his eyes move slowly upwards, as his head remains facing down towards the small people. A special smile forms just under his jutting stare. His words pierce my tiny heart and hurt it so kindly. "I have not forgotten you. For you are very, very special to me." I feel both the drums of our hearts pound proudly faster and louder. A notion of doubt warns me, "But, I am tiny and useless. How can you possible think I'm special?" My reason saddens me.

"I'll tell you why Solomon was the wisest of the wise. It started when he was a child. He had a wonderful loving father who filled his tiny heart with love." I think about me in the moment, and

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how I have a tiny heart too. "Every moment of every day his Abba reminded him of how very special he was to him. He taught him what was true, right, merciful, wise, and loving. The young son asked his Abba how he knew all these things. His daddy smiled down at him from the pedestal his son had made for him. He replied, 'It is because I love and fear God'. Solomon didn't quite understand how anyone could love and fear at the same time. But, his wise Abba explained it so he could understand."

I watch intensely as this intriguing man very, very slowly inches closer towards this woman holding me. "One day two children asked their father which one he loved the most. Immediately, both the son and the daughter cozily contended with their hugs of affection to their adoring Abba, while awaiting his response. This complicated question briefly perplexed their father. He responded, 'I love each of you differently, but the same. You, my sweet son, are like the warm sunrise of day. And you, my dear daughter, are my cherished beautiful sunset'." This storytelling man continues to humbly approach the lady and me. His face is bowing downward, and his penetrating eyes continue facing me and the lady. "'I'll answer your question', the father said. 'Which of you loves me the most?'" I think their father is just trying to evade the question. "As you'd expect, both proclaimed they each loved father more. 'Prove it to me' Abba asked. 'Would you give me everything you have?' Both children thought then nodded 'Yes' to his request. 'Son, give me your pet lizard Sampson, and daughter give me your darling dolly.' Both scampered off to retrieve these objects of their affection and return to deliver it to father before the other does." This strange smiling man brings along the entire herd of little people. He stands very close to us now. The woman holding me opens her mouth in awe, and I can smell the eggs she's eaten for breakfast. I want her to close it, but the suspense seems to have propped it open. The smell makes me cry, so she starts bouncing me up and down again, making the situation even worse. I decide to ignore her and concentrate on the storytelling man.

"Both children arrive together and force their most cherished

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treasure up towards their Abba's face proving to him their utmost sincerity. These two things were all each child had that they could call their very own. So, they loved their possession very much. Their father pushed the objects down and asked each child to go stand near the well. From a distance, father said 'hold out your present to me overtop the well'. Both obeyed and did what father asked. 'Now, I want you to let go of your gift to me.' Each sibling turned towards the other with surprise filling their face. Father watched patiently for them to obey his command, but both were reluctant to let go of their beloved treasures. The older son just could not drop his Sampson to his drowning death. The daughter watched, as her crying brother ran away with his dear lizard. This made her sad too, but she was determined to honor her dear father's request. She closed her eyes and hung her head back, as if to face God while asking Him for immediate help in this matter. She began crying loudly saying, 'Abba, why?' Her father beckoned her to let go, by encouraging her with the words, 'trust me my love'. The hand squeezing her dolly tightly suddenly opened, and her heart waited to hear her dear dolly splash to her dark drowning death. But instead, all she heard was a 'plunk'. Through her tears all she saw was Abba's smile approaching. She was confused by all that had happened, and ran to leap on her wise poppa for help. He embraced his dear daughter and walked over to the well. 'Now dear, don't cry anymore'. Her sobbing subtly subsides as she watches Abba reach into the well and retrieve her dear dolly. She immediately grabs her precious child and hugs both of them like never before."

This funny man standing in front of me is reaching his hand towards my face. The lady is bending her protecting head away from me allowing this atrocity to happen. He is sliding his rough hand over my cheek and staring fervently into my eyes. He asks me, "Which child do you think loved their father the most? She feared the father, but also trusted her Abba with all she had, and with all of her heart. You see, father had prepared a way of escape when the children weren't looking. He placed the well bucket back inside the well to catch their treasures." This rough

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hand of this strange man feels surprisingly comforting. He tweaks my cheek and laughs at me, as the lady leaks on her wonderful smile. "This is why it is impossible to please God without faith. Trusting Him in the midst of fear is real love. That is why Solomon is the wisest of the wise. He feared, but trusted God." After these words, the not so strange man winks at me while moving gradually away. "Don't go!" I think to yell. The nice man steadily smiles at me as he gets smaller and smaller. "But, I don't want you to go," I want to scream to him. I wave my arms frantically up and down, crying for him to come back. But, not even the beautiful lady can stop this chain of events, as she fights to hold on to me. I drift back, and back, and back into the darkness, feeling somehow I'll return to him one day.

I awake to a lighter shade of darkness that barely distinguishes itself from the one prior. This one is cold though. I feel around for my rucksack and retrieve another "Canned Heat." The flame restores some facsimile of order to my focus. The warmth comforts me into a state of momentary meditation. I ponder the wonder of this wise flame, and find it too is like faith and reason. The life giving breath blowing the fire is no more important than the material the flame dances upon. It is the wisdom of the heat that sears them all together, in this one spot, in this certain time, and for its own purpose. Yes, the burning question is answered in the eternal flames. Reason, without faith, is a fire without light.

I gain my composure by rubbing my cold hands on my warm face. I stare into the dark and see the gang is still sleeping. I slowly rip back my Velcro's watch cover to see the illuminated hands silently whispering to me, "It's 5:15." Quietly, I stand and turn in the dark, and then ascend up the stairs. My feet crunch the fragments that must have adhered to the bottoms of my shoes during my previous journey. Paul begins rustling on his dark spot of the bench. He undoubtedly is influenced by the loud pop of the stowaways sticking to my soles. But, he turns this in to an opportunity to search for a better and more comfortable resting position. I feel blindly under the metal doors for the retaining rod securing them shut. I find it and begin sliding it slowly away, which

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creates an irritating sound; similar to the one that a full bow by a new violinist might make. The metal rod slowly scratches an eerie song along the metal securing hole. I am amazed it does not wake Paul and Mark. I lift one side of the door into the darkness that shouldn't be. I stick my head out and see the world is still shaking with the same violent intensity. This time, vibrating an orange and red sunsets, painting the distant dreary sky. I spin my head and notice the brilliant colorful horizon extending in all directions. I turn my stare straight up and see a pitch black starless sky. There are no stars, not even one. This sight is beyond belief. I think this must feel sort of like the night Rome was burning. I close the door and leave death to pass over us.

It "hits me," as I return to my section of the bench. It has to be five in the morning. I start crunching the numbers and am numb to the results. The quake has been going on for at least sixteen hours, and I've been asleep for fourteen of them. This realization overwhelms me enough to wake someone and share these amazing statistics. "How is this possible?" As I contemplate the reality of this situation, I feel myself begin to comfortably drift back into the dark. The exercise of my reasoning uses up the little energy I still have.

Out of the darkness, I immediately find myself running past pictures, moments, and glimpses that are moving alongside me in this dimensional tunnel. Every instance is a brief view of my life. I pass by my birth and accelerate through history. My clothing quickly ages, and then falls away. I try running away even faster, but there is no exit from what is happening. A new set of attire magically materializes over me. It seems the further back in time I run, the more ancient the style of clothing. Out of breath, I slow down under the weight of this shabby robe. I feel like I've ran for two thousand years. I see the brilliantly lighted exit I've been looking for. It lay slightly up ahead. All of a sudden, I become scared caused by hearing the extremely loud blasting clamor emanating just beyond the mouth of this cave.

I attempt to protect my eyes from the intense light with the waving flag draping down from my arm. My eyes hurt as they try

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adjusting to the bright sunlight. In my temporary blindness, I listen to what sounds like a passing precession. The crowd around me is filled with extreme emotion towards, what seems to be, the passing parade. Some are screaming shameful suggestions to vulgar to repeat. Others in the crowd are crying pitifully, while loudly yelling, "Mercy!" I let my ears be my eyes, as I try making sense of this extremely unusual event.

I am able to see the faint outline of an image through my loosely woven robe. I hear the thumping of something heavy pound down over and over on some sort of stony path. It is becoming louder and louder as it comes slowly closer and closer towards me. The crowd of voices grows more violent in their extremes. I feel shrugging on all sides of me. I am forcefully tossed back and forth while being continually jabbed in this sea of churning elbows. It seems there is a war within the crowd, contesting to roar their own convincing convictions. Each battle of persuasion is attempting to push their counterpart over to their verdict. I wonder amidst all this hostility what could cause them all to feel so violent. I think, "What could cause a man to act so hateful towards another?"

The approaching pounding is very close now. I notice in my blindness something particularly odd. An eerie awkward silence seems to parallel the point nearest the sound of the pounding. I can only guess at the reason these independent battles among the crowd momentarily stop. Is it to briefly view their passing guest of honor? I've been to championship parades before with a million hysterical fans, but none were like this. The pounding sound strikes me like a large resounding baseball bat. That's what this pounding sounds like. It has the same wooden pitch that tingles when hardwood echoes off a stone surface. I use to make a similar sound as I bounce my baseball bat vertically off my concrete driveway. I wish I could see who is making this sound. He must be some sort of super star to have gained all this attention.

I feel the jousting elbows slowing, and notice the pause in the approaching silence coming nearer. I subconsciously command my eyes to hurry and adjust to this bright light. I continue to stare

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through the loose weave, and see a large shape moving up and down, inching its way forward. I am able to determine it is definitely the source of the pounding. I try and see the machine that could be driving, what must be, a very heavy wooden pile downwards. I know now it is much bigger than a baseball bat. The only reason I can come up with is: there is a special machine demolishing the road, so a new one can be laid. But, this does not explain why all these emotional people would be here to view such an event. I don't hear the sound of the engine it would take to repeatedly lift the heavy beam. I think, "This machine is very efficient for it to be working as quietly as it is." I hear something else strange coming out of the almost silence. Terrible voices are yelling at someone who is trying to maintain the machine. I hear them threatening the operator to keep the device moving. I kind of feel sorry for the guy, as this machine breaks down and stops in front of me.

I strain to see what is going on through the veil of material hanging down from my arm. My vision improves just enough for me to see the shape of something lying on the road. I reason something big must have broken off the machine. I hear the sound of leather slapping bare flesh. I yell, "What the heck!" I know this familiar sound from when I misbehaved as a child. I still remember the stinging pain of my father's leather belt on my bare bottom. I hear this gentleman's agonizing moans, but those evil leaders just don't care. They continue slapping him over and over as he tries to fix the machine. My swelling compassion overtakes me. I yell through my cape commanding these bullies, "Stop it!" I feel the weight of the crowd's stare suddenly turn towards me. I muster all my strength and defy these beating bullies once again by yelling, "Stop hitting him!" Off to my sides I see a sea of sliding heads churning side to side. They seem to be quietly warning me to "stop it" myself. My growing anger towards this apathetic horde is much greater than my restrained fear. In the heat of the moment, I realize I don't care one iota what they think! Why should I? I don't hear one lousy soul screaming out "mercy" for this poor guy just trying to do his job. The sound of rising

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commotion is coming straight at me. My senses heighten amongst the chanting chatters of, "Ahhh, you did it now!"

Stomping feet and growling growls quickly approach my direction. I ball my fist from behind my draped arm and prepare to secretly plow over the encroaching thug. His waving silhouette is about three or four people away. I time my punch while watching this welcoming sea part under his advancement. I think to myself, "You whips. That's alright; I'll stand up for this poor fellow all by myself." I slowly lower my arm while still staring through the loose weave of my robe. I jerk my eyes over the blind spot my arm is creating, and, and, and I swing and knock the heck out of this devil. In this moment I see what is really going on. I stand submissive and helplessly in awe.

My eyes swell up with instant tears of compassion in my realization of what I'm looking at. This poor man covered in blood is the machine carrying that gritty splintery heavy wooden beam attached to his cross. He looks directly at me and forces himself to comfort me with his most amazing smile. I shake my head silently side to side as my heart profusely repeats "No, this can't be!" His battered face reveals a gasp that looks like He's saying, "This has to be." His overwhelming compassion allows me to feel some of His immense pain and exhaustion. In this moment, I decide I will risk everything and go help him. The soldier I knocked down is now grabbing me. I am mesmerized as I hypnotically stare at this totally bloody man. One soldier from the street yells to the one holding me, "He needs a good beating! Bring him down here!" But, the poor bloody man gains the strength, from where I can't imagine, and yells, "No, give his lashes to me instead!"

Immediately after this proclamation He falls and weeps in the puddle of blood he is leaving. For some strange reason the soldiers decide to take him up on his offer. I move to advance, but a large invisible presence abruptly comes and confines me in my current position. This poor rejected man on the street turns his head again back towards me, as if to say, "Thank you Joey," just before they tear violently into his flesh without any sign of mercy. He screams, but He continues His inch by inch march. I shake and

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cry as I feel this humungous invisible presence clutching me remorsefully tremble right along with me. Suddenly, I am pushed helplessly back towards the darkness in the cave I came from. I wave as I depart to the dead man walking, "Thank you, thank you, thank you Jesus!"

I rub my eyes and feel the grit and dirt that must be forming in this dark chamber. I think, maybe it is some of the ancient dust from that holiest of days. I see Paul is awake and sitting considerably quiet across from me. I make out Mark's strewn body that unbelievably is still sleeping. I whisper to Paul, "Follow me." I stand, and then proceed up the steps. I slide the screeching bolt, and then lift the door into the sunlight. Paul lifts the side door, as we peer out together.

Everything still continues to shake as it has. I check my watch and determine it has been over twenty four hours since this all began. We see there is absolutely nothing left outside, except two things. There is a fine mixture of pulverized organic and inorganic debris resembling sand everywhere, and the reverberating silhouette of where "Project Hope" should be. Paul humbly looks at me and says, "The Bible mentions this. It predicts there will be a three day period of shaking where no man will be able to stand." I look down at my watch and tell Paul, "That means we still have two days more to go." Paul moves back down the stairs as I decide to test the power of protection I was previously given. I place my leg onto the vibrating ground beyond this still area of protection, and set it down. I am suddenly twisted and thrown back down the steps. I know now that the preceding gift is gone. I shut the doors and return to my friends in the lower chamber. I again leave death alone, and pray it will continue to pass over us.

I watch Paul light the "Canned Heat" bringing this chamber to life. "I woke earlier and put the can out," Paul informs me. "I figured there was no sense wasting its fuel while everybody was still sleeping." He reaches into the rucksack and states, "I guess that's it for the protein bars." I motion for him to slide the rucksack over to me. I reach deep down inside and pull out two empty cans that were formerly "Canned Heat." I tap any remnants

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still in them onto the floor below, and then remove my canteen of water. I fill both small cans with water while asking Paul if he might like a delicacy. I reach back into my sack and remove two thin foil packs of instant coffee I saved from some previous MRE. "Sure thing," Paul responds. I place both tins partway over the flame and use three stone fragments to prop the cans up. We sit back in the partial light and wait for the water to get hot.

Mark finally seems to be waking up as we notice his shifting shadow stretch over the wall. Our attention is now on Mark slowly swinging his feet around from his horizontal position. I remark, "I guess tea for two has turned into coffee for three." Mark returns my offer by responding, "Who has coffee?" I mildly chuckle, and discern his very long nap has restored his cognitive ability to a higher level of function than he previously had. "How'd you sleep Mark, and how's your stomach?" I stare for his response while watching him using the palms of his hands to twist his eye awake. He asks, "Where am I?" I figure he's disoriented by that comment. "It's me, Joey. We're in a storm cellar." The realization of his situation begins to return, as depression and hopelessness appears on his darken face. "We're making you some fresh brewed coffee," I remark. He sits there just rocking and simmering with the knowledge there's no current way to release his pent-up anxiety or frustration. He barks, "I heard you guys remark the quake is still shaking out there." I'm careful to respond knowing Mark is hanging by a real thin thread-mentally. I know his hope hinges on still finding his family alive. The shaking world is beyond just devastating to us.

I try and change the subject by remarking, "Do you take cream and sugar?" I have neither, but I figure the offer is worth a thousand words. I am glad to hear him say, "I haven't had fresh coffee in months, or has it been years?" I try subtly to work the epic question into the conversation. It's the last question on everyman's heart. "So Mark, do you think there is anything after life?" Mark says nothing in his attempt to control his battling emotions. He kind of shrugs his shoulders as his answer to my question. I know now he may be receptive enough to listen to the

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might of the Holy Spirit inviting his heart to really reason.

“The way I look at it Mark, there are only two logical possibilities for our existence.” I go on to explain both possibilities while confidently suggesting he looks like a man of reason. He shrugs his shoulders again and replies, “Well, I guess so. I’ve always tried to be rational in my decisions.” I pose the two epic possibilities given to man. “Mark, one is we came from nothing and are going back to it. Everything and everyone you love will die when you die. Why go through the pain of caring about anyone if you’re just going to lose them anyways? If the only reason you live is for whatever you decide your life should be then your purpose is really worthless. This means living itself is a selfish act and there is absolutely no reason for us to even live. If you buy this argument you might just as well live like hell and fill your gut with every personal satisfaction you can swallow.” I stop for a brief moment so Mark can digest this no calorie thought. “Every law of science says everything has a beginning. This requires something eternal to create the very first thing. Some secular scientists try to evade this realization by burying the absolute beginning to the universe in String Theory, alternate universes, or supposedly locked dimensions. But these too must have a beginning. You see Mark; always look for the cracks in the foundation that every proof is built upon, because eventually that house is doomed to fall. Yep, the house is only as strong as its foundation.” Mark agrees with this logical conclusion by giving a silent nod of his head. I try to steer clear of psycho babble regarding absolute truth and post modernism by keeping the idea simple. “I once heard that Albert Einstein stated: ‘If you want to see inside the mind of God you need to think and believe like a child’.”

I go on to strengthen my debate by saying, “Do you know Sir Isaac Newton is probably the smartest guy who ever lived? He devoted more of his life to writings about the proof of God’s existence; which most people are never told. Why look for something if it’s not there? This genius mind knew in his heart there has to be God. That is the only real logical answer.” I bend over and place my finger tip in the tin can to check the

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temperature. "Ohhh, a couple more minutes." I continue by stating God put this desire to fellowship with Him in every heart at the moment He created each of us. This yearning to be complete with God is why every society in history contains one particular part experts have a hard time explaining. It's called religion. God has given us His word to prove which religion leads truly to Him. He also has given us one hundred percent verifiable accurate prophesy to prove Christ is God. He doesn't expect us to blindly believe, but rather test Him, and His word." I want to introduce evidence proving Atheists are nothing more than self proclaimed idiots by saying they know nothing exist, but I appeal to a different reasoning instead. It's the one answer that always comes down to the heart of the matter.

"Let's put God to the scientific test." I lay the ground rules for this experiment and remark to Mark this will only work if he is prepared for the results. "This is why God won't give certain unbelievers the miracle they require to help them believe. God knows their hard hearts will explain away any proof, even the miracle they asked for as evidence." Mark suggests that I am crazy, and he wants nothing more to do with this. I reply, "Okay then, but if I'm right I know one day in eternity I'll be with my loving God, and those whom I loved here in life whom also accepted Him." I return to my silence and let this thought stew a while longer. I know the heart is a funny kettle. Some are made of thicker metal than others. I return my finger thermometer to the tins below while formulating my next move. "Feels like coffee time," I remark. I see Pastor Paul smile and lean back, as if he might be learning something.

I juggle one steaming hot can over to the available section of bench closes to Paul, and then toss him a brown foil packet of the instant coffee. I tell him he'll have to improvise a spoon to stir it with. I watch him think as he comes up with his solution. He empties the coffee into the tin and bends the foil packet into a "V" shape. He smiles as he stirs and remarks, "Don't let me interrupt your conversation." I stare at his agitating face as he presses the hot tin to his cold lips. He seals his contention with a

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subtle smirk and a smile. I quietly and slowly simmer, watching this godly man return to stirring his brew. I think how I missed the opportunity to have a hot accident on his lap. I nod and smirk my laughing smirk right back at him.

I repeat the process Paul went through, and then hand my coffee tin over to Mark. It seems he has given the issue more thought. Or, maybe it is sheer desperation to grab at any solution which may save his lost family. He asks, "So, you're saying you have proof God exists?" I nod a sincere and simple, "Yes." He thinks a second and tells me, "You're trying to tell me for thousands of years man has looked for absolute truth that God exists, and you finally found it?" I respond with another simple, "Yes." Mark finally seems relaxed enough to find the missing key that will open this true treasure. It is the key to his heart he had all along. He finally gives me the answer I am looking for with his, "How?"

I return to the one simple rule he must subjugate himself to for this scientific experiment to work. "This test requires that for one minute in your measly existence you ask God, your father and creator, with your broken heart, to prove to you He exists." I proclaim the one certain condition of the experiment, "You have to be willing to accept the miraculous result when it happens. Sometimes He'll answer in a very small way, but in a very significant way. Other times he may send giants. God promises to always answer a sincere open heart." He looks at me through the wall of his defense he's built to protect his hurting heart. I watch as he opens his deepest desires to me. He cries out, "I want to believe. Oh God, I do want to believe!" I sit by Mark and wrap my comforting arm over his shoulder and around him. I tell my new buddy, "You are not alone." I ask him to promise me one more thing. "When God does prove exclusively to you He exists, will you then ask Him to come into your heart and be the Lord of your life?" I feel him nod his skeptical affirmation from his head currently buried in my chest. I pat him on the back as Pastor Paul moves towards Mark's other side. Paul leads us in prayer.

"Dear Lord; our dear brother needs your love. He is in a

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terrible situation Father. He is so very desperate to know where his family is. Can you please use this as your sign proving to him you are the only God, and the most mighty God in search of our heart?" I feel Mark shake out the thick callus coating of doubt that's been holding his hard heart together. He melts down in his brokenness, as he is heated by the warm power of the Holy Spirit. I am urged by the holy sensation to let Mark know that his urgent request has been accepted, and God will respond shortly. In my heart, I know this to be true. We all comfort each other in this perilous and dark time. For, we are not alone.

Chapter 14: The Final Chapter

I hold Mark with my arm draped over his shoulder as he starts to snore in his bent over fetal position. I slowly lift my arm off Mark and spin his sleeping body around on the bench. A warm secure comforting feeling permeates the entire chamber. It actually feels kind a cozy. Paul very quietly tippy toe's over the flames, which cast a fiendish lurking shadow over all the walls. He creeps almost silently down to his resting place, and I to mine. I cross my arms and lean back into this comforting darkness my Lord has given us to rest in. I tell my Abba, "Thanks for all your help." He rewards me with a quick departure off into "La La Land."

As I begin to drift back off, I hear a passage from my heart. It whispers tenderly to me, "For my yoke is easy." All my worries evaporate, as I am carried off to a place even more heavenly.

In my peaceful sleep, something comes and securely snatches me firmly under my arms. Amazingly, I have no sense of fear, but rather of joy and peace. I look up and try and see what it is that is whisking me away. A glowing face seems to anticipate my concern, as it smiles down at me in this sea of darkness. It points to the prickle of light ahead, which looks like a star in the distant night sky. The only other thing I can see is the golden aura

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emanating from this magnificent flying beast lighting our way. I know in my heart something adventurous and wonderful lays just ahead. We must be traveling beyond the speed of conceivable, because the point of light doubles in size every second. In this moment of captivity, I realize, I've never felt so free.

Just seconds later, we enter the pure white atmosphere, and then crash into the brightest and bluest "baby blue" sea of anyone's imagination. It is soft and warm, and immense. Shimmering rainbows of color brush over the surface of this planet just below us. Every hue is so vibrant that it almost hurts to look. I just want to fly through this sky forever and ever, seeing this entire magical spectrum. But, I feel us descending and slowing, as the stunning green surface grows larger and larger.

We pass over a small herd of laughing silhouettes chasing what looks like their leader. Suddenly, the children stop and look up, and then begin waving their arms to welcome us. Their invitation to join them feels like a warm summer breeze tickling the reeds on a brilliant tropical beach. I look up to ask this creature if it sees what I see, but this majestic giant is just wiggling his enormous fingers while whispering, "Hello," to the tiny crowd below. I begin hearing the thrashing sound coming from above me as the atmosphere becomes thicker. His humungous wings are so strong they cause small cyclones to move over me, between each of his powerful swoops. They almost suck the breath from me, as they extend back up into the bright blue sea.

We pass over a mega metropolis of extravagantly designed pearl white palaces. Some tower much, much higher than the tallest buildings I've ever seen on Earth and some are shaped like dainty little cottages. A golden shimmer coming from the street below captures my attention. The dazzling shine off this golden magical mirror reveals the strolling specks of pedestrians joined arm in arm. My ears begin filling with the sounds of their joyful laughter, as they lovingly welcome one another along their journey. My desperate heart somehow wants to join them, but we jet pass this place towards the green rolling pastures just past the horizon. As we pass over the countryside, the fragrance of

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fresh fruits and blossoming flowers wonderfully overwhelms me.

I feel we're about to land. I hear the whooshing slowing as we begin descending. We drop in several increments as the ground comes clearly into view. The winged thing that is securely carrying me sets me down without stopping. I am forced into a gently steady run after landing. As I slow, my intense senses are invigorated by these awe-struck surroundings as he flies off.

This place is magnificent. I venture up this transparent road that is wider than any highway I've ever traveled. I turn my head towards all the wonders facing me in every direction. This beautiful golden path is lined with "Mother of Pearl" columns that shine my perfect reflection. I see each pillar stretching way up beyond the fluffiest and whitest clouds I've ever seen. The shine and intricate design on these super megaliths are spectacular. I immediately realize they're in a style I've never seen before. I walk closer to enjoy their unique artistic majesty and notice they contain a multitude of inscribed words. I move even closer to investigate what maybe written on this particular one.

I fall to my knees and immediately weep after reading the beginning words. Scrolled elegantly on it are, "Obelisk of Eternal Saint and Child of God: Betty Ann Perry; 'A Cherished Monument to Her Life'." Above these words are elaborately carved sentences stretching up to the sky. I start reading and find that the words are actually prayers my momma said over the years. This column must contain everyone she's ever prayed, because the words spiral on and upward seemingly forever. I read the most important prayer I will ever hear. "Please dear Lord and savior; save my darling Joey..." I weep uncontrollably at these monumental words. I see similar numerous request for my salvation spiral around and around the "Mother of Pear" tower. I respectfully kiss the tower of prayer, as the sweet essence of this place invites me to move along.

I stare up the golden path rolling slightly upward and try to speculate how many pillars there might be. I look behind me to find there are just as many. Rolling green hills decorate the spaces between what must be millions of columns. "Insistence" seems to

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be invisibly steering me to move up this path, although I don't know where it is hiding. I obey and stroll along. I walk about a hundred yards to the next obelisk. Along my journey I hear the music of tiny dancing silhouettes, laughing, playing, and chasing themselves in carefree circles. I look up and see gigantic winged birds bigger than any dinosaur I can recollect. Some are multicolor, and others are a single bright pastel of pink, orange, yellow, or purple. Some have a destination and fly off in a straight line, and others just circle these mega columns singing, "Holy, holy, and holy." Curious, I take a closer look to find the dedicatee of this next column. This one belongs to my sweet sister, that I somehow suspected. It too is elegantly embedded with her prayers. Many are dedicated to me. I kiss the pillar and whisper, "Thanks sis for not giving up on me."

I see someone floating towards me along the path ahead. I am startled at the power and knowledge it must possess to achieve such a feat; without using its feet. It must know I feel so insignificant, because it shouts, "Do not be afraid of me dear Joey! I've come to take you to a very special place." He shimmers with subtle rays of rainbow colors flowing from his flapping white robe. Starbursts of sparkles appear as he passes through the light. He quickly arrives, and then stops at my feet. I strain my neck to see his smiling face looking down. He bends closer erasing the personal distance between our faces, and then asks, "How about a trip to the temple of God?" He rapidly nods his magnificent smiling head up and down several times; seemingly as excited as me at this offer. He knows my answer before I reply, because he touches me and I too begin hovering. I lift up to the level of his extend arm, as we begin floating back up the golden path. The pillars begin to look like slats in a picket fence as we pass them faster, and faster. I look over towards his large head as he smiles again, while pointing with his other arm straight ahead. I see a tall wall made of layers of gems that extends in both directions forever. I can almost see through it; if it wasn't for the intense sparkling coming from its vibrant colors. In its center is a shimmering ivory white gate. On each of its sides are huge

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muscular winged soldiers with giant spears, shields, and swords standing at the position of unflinching attention. I am terrified as we approach the gate.

We slow as these giant hundred foot guards slam their spears against their bodies. They abruptly turn “left and right face,” respectively, and return their legs to attention. Each slowly draws their right hands upwards above their stern faces forming a salute. The towering gates methodically swing steadily and effortlessly open. I shake in fear as we pass between these awesome warriors. But, I’ve never felt so honored or so proud.

Just inside are four more matching monstrous soldiers; also presenting their respectful arms. As soon as we pass them, I hear their thunder as they return to their former positions. The only thing I can think of is, “Whew!!!” I see many translucent golden paths along the way, pointing all in the same direction. They verge, like spokes facing the center of a wheel, and travel in the direction we are. The castle ahead of us cascades with rivers of flowing clouds. I think to myself, “This thing is super humungous,” as the Angel swishing me along nods a serious, “Yes,” to my noisy thought. I hear him reply, without moving his mouth, “This is the temple of God!” I nod my reverent affirmation as we slow and land. “We must walk from this point on,” he orally invites me.

I see a person off to my side waiting to tell me something. I stop in front of him, confused. All though I’ve never seen him before I know who he is. He’s Amanda’s martyred brother Jimmy. He smiles a wonderful smile, which seems is his message to me that I am to take back to his worried sister. I reward him with my own smile that promises I will. I see next to him a beautiful young lady leaning against him. In an instant, I also know who she is. This is the old lady fleeing the LD with Jimmy and Amanda. I joyfully smile at her as well.

We continue up the path as I notice all the other golden paths merge. They all end at this splendorous brilliant white marble temple gate. A legion of behemoths all draws their spears inwards as we approach; one regiment is posted on each side of the gate. The towering gates swing inwards, as their tops plow the puffy

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clouds away. As we walk in I hear the rush of flying creatures' way, way above. They are singing entrancing songs of worship and saying "Holy, holy, and holy." The floor is a sea of very fine crystal that also seems to be singing. I can see the flying creatures in this floor just as easily as looking up. I almost become dizzy and disorientated, due to the lack of reference points these reflections cause, and the impossible distance this large structure presents. If there are walls, they are too far away to see. I take a moment more to absorb all this amazement, but the wonderful echoes of praise remind me I am in the princely presence of majesty. Humbly we continue on.

A brighter light, than even the brilliance here, is projecting from the distant area ahead. It is a shower of pure white pouring upwards, instead of down. The prestigious power of the pure light begins to burn my eyes. I raise my arm in defense to shield it, and then look just below my arm to see the glitter of many golden thrones. I see four mega giants, twice the size of the previous soldiers. They stand at the four corners of this gathering. Each has many wings, and each of their wings has thousands, and thousands of rapidly shifting eyes in them. I immediately become alarmed, as they begin to all stare at us. I tremble and stop. But, this Angel tugs me along anyway. He reminds me, "Don't be afraid, you are the child of God." I take advantage of the crystal floor and use it for my eyes. We move forwards between these beasts, as I stare reverently downward.

In a second, I fall down in my weakness. The weight of His holiness causes me to bow, and accidently kiss the crystal floor below. I shake while seeing the reflection of the guiding Angel stoop and bow also. I know I am only feet away from His holy presence. His warm gentle hand caresses my shoulder, as He commands me, "Rise!" His touch has cured the pain of my sight, which allures me to stare at His soothing smile. "I have brought you here Joey for a reason. Time is growing very short for man to accept my grace. I have opened seals, and poured out bowls of judgment to prove I am God. Soon, I will finish with my wrath, and withdraw my present offer of eternal salvation." My face becomes

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sad, and Jesus' face too. "Do not be afraid Joey. I hear your prayers. You still have work to do, and many souls to steer. Every dream and vision I've given you has a reason. Share these experiences and my message of salvation. Know this; my Holy Spirit is with you, and my divine power." I nod my affirmation as He tells me, "I know you will." He hugs me with the strength of a lion and the tenderness of a lamb, and says, "You are mine, and I will never let go of you." I watch as He turns from me, and then grabs a scroll. I notice seven seals affixed to the scroll, but several are broken. He looks over his shoulder as He slides a finger under one seal still unbroken. I disappear in that moment. But, I know what is about to happen.

I find myself waking up, knowing this is a vision and that was reality, or vice versa. I know where I was is much more real. I reach into my rucksack, fumbling in the dark to find another "Canned Heat," but I don't find any. I kick around on the floor to see if I can find the last can burnt, and hear the tingling echo of multiple cans colliding against each other. I reach down and count three. My mental itinerary tells me, "That's all she wrote." I reach back into my sack and find my emergency flashlight. I turn it on, and then balance it, facing straight up in the center of the floor. I stand and check my Army watch to see that it reads 1:05. I feel so completely rested I cannot sit any longer. The other guys begin to wake up as I head up the stairs. I slide the exit door's securing bolt over, and make that terrible violin music again. This time I hear both Mark and Paul comment, "You need to take some more lessons," and "You play like I sing." I chuckle and remark, "What's up Chuck? Get it, up Chuck?" They boo at my rude attempt to be a comedian.

I lift open the door and pop my head out. Amazingly, everything is finally over. I see ponds, and lakes, and dunes of fine soot replacing the town I once knew. I know nothing, absolutely nothing, could have survived this. I say a silent prayer towards heaven thanking God Jesus for his providence and divine protection. I turn around for a panoramic view and feel one of the guys from below forcing me over to one side. In a second, I find

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out it's Mark. I know he is thinking about the chances his family could have survived this devastation. Immediately, his face forms a deep depressing frown. He asks me, "Do you think anyone could have survived?" I give him the only logical answer I can think of. "With God, all things are possible." A second after, I feel Paul shoving my rear upwards. I step out onto the fine dust and create pillars of dust clouds. Paul pops his head out and immediately proclaims God to be his god. I remind Paul, "He's everyone's God." I feel there's no room for sarcastic humor at this moment, while we all view this vast desert of destruction purely rebirthed.

Paul and Mark steps out, as I pass them back down to retrieve my old rucksack. Reaching down, I grab both my flashlight and rucksack amidst the stream of sunlight rushing down the steps. I take a final moment to reflect as I spin slowly around. I don my sack and whisper to the inanimate cellar, "I will never forget you as long as I live." Respectfully, I climb these steps for the last time while feeling a slight hollow echo of the memory formed inside me, saying, "Nor, will I." I just nod twice a reverent goodbye.

"Are we ready?" I ask the fellows, as I step out alongside them. Mark asks, "Where are we going?" I turn and point towards the only object on the horizon and say, "Over there." Paul again suggests God is his God. I say nothing to the reverend this time.

We all march off without fear of LD for the first time in a long, long time. Each of us carries a different perspective, as we step out onto this nearly formed planet. Paul's gaze seems to be one of amazement; like a baby seeing for the very first time. "Everything is new," he proclaims! I think everything is dead, but I don't want to destroy his optimism. I know the heavy weight Mark is carrying. I reach over and tell him, "Marky, keep your chin up. God works miracles. You just wait and see. It's alright to call you Marky, isn't it?" The personalized touch to his name seems to have helped him lift his spirits-slightly. I tell him, "Have faith and believe." I know inside, this is one of the hardest things in the world to do, but, it is something that scratches at every man's soul. "Believe Marky!"

I walk and I pray for the revelation God will provide Mark's

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teetering soul. But, I know in my heart, in my spirit, in every fiber of my being, God will never ever let you down. I silently remind Jesus how dear Mark has become to us all. His answer one way or the other will affect us all. These are the times we are stretched beyond what we think we can stand. But, these are the times a man becomes a real man. Some call this the growing stage in our relationship with Christ. It is sometimes referred to like the body building term “no pain, no gain.” I prefer to think of it as the only way God sometimes can get our full attention. The only thing left is: Him, me, and a broken heart.

Every choking dusty step towards “Project Hope” feels more like one giant leap for all mankind. We trudge along pulling our undershirts over our faces as far as they’ll stretch. I fight the stench that three days of perspiration has left in my shirt, and continue to cough anyway. But, at least I can breathe now. We approach an almost perfect pristine pond; except for thin film of dust dimming its sheen. I stop and bend down to the peaceful water that is without as much as a single ripple. I scoop a handful and smell it. It smells fresh, and is cold enough to eat. I slurp the dripping remnant from my hand and taste how sweet it really is. I know this comes from a deep protected cistern that must have sprung up as the continental plate cracked. I invite the fellows to join in the festivities, knowing they haven’t had a real drink in days. I remark as they slurp, “This is surely a gift from God.” Paul tries to nod, but stops his affirmation, causing him to choke. I laugh at him and call him a silly idiot, while he continues to chug down his fill.

I stare at the old store and can just about see life sprawling on the roof top. I pray and hope it is the Watchman. I retrieve my knife and tilt its blade, hoping I can communicate our existence. I stare towards the roof and keep tilting it quickly up and down. I hear the guys finishing up, and ask them, “Would you care for some dessert with that meal?” I turn back towards them and see them using their shirt sleeves as napkins. I quirkily smile down towards Paul; which confuses him temporarily. He knows my comment was more than just the snide humor he has grown

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accustom to coming from me. "Okay, what do you mean?" I flip my blade closed and tell them, "It seems there is hope coming from "Project Hope." Paul asks, "Do you mean they're alright?" I just smile and nod, "Yes," to them both. Paul jumps for joy while Mark runs his hand through his hair. I whisper to Paul, "That's miracle number one." He "catches my drift" without saying anything more.

"It's time to move out," I tell the bunch. Paul hurries to grab my canteen and fill it as quickly as he can. He comments, "This is some good stuff. I want to bring a full can back to share with the others." We wait till the last life giving gulp of air burps out of the drowning canteen. Paul pats the can and smiles, "Yeah, this is good stuff." In my humorous mind there forms a picture of smiling Pirate Paul saving the last keg of rum while standing on the deck of his sinking ship. "Yep Paul, that is some good stuff!"

We continue along the water's edge while I watch our reflection in the water. With our undershirts pulled up we look like French Legionaries. I sigh out a single laugh, as we move away for the oasis resort near the beach. Paul finally makes a "funny" and asks, "I wonder if that thing has any fish in it?" I tell him, "Next time we'll bring our poles and find out together." I then remark, "Like my poppa use to say; 'ten million comedians are out of work, and you're applying for the job'." We continue on.

I figure we've covered over a mile, and we now can plainly see our objective. Both Paul and my spirit grow more excited every step closer we get. Paul makes a comment without being very thoughtful. "I can't wait to see our family." Poor Mark's steps slow as his head grows heavier and heavier. I tell Mark the Irreverent ahead are his new family too. That doesn't seem to help boost his confidence one tiny bit. We continue on quietly the rest of the journey.

Repeated blinking from the "Watchman" signals us we are in his sights. I shine my blade back to confirm reception of his message. The blinking stops as we step on, what I believe use to be, the edge of the property. It's about the same distance, but there is absolutely no sign of foliage. There's just tons and tons of

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pristine dirt marking the indistinguishable boundaries now.

I wrap my arm around Mark to assist him towards the building. Suddenly, I see distant movement approaching the building from all sides. I am astonished to see what is happening. Each of the teams are returning from each of the remaining four winds. I stare off in the distance to see their trails pointing like the arms of a compass towards “Hope.” Paul again claims God for himself, as I rather thank Him instead. I whisper just loud enough for us to hear, “Come to me my children,” while feeling a great satisfaction for their safe and miraculous arrival. I see each team waving their arms welcoming home one another. I turn in the moment towards Paul and whisper, “That’s miracle two.” The only person not cheerful is Mark. I think he feels he’s lost his family forever. Being around this welcoming committee just reminds him even more.

I see Amanda’s group approaching as we make it to the entrance way of the old store. The odd thing is she has a string of people following behind her black “Hello Kitty” backpack. I count one, two, and... nine all together. This means we have seven new members. I notice four are wearing Army fatigue uniforms. I make out Doug’s face from among the group, and then wave my far off “Hello” to them. Amanda, Jerry, and Doug recognize me, and return their congratulations with a conquering wave of their own. I stare as they surf down the dust bitten dune while I hold my arms wide open. Their leader Amanda yells down to me, “I brought you some new customers!” I scream back, “Well, we’re open for business!”

I start adding two and two together as I see two fairly young men assisting this weary lady in between them. I think maybe it was Doug that showed up at Mark’s that day, and what I am looking at is miracle number three. I turn towards Mark’s hung head and ask him, “What was your honey wearing the last time you saw her?” He immediately looks up at me, knowing that is a strange question to ask him; unless! I just point to the “lineup” and ask him, “Can you identify any of these criminals?” He falls to his knees and screams, as every doubt in his body to the existence

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of God explodes out of him. He holds his arms open as widely as humanly possible, as I watch the flood of tears profusely pour out of him. I lean down as three lost sheep charge his position. I softly whisper into Mark's ear, "There's your answer, and your miracle. Remember your promise to God." He nods his head rapidly and violently up and down. I move off to the side avoiding the impending tackle, as six worried outstretched arms prepare to "close line" the joyous man. I think to myself, Mark looks like he scored on a "Hail Mary" catch. I briefly look over at Paul, and then up to Heaven. "Thank you God. I love you."

For some reason, I feel and think He winked down at me.

Amanda runs to wrap her loving arms around me. The combination of our dust and the impact makes me think she's trying on makeup. I smile and she smiles. I cough and she coughs, under the influence of the powder puff impact. "Awe, what the heck," I tell her. I pick her up and spin her around, making a cyclone of dust. She just laughs, and then coughs, and then she just laughs some more. I set her down and pat the top of her head, as she stares over to see the family reunion going on. I tell her, "Good job girly." We both watch as Mark tries to get up, but he is immediately tackled all over again. Part of me must have somehow rubbed off on Amanda in the impact as she cynically comments, "You mean we weren't invited?" I tell her, "Well, you aren't dressed for the occasion anyways." I want to tell her about Jimmy, but decide instead to tell her, "I have a present to give you later."

Doug swings around from behind Amanda with his outstretched arm, beckoning me with his welcoming hand shake. I time my assault, and stick out my hand at the exact correct moment to join his. I stop him with my shaking arm, and tell him, "Hi Doug, glad you could join us." He tips his green ball cap up while saying, "The feeling's mutual." We all reflect in our huddle as we watch the tender "family moment" going on below us. The other two teams connect and greet each other as they meet at the far end of the building.

A flood of "well wishers" come out of the building and offer

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their assistance to the arriving parties. My eyes run the length of the building looking for any signs of damage before I'm overtaken by the approaching crowd. I don't see one crack or one block moved out of place. I know I'm looking at the miraculous, and feeling the Almighty's presence. Ken yells down from on top the building, "Welcome home Joey!" I wave back while waiting for the rest of the returning tribes.

Dave and Randy are the next set to reach my welcoming embrace. Dave tells me, "You won't believe all that has happened to us the last three days." Randy just nods his head in agreement to Dave's comment. I reply, "I want to hear all about it, but it will have to wait till later." Right behind them is Scotty and Moses, and several other new members they must have rescued. I shake hands and invite them all to go inside while passing them off to the "welcoming committee." I pat each passing back while offering my rotating handshake. I tell the passing precession, "Just ignore the dust," I'm creating with every up and down shake of my arm.

My eyes drift back to smiling Mark as he herds his flock my way. As he approaches, he introduces each of his family members. He requests, "Me and my family all want to know more about Jesus." I wave Paul over while stating, "This is the man that can help instruct you best. He will show you how to have an eternal relationship with our creator." Paul whisks them away to the security of the inside. I hear him offer the family a meal and a chance to clean up first. They feel the holy urgency to take care of business first as Mark asks Paul, "How can we be saved?" I give Paul the "thumbs up" as they turn the corner and head inside. Paul returns the sign with his added smile of approval right before disappearing through the building's entrance-way. Both of us know we are adding four more soldiers of Christ to our army, and four more eternal family members to God's eternal treasure chest.

I now stand alone outside and reflect on all that has happened these last several years; especially these last days. My mind remembers that kitchen hutch with those piles of broken pieces.

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Each pile was a special someone, a special memory, and a very special time. I use to tell my niece when she was growing up, "I can fix anything; except broken hearts. Only God can fix them." Now, I don't even try. I just consider myself the oarsman that steers the lost towards "The Star of The Morning." For, this is my mission, and this is my new life.

Hell is coming on earth as the "clock of last chances" ticks down. I feel the finger of God ready to break another seal that's holding back His terror of wrath. I can hear the swirling bowls of judgments that are ready to spill over their sides.

I am not scared anymore, because I am not alone. I have His promise that I will take with me; and I will bring the message of the cross across this desert to those desolate. I feel fully satisfied in this moment, even though I face perilous times ahead of me. But, in this moment, "All the world is right!"

This is not the end!

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PS: I once heard this story of an elderly Christian lady asking her pastor to honor her last request. “When my time comes, I want to be buried with a fork in my hand.” The pastor scratched his head, chuckled, and then asked “Why the heck would you want that to be everyone’s last memory of you?” She replied, “You see; in the last sixty years I have never missed a ‘potluck’ church social diner. At every one of them someone would come yelling out of the kitchen right before we’d finish eating the main course, ‘Hold on to your fork, because the best is yet to come!’”

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