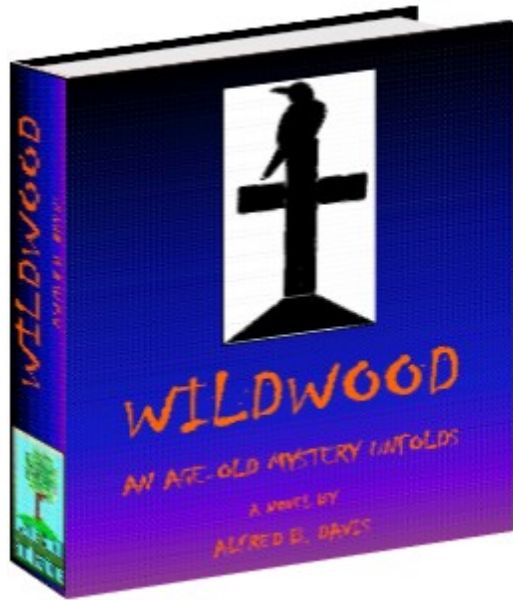


# WILDWOOD

AN AGE-OLD MYSTERY UNFOLDS

A NOVEL BY

ALFRED B. DAVIS



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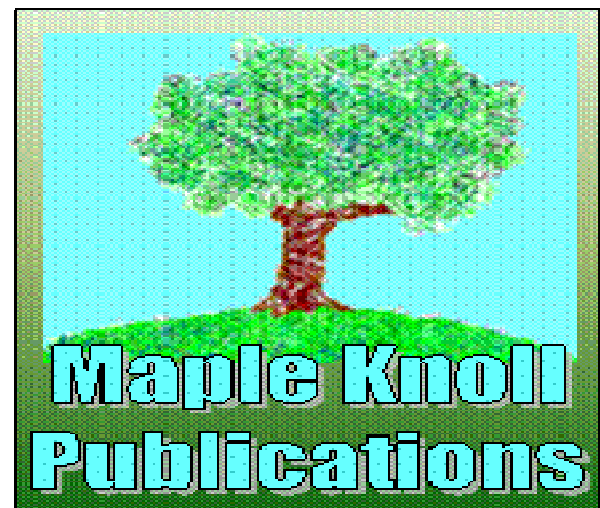
**Thanks and God bless!**

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# Dedication

To  
My Wife, Kimberly,  
and  
My Daughter, Anna

# Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge all those that had a part in this book by proof-reading, encouraging, and praying for me.

Especially:

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# WILDWOOD

## An Age-Old Mystery Unfolds

### Chapter One

Pastor John Williams glanced around nervously. Brandon Hayes had dropped him off at the main concourse before going to park the van. The ticket counters were nearly deserted. Few people were moving about the airport this early on a Friday morning, but that would change in a few hours. He carefully checked his watch while mopping the perspiration from his brow with a worn handkerchief. It was 5:21 AM, three minutes later than when he last looked.

"Brandon ought to be able to get a good parking space," thought Pastor Williams as he studied the arrivals board in the main concourse. He ran his fingers through his thin, gray hair. They trembled slightly. He started at the sudden crackling of the loudspeaker behind him.

"Attention, attention!" commanded an unseen announcer in a static-laced voice, "There has been a gate change. Inter-Continental Flight 256 from Honolulu is now arriving at Gate 7. Inter-Continental Flight 256 from Honolulu is now arriving at Gate 7. Passengers connecting with Inter-Continental Flight 256 to Philadelphia, please proceed to Gate 7 immediately."

"Twenty minutes early," breathed Rev. Williams quietly as he headed off in the direction of Gate 7. "Thank God for small miracles!"

Paul Brown waited somewhat impatiently for the seatbelt light to click off as the plane taxied slowly off the runway. He slowly stretched his five foot 11 inch frame in his seat as much as possible. After a number of years in the United States Air Force and then several more as a missionary in the South Pacific, Paul Brown, though not a pilot himself, had logged more hours in a variety of aircraft over the last 20 years than he cared to think of.

"These airline seats get smaller by the hour!" he complained to his wife, Karen, who sat next to him.

"Just be thankful we're arriving early!" laughed Karen, "How would we ever get you out of the seat if we were running late?"

Karen Brown, just a couple years younger than her husband, was a registered nurse with extensive emergency medical training. Equally at home in a modern trauma unit or a primitive jungle clinic, Karen had first met Paul on a medical missions trip to Columbia, shortly after graduating from college. He was still in the Air Force at the time and had visited the mission

clinic she volunteered at while participating in a "training" exercise that he still could not tell her about 17 years later.

"Well, Pastor Williams and Uncle Brandon will be glad we are early," chuckled Paul. "I can't wait to see them—it's been a year since Uncle Brandon visited us in Tunoa and nearly two and a half years since we last saw Pastor Williams." Sobering abruptly, he paused and added somberly, "Unfortunately, a lot has happened since then..."

"Please remain seated until the plane comes to a complete stop and the pilot turns off the fasten seatbelt signs." intoned the flight attendant as the plane rolled along the taxiway, headed for Gate 7. "Local time is 5:22 AM. The outside temperature is a cool 46 degrees. Please enjoy your stay in Cleveland, Ohio. For passengers continuing with Inter-Continental to Philadelphia, please remain on board the aircraft. Thank you for flying Inter-Continental Flight 256 from Hawaii and have a nice day. Mahalo."

As the giant Boeing 777 lumbered along the taxiway Paul looked over to check on nine-year old Alexandria Brown and her older brother, Ben. Ben, he could tell, was excited but in his typically reserved manner. Karen said he took after his dad. Alex, on the other hand, was more like her mother. Squirming in her seat and looking intently out the window she could barely contain her excitement. She was only six the last time they were on furlough and had spent most of her young life in the Tunoa Islands. Their overnight stay in Hawaii had been too brief to get a real taste of the States. Long enough to get a taste of fresh milk, real doughnuts, and fast food though.

"Alex! Sit down!" cautioned Paul, "Wait until the seatbelt light goes off." Ben laughed as he pushed his sister back down in her seat. At three years older than his sister, Ben was nearly twice her size, not that she was all that small for her age.

"That boy is going to be taller than you yet, Paul," laughed Karen.

Paul and Karen settled back in their seats as the airplane rolled up to the gate, their minds racing. It was hard to believe that they had left Tunoa only a few days ago—it seemed like weeks. Nearly the whole church was there to see them off at the Tunoa International Airport, along with many dear friends. They were only halfway into their second term when Pastor Williams asked them to pray about returning early. The sudden, tragic loss of his wife, Joyce, a few months earlier had devastated Pastor Williams and the church. Though the official cause of death was listed as accidental, Brandon Hayes had misgivings and had been quietly digging into the matter with the help of his close friend and fellow deacon, Attorney Chuck Krankovich. Although the Browns were supposed to return to Tunoa in a year or so, both had the strange feeling that they would not be returning to the South Pacific anytime soon. Pastor Williams' last letter only fueled those feelings.

Flight 256 came to an abrupt stop at Gate 7. The seatbelt lights clicked off and passengers began spilling out of their seats, grabbing carry on bags and filling the aisles. Paul stood up and began pulling bags out of the overhead compartment, handing them down to Ben. Karen and Alex retrieved more from under the seats. Paul and Ben noticed an elderly couple struggling to get their bags out of the overhead compartment. Paul nodded at his son who quickly went over to them. "Excuse me, Sir, Ma'am," said Ben, "Can I get those for you?"

Pastor Williams hurried to the baggage terminal. He headed for Gate 7 first but airport security had informed him that he could not proceed to the gate without a valid airline ticket. "I really miss greeting people at the gate," he thought to himself as he headed for the escalator.

Arriving at the lower level Pastor Williams scanned the area looking for the Inter-

Continental baggage area. He spotted the tall, lanky frame of Brandon Hayes standing just outside the Inter-Continental baggage area about halfway down the concourse with two luggage carts at the ready. Brandon saw him at about the same time and waved in his direction.

"I was hoping you'd remember that you can't meet them at the gate, " said Hayes. "I'm parked right outside. Willy Sykes called just as I was heading to the parking garage. Said he was tracking Paul's flight on-line and it was early. So, I came around and asked if I could park long enough to run in and let you know where the van is. Got some carts on the way in for the Browns' luggage. The plane is unloading now so they should be here shortly. I'll meet you folks outside in a few minutes. Will you be o.k. Pastor?"

"Don't worry Brandon, I'll be all right," assured Pastor Williams.

Brandon Hayes relinquished the carts to Pastor Williams and headed back outside to the van. It was nearly 5:30 AM. Several cars and buses were just now arriving to pick up passengers from two Inter-Continental red-eyes and a charter flight from San Juan, Puerto Rico, due in that morning. A newer dark gray Jaguar came angling into the passenger loading area a little too quickly, almost hitting Brandon. Hayes avoided it with surprising agility. Though in his late 60's he looked much younger and had never fully lost the reflexes developed as a foreign correspondent in some of the most remote and dangerous hot spots on earth. Now, semi-retired as a free-lance investigative reporter, he had time to devote himself to his greatest passion, serving the Lord as a Sunday school teacher and deacon.

Hayes unlocked the door of an older 12 passenger red van with "Wildwood Baptist Church, Wildwood, Ohio" emblazoned on the sides. As he did so a small, slightly built man carrying an umbrella leaped out of the Jaguar, grinning oddly. The strange little man told the driver to wait and walked briskly into the terminal, pausing only to ask a skycap where the Inter-Continental baggage carousels were located.

Paul Brown followed closely behind as his family made their way off the airplane and into the terminal. Little Alex was chattering excitedly while her mom kept a firm grip on her hand so she could not get too far ahead. Ben was walking just in front of dad. A handful of Bible tracts stuck out of his knapsack, a little less than half of what he had started out with. The rest were scattered along their route, stuck in magazines and seat backs on several airplanes and buses as well as left in restrooms, waiting areas, and restaurants. Many more had been given to people, such as the older couple he had helped on the airplane.

"Thank you, God, for a wonderful family," Paul prayed silently as they headed for the escalator.

Pastor Williams waited anxiously near the Inter-Continental baggage carousels. He had several things he wanted to discuss with Paul and Brandon but that could wait until they got back to Wildwood and rested up a bit. Shifting from side to side, he watched anxiously as passengers from the two Inter-Continental flights and the Puerto Rico charter spilled out of the escalators into the lower concourse, converging on their respective baggage areas. He scanned the crowd nervously until at long last he spotted the Browns moving down the far escalator. Excitedly he waved at them, his unease momentarily forgotten.

"I see him, I see Pastor Williams!" squealed little Alex, pointing and waving back. She had memorized his picture on the way from Hawaii, determined to be the first to spot him.

"Yes, Alex," said Karen, "I see him too! But you'll have to stick with me. I don't want

you running off in this crowd!"

The Browns made their way through the growing crowd around the Inter-Continental baggage carousels to Pastor Williams as quickly as they could. It was a warm reunion and they paused for a brief prayer, thanking God for a safe trip. Paul and Ben put their carry on bags onto one of the luggage carts while Karen and Alex filled Pastor Williams in on the details of their trip. Several bags were beginning to arrive from Flight 256 and Paul's old Air Force duffel bag was among them. Ben swung it off the carousel and onto the floor by his dad. Paul loaded the duffel bag onto the cart as his son scanned the arriving bags for more.

Meanwhile, the strange, grinning little man with the umbrella stood at the outskirts of the Inter-Continental baggage area. He scrutinized the faces of the jostling group intently. His grin broadened in a malevolent sort of way as he spotted Pastor Williams and the Browns.

He watched patiently as they loaded several more bags, waiting for them to move out of the crowded baggage area. "Patience is a virtue," he whispered to nobody in particular, his voice betraying a vaguely French accent.

Finally the last of the Brown's nine bags had arrived and were balanced precariously on the two luggage carts along with several of their carry on bags. The ninth bag had exceeded the limit of two checked bags per person and was filled with *nie'emuge*—gifts—from well-wishers at the airport in Tunoa. Fortunately Rev. Dobemo, the newly installed pastor of *Ta Emuge Vapue Pabtesta*, Tanoan for Grace Baptist Church, had the foresight to bring an empty suitcase to the airport. A friend of his with the airline had checked it to Hawaii for free, though Inter-Continental had charged them from Honolulu on.

The little man's ice-blue eyes narrowed as he watched Pastor Williams and the Brown's leave the Inter-Continental baggage area. One cart wobbled noticeably.

His grin faded into a tight smile as he turned over his umbrella and gave the tip a slight twist, exposing a small hypodermic needle.

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose," he whispered to himself, striding quickly in their direction, "A time to die, a time to kill, a time to weep, a time to mourn. Paul Brown, it is your time!"

"Ben!" Paul called out sharply, "Watch that cart!" Ben's luggage cart lurched abruptly as one of the wheels suddenly turned the wrong way. The bags shifted, toppling to one side as Paul and Pastor Williams grabbed for them.

Simultaneously, the man with the umbrella came up behind Paul and pretended to stumble. His right arm flailed out in front and to the right, thrusting his umbrella sword-like toward the middle of Paul Brown's back. He did not count on Paul leaning to the side at the last minute, however, and narrowly missed Paul as he lunged for the falling bags. The man's momentum carried him forward as Pastor Williams reached out for the bags as well and the tip of the umbrella caught Pastor Williams in his right shoulder. In a flash, the hidden needle flicked out a fraction of an inch and pumped a minute amount of clear, yellowish liquid into Pastor William's shoulder before snapping back into place.

"Oh! I-I am dreadfully sorry!" apologized the man, "I was in a hurry and my bad knee gave way. I must have been walking too fast. I hope I did not hurt you!"

Startled, Pastor Williams rubbed his shoulder, unaware that something had been in-

jected. "I'm alright," he said, "The end of your umbrella caught me but no harm done. Just smarts a little. How about you?"

"Fine, fine!" answered the man as he turned to leave.

Karen had seen the man stumble. "Are you sure?" she asked with a note of concern in her voice, "Are you able to walk?"

"Sure, sure," said the man, "It happens every once in awhile." He quickly strode off before she could ask anything more.

"That's odd," mused Karen aloud, watching as he walked quickly out of the terminal.

"What's that?" asked Paul, looking in the direction of her gaze.

"Well, for a man who just stumbled as bad as he did on a trick knee, he doesn't seem to be limping or anything." With that Karen turned her concern to Pastor Williams as Ben and Alex finished helping restack the bags. "How's your shoulder, Pastor? That was quite a blow."

Pastor Williams continued to rub his shoulder. "It tingles a little but I'll be o.k. Let's get you folks out to the van and back to Wildwood. There is a lot I want to talk with Paul and Brandon about."

Brandon Hayes waited patiently outside, leaning against the van. He watched as the stream of people leaving the airport quickly swelled and then slowly began to trickle off. He could hardly wait to see his nephew, Paul, and his family again. A sudden movement caught his attention as the little man with the umbrella rushed out of the airport and jumped into the Jaguar parked two spaces ahead of Brandon. He was no longer grinning.

Obviously angry, the little man said something to the driver as he was getting into the car. Brandon only caught a few of the man's words, something about "missed him!" and "wrong one!" before the door slammed shut and the car roared off.

"Seemed a little upset. Must have been here to pick up someone who was on another flight," surmised Brandon to himself.

A few moments later Pastor Williams and the Browns came out of the airport. Brandon forgot all about the man in the Jaguar as he ran up to the Browns. He scooped up little Alex in one hand while wrapping an arm around Ben, giving both of them a big hug. Letting Alex down and Ben go, he turned to give Karen and Paul a welcoming hug as well.

Pastor Williams stood quietly off to the side, watching the family reunion take place. He knew that Brandon Hayes was more a father than an uncle to Paul. Ever since Paul's parents died with Brandon's wife in a tragic car accident shortly before Paul graduated from high school in 1979, Brandon, who had no children of his own, had taken Paul under his wing. In spite of his own loss, he helped Paul, an only child, with the funeral arrangements, taking care of nearly all the expenses himself.

Paul went through a rough time after the death of his parents but Pastor Williams credited the quiet support and steadfast love that Brandon, though grieving deeply over his own loss, had shown him with keeping him on the right track. Paul had gone on to college at Ohio State University, earning his Bachelor of Science in Forest Biology with a minor in Military Science in 1984. Following graduation Paul fulfilled his ROTC obligations by going into active duty with the United States Air Force barely a month later. For a time Pastor Williams, and even Brandon Hayes, had lost contact with Paul but he surfaced again a couple of years later in Columbia.

Brandon was running down a story concerning American drug interdiction efforts in Co-



lumbia when he chanced upon a group of American missionaries operating a medical mission in a remote jungle area. He was interviewing the missionaries, including a group of medical volunteers from Kentucky, for a sidebar story when several American military personnel stumbled into the clinic, surprising everyone. They were all in rough shape, bruised, scratched, and suffering from varying degrees of exhaustion and dehydration. Several had severe cuts and lacerations and at least one had a badly infected gunshot wound.

Brandon pitched in to help a young RN, Karen Florenson—now Karen Brown—sit one of the men down long enough to make a brief examination of his wounds. Much to Brandon's surprise the man turned out to be his nephew, Captain Paul Brown, USAF. He barely recognized him due to the dirt, camouflage paint, and dried blood caked on his face. Besides, it had been nearly two years since they had last seen each other.

As Karen began cleaning out a particularly nasty gash on his leg, Paul filled his uncle in on what had been happening. He had been, as his uncle had last heard, originally trained as an Intelligence Officer and stationed at an airbase in central England. Six months ago, due to his background in forest biology, he was assigned to a special joint Air Force-Army task force based at Homestead Air Force Base in Florida. Actually, his particular unit operated out of the American embassy in Bogata, Columbia.

They had been dropped into the jungle east of Bucaramanga, near the Venezuela border 10 days ago. Their mission was to identify and obtain a rare variety of wild coca that did not produce the chemical compounds that the Colombian drug cartels refined into cocaine and smuggled to America. It was rumored to be growing in the region. Officials at the DEA in Washington hoped that the rare variety could be cultivated and the seeds spread by air over known cocaine producing areas throughout Central and South America. Plant biologists at the Department of Agriculture theorized that it would hybridize with the cultivated coca, drastically reducing the amount of cocaine produced per pound of leaves and drying up the profits.

Unfortunately, things had gone badly wrong six days into the mission. Paul and his men had identified several possible plants and were collecting them when either a rouge Colombian military patrol or a band of rebels, they were not sure which, surprised them. A few shots were fired but the Americans managed to elude the Colombians by sliding down a steep hillside into a rain-swollen creek below. They splashed hurriedly along the creek while the Colombians, reluctant to slide down themselves, raced along the ridge above firing down on them. As the Americans ran along the creek they suddenly hit a slippery steep area where they lost their footing and slid into a larger stream that took them nearly three-quarters of the way down the mountain before they realized what was happening.

By the time they regained their footing the Colombians had given up the chase. Paul and his men took stock of their situation and realized that they were all accounted for. Only one man had been shot and their medic quickly bandaged up his wound and checked over the others. Everyone was banged and cut up to some degree but able to walk. Unfortunately the radio and most of their supplies had been lost or ruined.

Paul headed them downstream figuring that eventually they would reach the Magdalena River and find some way to get in touch with the embassy. Three days later they spotted the mission clinic near the tributary that they had been following. They watched carefully that night and well into the next day, not sure if they should risk approaching it. What little food they had was gone and their comrade's gunshot wound desperately needed treatment.

Paul, a born again Christian, prayed fervently about what to do when he noticed a tall, familiar looking American arrive and enter the clinic. "That looks just like Uncle Brandon!" he

told himself, "But it couldn't be, not out here in the middle of the jungle! But then again, maybe God is trying to tell us its safe to go in."

Cautiously the Americans got to their feet and made their way out of the jungle and into the clearing surrounding the clinic. Paul was the first to enter the building, which was little more than a sheet metal roofed shack, and was surprised to find a number of Americans and several Colombians who were just as surprised to see him. The American missionaries and medical team, after getting over the shock of having a bedraggled band of American Air Force and Army personnel unexpectedly walk in quickly began taking care of them. Paul did not see the man that looked like his uncle at first, at least not until after a pretty, dark-haired nurse named Karen made him sit down so she could look at his wounds.

The man Paul had seen outside came over to help Karen. Paul managed a wry smile, "Uncle Brandon, I presume?"

Paul convinced his uncle not to include him or his men in his story and used the mission's radio to call for a med-evac flight to come and pick them up. They had managed to retain a few of the plants that they had collected but the project was disbanded two months later and Paul's team was dissolved. He wound up stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland, after a brief furlough back home in Wildwood.

Brandon Hayes surprised his nephew with Karen's address and telephone number. A few months later they were engaged to be married on March 2, 1987, one year from the day that Paul had stumbled out of the Colombian jungle and into her life.

Pastor Williams' thoughts were interrupted as the Browns and Bro. Hayes joined him by the van. "How's your shoulder, Pastor?" inquired Brandon while opening the side door of the van. "Karen told me some guy hit you with an umbrella."

"I'm fine," answered Pastor Williams, "Though it still hurts a bit. Sort of tingles. Actually, it is starting to throb now. Burns a little, too. That umbrella must have jabbed me harder than I thought."

"You should let me take a look at it, Pastor!" said Karen motioning to Pastor Williams. She patted the van seat and continued, "Maybe it broke the skin. Let the boys load the luggage in the van and you have a seat here while I take a look."

Pastor Williams grudgingly complied with Karen's request. He might have argued with her but, how do you argue with a nurse? Besides, his shoulder was beginning to hurt more by the moment. The throbbing was turning into a fiery sensation that was spreading across his shoulders and down his back and arm as he removed his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt.

"Paul! Uncle Brandon!" cried Karen, "Come and look at this!"

Paul and Brandon hurried from behind the van, leaving Ben and Alex to finish loading the bags. They gasped at the angry looking bluish-white spot with bright red lines radiating out from the center that was spreading across Pastor Williams shoulder.

"What is that-!" began Paul.

"I think we should head to the hospital," interrupted Karen, "I don't like the look of this at all. Something must have been on the tip of that umbrella and it got into his shoulder. He needs to have this checked out by a doctor right away."

"Southwest is not too far away," said Brandon, "Paul, you get the rest of the stuff and the kids loaded and I'll start the van!"

Paul and the kids hurried to get the remaining bags into the van. Karen got Pastor Williams settled in the van and climbed in next to him with a serious look on her face. Paul could

tell she did not like the look of the spot on his shoulder and was more worried than she let on.

Paul slammed the van's rear door shut as Alex jumped into the van. Ben climbed in after his sister, pulling the side door shut behind him. Paul hopped into the front passenger seat and turned to make sure everyone was buckled in as he fastened his own seat belt. Turning to his uncle he said, "Let's have a quick word of prayer... Heavenly Father, we want to thank you for a safe journey home. Now, Lord, we ask that you would be with Pastor Williams. We do not know what is wrong but we know that he is in Your hands. Give us safety and clear roads as we head to the hospital. Amen!"

No sooner had the others said, "Amen!" as well, Brandon Hayes had the van in gear and was pulling away from the curb. He glanced down at the clock on the dash, noting that it was only 6:34. "Rush hour would be starting soon but Route 237 should be fairly clear still," he told the others.

They made good time getting out of the airport and onto the highway. Heading southwest Brandon pushed the van as fast as the traffic would allow, scanning the traffic ahead and behind. He was a good driver, probably the best in the van, or the whole church for that matter. Some years ago, back in the seventies, he had done an investigative piece on a defensive driving school in Arizona that trained drivers for various firms operating in third world hot spots. His employer at the time, World News Digest, had enrolled him in the school's six-week program. He had done well and even had offers from several firms who were impressed with his abilities. Distracted by his concern for Pastor Williams he did not notice the dark gray Jaguar that pulled out onto the road behind him and matched his speed, following at a discreet distance.

## **Chapter 2**

Pastor Williams made himself as comfortable as he could. The pain in his shoulder was not spreading anymore but throbbed like an abscessed tooth. More troubling was the tingling sensation that was starting in his tongue and the tightness that was beginning to spread across his chest. He knew the others were worried about him but he also knew that he was in good hands – God's. He also remembered that he needed to talk to Paul and Brandon. He felt the need to talk was more urgent now than ever.

"Brandon, Paul," he began, "I need to talk with you. I wanted to wait until after we got back to Wildwood and everyone had a chance to rest up a bit. However, now I don't think I should wait. Brandon, I know you and Bro. Krankovich have been investigating Joyce's death. I appreciate that. I no longer believe her death was an accident either. In fact, I believe that it was part of an overall scheme to close our church."

"Close the church! What do you mean?" asked Paul.

"I received a letter about two and a half months ago," continued Pastor Williams, "from someone working at the Narsch Foundation. I don't know who sent it but it was signed 'A Friend'."

"Karen," Pastor Williams interrupted himself, "There is an envelope in my coat pocket. Can you get that and hand it to your husband, please."

Karen retrieved the envelope and passed it forward.

Paul took the envelope and opened it as Pastor Williams continued. "You can read the letter yourself. There is not much in it. It was actually the other papers in the envelope that concerned me the most." He paused and rubbed his hand along the bottom of his jaw. The tingling sensation was spreading. "Please read it out loud so your Uncle can hear what it says as well."

Paul Brown shook out the contents of the envelope. The letter, along with three other papers, fell into his lap. The letter was fairly brief and he quickly scanned it before looking at the other papers. It was undated and looked like it had been typed on an old manual typewriter rather than coming from a computer printer.

"Mr. Williams," the letter began, "You do not know me but you and another gentleman knocked on my door one time about ten years ago. You invited me to visit your church and tried to share your antiquated view of 'god' with me and told me that I needed to be 'saved'. We had an interesting debate and obviously had some profound philosophical differences. We also differed greatly on our view of who and what 'god' is and what that 'god' expects of us. I appreciated your sincerity and the obvious concern, however naive and misplaced it might have been, for my welfare. Well, maybe now I can return the favor. I recently had opportunity to view several documents, which may interest you. I have nothing to gain by sending this information to you. In fact, it would endanger my position here at the Narsch Foundation if Simon were to find out that I sent it. Still, it is not what I signed up for."

Laying aside the letter, Paul picked up the other papers. The first was a slightly fuzzy copy of an aerial photograph. Squinting at the picture Paul saw that it centered on the buildings and property of the Wildwood Baptist Church. Two small equilateral triangles, connected by a smaller rectangle, were drawn over the woods immediately behind the church's back parking lot. The strange symbol was circled with a heavy black line and the words "SHAMBALLAH OPENING?" were scrawled alongside. The second document was actually a series of narrow strips, each about 2 inches wide, that had been glued on to a piece of paper from a yellow legal pad.

"Look at this," said Paul as he held up the second paper. "It looks like someone used one of those small, hand-held copiers to put this together. I remember getting a National Security Agency warning about those things back when I was stationed in England with the Air Force. They were concerned that it could be easily smuggled into a secure building since it was only about the size of a pack of cigarettes or a deck of cards. Documents could be scanned in strips just like this. Looks like the NSA security folks' concerns were justified."

The document was headed "Gaia Society - Properties of Interest & Investigation, Wildwood". It revealed a list of a dozen or so properties in and around Wildwood, Ohio. Some of the properties were check-marked with various dates going back over 30 years written alongside. The church property was listed but unchecked. It was, however, underlined and "GLF-Ops" was written along with today's date next to it.

"Now that is certainly interesting," observed Paul dryly, "I've heard of the Gaia Society. That's one of those environmental-wacko groups that want to save the world from the internal combustion engine. Why would they be interested in our property? And, more importantly, what is this "GLF-Ops" along with today's date supposed to mean?"

Brandon Hayes eyebrows scrunched together as he thought for a moment. "GLF-Ops? GLF-Ops? Why does that sound familiar?" Suddenly it dawned on him. "GLF-Ops!" he said while slowing for the traffic light, "The Gaia Society has an unofficial activist arm known as

the Gaia Liberation Front. Though it has never been proven, it is thought that the Gaia Society secretly funds the GLF while using it to take direct, destructive, and frequently illegal actions to further its goals. They started out breaking into labs and release animals, spiking trees in logging areas, and pouring sugar into the fuel tanks of heavy equipment at development and mining sites out West. They've since gone nationwide and graduated to threats, intimidation, bombings, and arson. They are even suspected in several deaths and assassination attempts."

Turning right onto Bagley Road, he continued, "The FBI has the GLF on their list of domestic terrorist groups and has been tracking their activities for nearly a decade. So far no one has been able to tie them into the Gaia Society directly. 'Ops' could refer to an operation planned for today. Quite a coincidence that it was the same day Paul and Karen were coming home. No wonder you were concerned this morning, Pastor!"

Pastor Williams lifted a hand stiffly. The tightness around his chest felt like a steel band constricting his breathing. He tried to talk but his tongue felt thick and swollen. His words slurred together, making them hard to understand. "Paul, Brrra- Braan-don" he began, "The date...not coincidence...not me...not me...P-P-Paul..." His words cut off into a moan as he suddenly stiffened in the seat.

"Pastor Williams! Pastor Williams!" shouted Karen.

Pastor Williams sat rigidly in the seat, his breath coming in short, labored gasps. His eyes were glazing over as she grabbed his wrist, desperately feeling for a pulse. It was there, weak, sluggish, and erratic.

Brandon took a quick look over his shoulder at Karen and Pastor Williams. "Hang on!" he hollered as he pushed the accelerator to the floor and flipped on the van's emergency flashers. "We're only a couple of blocks away!" He whipped the old van expertly around a couple of slower cars as he headed for the hospital.

Paul gripped the dashboard tightly with one hand while turning in his seat to look behind him. His wife had braced herself against the back of his seat and was doing her best to steady Pastor Williams. Ben and Alex were hanging tightly onto the seat in front of them. Alexandria's eyes were wide with fear and concern while Ben's lips moved silently in prayer. A sudden movement on the road behind them caught his attention as Brandon suddenly cut the van over in a tight right turn into Southwest General Health Center's main entrance. A dark gray car made an abrupt turn into the hospital behind them, skidding slightly and nearly side-swiping a delivery van.

Screeching to a halt outside the emergency entrance, Brandon slammed the van into park and jumped out without bothering to shut off the engine. "Stay with Pastor Williams! " he called over his shoulder, "I'll get some help!" He ran into the hospital while Paul hopped out and opened the side door to the van.

Unnoticed, a dark gray Jaguar circled around and pulled into a parking space in sight of the church van. The occupants, the small thin man from the airport and his driver, a larger, stockier man, watched the occupants of the church van intently. The little man held a cell phone tightly as he described what was happening to the unseen listener. He paused for a moment, watching as Brandon Hayes and two ER residents in scrubs hurried out to the van. One turned and hollered back toward the hospital and two aids rushed up with a gurney. They pulled Pastor Williams out of the van and rushed him into the emergency room, followed closely by Karen Brown.

The thin man spoke briefly into the phone and then folded it up with a quick snap as

Paul and Brandon got back into the van with Ben and Alex. He watched the van move to a parking space with a cool clinical gaze. He turned to his driver while the van moved from the emergency entrance to a parking space.

“We wait,” he said through tight lips.

“And...?”

“And see what happens.”

“I know what's gonna happen!” his driver interrupted, “That old guys gonna croak! That's what's gonna happen, even if he's the wrong guy! There was enough of that concentrated salamander juice in your umbrella tip to kill the lot of 'em.”

“Newt,” said the smaller man, shaking his head, “Newt, not salamander. It came from the rough skinned newt, found only in the Pacific Northwest. It is one of the most poisonous amphibians in the world. The only one in North America. Its skin glands produce a powerful neurotoxin that affects the heart and lungs by slowly paralyzing them.”

The driver shrugged, “Whatever! All I knows is it works. Remember that Forest Service survey crew a few years back? They was camped out near Mt. Rainier marking trees for a selective logging cut. A couple of GLF buddies of mine snuck in late one night and dropped a dead salamander they'd found in their coffee pot. They just wanted to gross 'em out. They didn't know 'bout them poison glands all over it. Next mornin' them Forest Service guys get up, pour some water in the pot and don't see the salamander. An hour or so later they start having trouble breathing and keel over. Only one guy survived. He had tea 'stead of coffee. Got wrote up in the local papers but the GLF never got the credit.”

“Good thing!” snorted the other man. “If they had we would not have been able to use the poison as successfully in other cases since then.”

“Yeah, but I hate having one of those little guys die just to take out some planet killer.”

“Small price to pay to save Mother Earth! Besides, that newt is bound to come back in a higher form after being used for such a noble purpose.”

Twenty-some miles away an angry Simon Narsch let out a stream of profanity and slammed his silver-tipped walking stick down hard. The slim hickory shaft splintered on impact, leaving yet another dent in the hard walnut surface of the massive desk. Cursing yet again, the old man flung the ruined stick at his son, Arnold, who was seated uncomfortably in an oversized leather armchair across the room.

At 92, Simon Narsch, III, Founder and Director of the prestigious Narsch Foundation, was still an imposing figure. Tall and slender with an aristocratic carriage befitting his Prussian ancestry, he exercised religiously and jogged daily, rain or shine, every morning around the perimeter of the Narsch family estate in Wildwood. He looked a mere ten years older than his son who, at 62, was grossly overweight and terribly out of shape, a constant source of friction between the two.

As the past President and CEO of Narsch Industries, Simon enjoyed a spacious corner office on the sixth floor of the Narsch headquarters building. It overlooked a carefully preserved and tended stand of some of the last remaining virgin timber in Northeast Ohio. From his chestnut paneled chambers he oversaw the Narsch Foundation while wielding a great deal more influence than anyone suspected over the company that his immigrant grandfather, had founded in 1891, especially the research and development division. His son, Arnold, had taken over the family business upon the unexpected death of his older brother, Simon Narsch, IV, 25 years earlier in a remote mountain village in Haiti. The elder Narsch still refused to talk about

it, though he had been there when it happened.

“Bah! Idiots! The wrong one indeed! How could they miss?” demanded Simon, stalking back and forth behind his imposing desk like a caged lion, “Now we have to alter some of our most important plans! You know as well as I do that young Paul Brown is the real threat. All our forecasts and readings pointed to him! That old man was nothing. We would have had no trouble with him, not when the time came. Everything was set. How could that fool miss?”

“It was an accident, Father,” soothed Arnold. “These things happen. We’ll compensate. I’ve already instructed our agents to watch and wait outside of the hospital. I—”

“Instruct them to stay out of sight and follow them home from the hospital as well!” interrupted his father.

Arnold sighed, “Already done, as I started to say before you interrupted.”

“At least you have done something right today,” sneered Simon, “I suspect Brown will be staying with his dear uncle, Brandon Hayes. I would like to be sure before we decide what to do next.”

“Maybe we can deal with that thorn-in-the-flesh, Hayes, once and for all as well.”

“Indeed!”

Placated for the moment, Simon Narsch sat down behind his desk, motioning for his son to leave. Arnold struggled to his feet and lumbered out of his father's office. When the heavy oak door closed, Simon slid open a desk drawer beside him and removed an intricately inlaid wooden box. Placing the box on the desk in front of him, Simon ran his hand briefly over its ornate surface. Composed entirely of apple, cherry, and other fruit woods, a series of occultic symbols and runic letters decorated its exterior.

Depressing a hidden catch, he carefully slide open the top and withdrew a bright red silk bag and a round copper stand. Reaching into the bag he took out a large dark blue sapphire and laid it reverently in the copper stand. Reaching around to the wall behind him, Simon pressed several buttons, which closed the heavy wool drapes and dimmed the lights. Another button and a solitary spotlight stabbed down from above spearing the crystal with a narrow beam of light.

The sapphire glowed in the intense beam. Blinking several times, Simon's old eyes focused on the gem as an incredibly beautiful five-pointed star began to burn deep within the stone. He placed his hands so that the thumb and index fingers of his right and left hands formed a triangle around the base of the crystal's copper stand. Slowly he bowed his head and began chanting quietly...

Meanwhile, back at Southwest General, the Brown's were waiting anxiously in the ER waiting room. Brandon stood just outside using his cell phone. He was calling Pastor Williams' family and several key members of the Wildwood Baptist Church to let them know what had happened. Ben Brown came running out as he was hanging up.

“Uncle Brandon,” he called slightly out of breath, “Dad sent me to get you. The doctor is on his way to talk with us and wants you to be there.” Two sets of eyes watched intently as Brandon turned off his cell phone and headed back into the hospital with his great nephew, pausing briefly to let a police officer enter ahead of them.

“I’d sure like to know what's goin' on in there.” muttered the driver.

“I thought you said that you knew what was going to happen,” replied his partner peevishly.

“You know what I mean! I just hate sittin' around like this.”

“You know our orders...”

“Yeah, sit and wait.”

Paul and Karen were on their feet talking to a doctor as Brandon and Ben walked into the waiting room. Alexandria was sitting nearby, perched nervously on the edge of her chair. Ben went over to sit with her as his uncle joined his parents and the doctor.

The doctor, a young Asian man who looked to be in his early thirties spoke first. “Mr. Brandon?” he began with a slight Chinese accent, “I am Doctor Pol. Li Pol. I understand that you are the one who brought Mr. Williams in.”

“Well, I was the driver...”

“But you are the one who came first into the ER to request assistance, yes?” asked Dr. Pol.

“Uh, that's right” answered Hayes.

“Please,” continued Dr. Pol, gesturing to a small room nearby, “Would you and Mr. and Mrs. Brown accompany me. It would be better if we talk in private.”

Karen glanced at her husband. He knew the look, and he knew what the room was used for. It didn't bode well. Karen turned away and called quickly to Ben and Alexandria. She instructed them to behave themselves and said they would be out in just a few minutes.

She followed the others into the room. As she started to close the door behind her a hand reached out and stopped the door suddenly, startling her. She looked around quickly and was surprised to see a police officer behind her.

Dr. Pol held up his hand in protest, “A moment alone please, officer.”

The officer obliged and stepped quietly back out into the waiting area while Karen closed the door.

“I am very sorry,” began Dr. Pol, “We did all we could. Unfortunately, Mr. Williams was unresponsive by the time you brought him in. We tried everything we could but were unable to resuscitate him. I am truly sorry.”

Paul wrapped his arms around his wife who began to cry quietly, blinking back tears of his own. Brandon sat down heavily. “What was the cause of death?” he asked somberly.

“Unfortunately, the new privacy laws prevent me from discussing the cause of death with you. Mr. Williams did not—was unable—to fill out a privacy release form when he came in, authorizing me, or anyone at this hospital, to release personal information concerning his case. I can only discuss his case with his next of kin. All I can legally tell you is that he has died.”

Dr. Pol lowered his voice and leaned forward, “It is a stupid law, but I will tell you this. Please do not repeat it outside of this room. Mrs. Brown, from what I observed, I believe you are correct. It appears that something was introduced into Mr. Williams' shoulder, which caused a detrimental neurological effect. What, I do not know. Neurology is not my specialty. I do know, however, that it did not act like a typical poison and was too fast acting for a typical infectious pathogen.”

“Hence the police officer outside,” said Brandon, “You had to report it to the local police to be investigated.”

Dr. Pol nodded, “Yes, I hope you understand. Again, I am very, very sorry. Now, I must let the officer in so he can take your statements. Someone from the hospital will be along shortly to ask about next of kin contacts for Mr. Williams. Please, if there is anything further I



can do for you, you can contact me through the hospital later.”

Dr. Pol opened the door and stepped out into the waiting area, holding the door for the police officer to enter the room. Paul Brown called Ben and Alex in through the open door as well. Li Pol smiled sadly at the Brown's children as they passed by. “This part never gets any easier,” he thought to himself.

About 45 minutes later, the officer left with a stack of statements and a hospital representative stepped into the room with some more papers. “Hello. My name is Ms. Hamblyn. Please accept my condolences,” she said, “Just a few more forms. I need to find out who the next of kin is and how to get in touch with whomever will be in handling Mr. Williams affairs.”

“Most of his family lives out of town,” answered Brandon Hayes, “All but his daughter, Janet. She lives in Wildwood. I think his oldest son, John, Jr., is the executor though. He lives in Colorado. His attorney, Chuck Krankovich, can tell you for sure. I believe he has a copy of Pastor Williams' will on file in his office. He can probably fax you whatever information you need and make any necessary arrangements. I—I've got his number right here.”

Brandon wrote down Chuck Krankovich's name and number and filled out a few of the forms to the best of his ability. When he finished Mrs. Hamblyn, thanked him for his help and said that the hospital would contact Mr. Krankovich and the next of kin.

Brandon and the Brown's gathered their things together and slowly walked out of the hospital. Heavy dark clouds had moved in, threatening rain. Wearily they climbed inside the van. Brandon put his key in the ignition and started the motor but did not put the van in gear. The clock on the dash glowed 9:16 AM. Pastor Williams was gone.

“We should call people,” began Brandon.

“Yes, we should,” agreed Paul, “But we need to call Someone else first.” With that, Paul bowed his head silently. The others in the van followed his example. Paul began to pray quietly as the tears began to flow. “Oh, Lord,” he began, “You have said in Your Word, 'Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints'...”

“Well, that's that! The old guy must be dead for sure,” said the driver of the Jaguar, as he watched the Browns and Brandon get into their van. Suddenly he nudged his partner in the ribs, “Hey!, what'er they doin' now?”

“Praying, I suppose, you imbecile,” replied the thin man. “You know how these 'Born-again' types are. Most of them are still locked in that unenlightened, backward Judeo-Christian spiritual concept of an all-knowing, all-powerful god who exists outside and apart from the universe but never seems to do anything for them. Still, it often gives them great comfort to pretend to talk with their god at times like this. I often wonder—”

The chirping of the thin man's cell phone cut him off. “Yes,” he answered, “I see...yes...understood.”

He clicked his phone shut and turned to his partner, “They have confirmed that the man who died is the Reverend John Williams. He is, or rather was, the pastor of the Wildwood Baptist Church. We are to follow the van discreetly and determine where Paul Brown will be staying. Having done so we are to return and await a decision for when and where the next attempt on Mr. Brown will be made.”

Inside the van, Paul Brown had finished praying. Karen had sat in the back with Alexandria who asked if she could pray too so they prayed together. When they finished Ben asked to pray as well. Brandon closed their impromptu prayer meeting a few minutes later and then,

after making sure that everyone was seated and buckled in, he put the van in gear and pulled out of the parking space, heading for the exit.

The driver of the dark gray Jaguar started his car up at the same time and pulled out smoothly a few car lengths behind them. He carefully maintained his distance as the red van ahead of him turned right onto Bagley road and headed for the highway. The van's right turn signal began flashing as it approached the entrance ramp for I-71 south but it abruptly turned off into a fast food place just before the highway. Cursing, the driver of the Jaguar was forced to drive by rather than risk following them into the restaurant. He stepped on the gas and accelerated by. "Have to go around," he said, "Keep an' eye on 'em."

The Jaguar headed under the highway and made a U-turn at the next intersection. He circled around while the van made its way through the drive-through. Doubling back he pulled into a gas station and waited.

"That's interesting," remarked Brandon Hayes, as they waited in line at the drive-through.

"What's that?" asked Paul.

"That car," said his uncle pointing down the road at a dark gray Jaguar pulling into a gas station down the street. "That car just passed us as we pulled in here. Just a few moments later it came back down on the other side of the road, turned around, and pulled into that gas station."

"Maybe they need gas?"

"Why did they park away from the pumps, then? Besides, it looks awfully familiar. I think I saw it at the airport. Looks just like the Jag that almost hit me when I went back out to the van while Pastor Williams was waiting for you inside."

"Now that you mention it, it does look a bit familiar to me as well. Looks sort of like a car that pulled abruptly into the hospital behind us. The driver must have been in a hurry because he narrowly missed a truck. I only got a glimpse of it then, though. I was somewhat pre-occupied at the time."

Ben spoke up from behind, "I saw that car at the hospital too, Dad! It was parked there when we left. There were two men sitting in it and it pulled out behind us as we left."

"If I were of a suspicious nature," observed Brandon, "I would say it almost looks like they were following us."

"Oh, Uncle Brandon," objected Karen, "Why would someone be following us! I think you're just a little jumpy after what's happened. Pastor Williams' death was so sudden and unexpected that I think we are all a little on edge. Let's just get some food and head back to Wildwood where we can all get some rest and decide what to do next."

Brandon Hayes pulled the van up to the menu board. Alexandria watched wide-eyed from the back seat as they placed their orders. The Browns had not gone through a drive-through in Hawaii and she was too young to remember them from the last time she had been in the States. There were no drive-throughs in Tuna and fast food was virtually nonexistent.

A light sprinkle began as they pulled up to pay at the first window. By the time they collected their food and headed for the exit the rain picked up in intensity as Brandon flipped on the lights and the wipers. He paused for a moment while Paul asked Ben to give thanks for their food. While the others began to eat he took a sip of his coffee before pulling out onto the road and turning onto the entrance to the highway. Out of the corner of his eye he noted the gray Jaguar pulling out as well.

The old van accelerated smoothly up the ramp and merged with the traffic. The

southbound traffic wasn't much lighter than the northbound, though the morning rush was nearly over. They reminisced about Pastor Williams and shed a few more tears as they headed down the road. Ben, in the back seat, became engrossed in the passing scenery as his sister nodded off with her head on her mother's lap. He eventually fell asleep as well. The others gradually lapsed into silence, grieving silently. Brandon watched carefully in his rear view mirror and noticed that the mysterious gray car had followed them onto the highway and was maintaining a discreet distance.

Paul borrowed Brandon's cell phone and called his old friend Kevin Farnham. Paul and Kevin had practically grown up together and had been friends since kindergarten. Both had been saved in 1971 during vacation Bible school at Wildwood Baptist Church under Pastor Williams' ministry. They had graduated together from Wildwood High School in 1980. Kevin had gone into his father's contracting business while Paul had gone off to Ohio State University. Kevin had been very active at church until his wife, Rebecca, had lost a child that they were expecting about six years earlier.

"Kevin," said Paul into the phone, "Hi, how are you and Becca and the kids? ... Oh, we're fine. It was a long flight, good, but long. Karen sends her love... Yes we're headed to Uncle Brandon's house now. Listen, I wanted to tell you. I didn't know if you would have heard by now but something happened to Pastor Williams... Well, we don't know exactly. He got poked with an umbrella at the airport and there must have been something on it. By the time we could get him to Southwest he was completely non-responsive. Karen couldn't believe how fast it affected him... Yes, it was all very sudden. A few minutes later and he was gone. Just that fast... Yeah, Uncle Brandon called Bill and Janet Bartlett earlier. He also got a hold of Chuck Krankovich as well. Bro. Krankovich was going to call church members. Janet was going to call her brother John, Jr., out in Colorado as well as her sister Julie in Maryland. ... Yeah, I'm sure that they will be coming in to help make their dad's funeral arrangements. ... No, I'm not sure about the others. George and his family might be able to make it from England but I doubt Jackie and her family can get back from Samoa in time. It would take them nearly three days; even assuming there is a flight going out today or tomorrow. They're almost as far away as we were in Tunoa."

They chatted for several minutes more before Paul clicked off. He folded the phone shut and handed it back to his uncle. They continued on for a few minutes more in silence. Paul's uncle broke the silence quietly. "Paul," he began, "Tell me again what happened at the airport."

Paul paused for a moment, so much had happened that it seemed days ago. Doing his best he recounted the events inside the airport while his uncle listened closely.

"What did the guy with umbrella look like again?" Brandon asked.

"He was small, thin. He said he had a bad knee that gave out on him. That's why he stumbled. But now that I think about it, Karen's right, he didn't limp on his way out. I didn't pay much attention to it at the time because I was more concerned with Pastor Williams and the bags. Why do you ask?"

"Well," said Brandon, "I have been trying to figure out what's bothering me. Shortly before you came out of the terminal a small thin man carrying an umbrella came hurrying out and jumped into a dark gray Jaguar parked ahead of me. He seemed upset and was griping to the driver about missing someone at the airport. I remember the car because it almost hit me when they pulled in. That and the fact that it seems to have been following us ever since we left the hospital."

“You mean that car that you pointed out when we stopped for breakfast?”

“Uh-huh. If you look behind us you'll see it about five cars back. I've sped up and slowed down several times and it always maintains about the same distance.”

“Why would somebody be following us?” interrupted Karen from the back, “Maybe it's just a coincidence.”

“There's an easy way to find out. We're coming up on our exit. Let's see what they do.”

Brandon put his turn signal on and drifted to the right as he approached the exit ramp. The rain was falling a little harder now as he slowed the van to a stop at the bottom of the ramp. “Here they come,” he said.

The traffic light at the bottom of the ramp changed to green and Brandon made a left on Center Road. Paul and Karen both looked over their shoulders and, sure enough, the suspicious car followed behind. “What now?” asked Karen, starting to feel concerned for the first time.

“Let me try something,” said Brandon, “I'll head along Center and then turn off on Ridge Road. If they are still following us I'll head down Bellus to Hinckley Lake. If need be I'll take a spin around the lake and we'll see just how determined they are.”

They headed down the road with Brandon keeping a close eye on the car behind them. He was trained in evasive driving maneuvers and was confident that they would have no trouble getting away if necessary. The Jaguar maintained its distance as they approached the light at the center of Hinckley and followed them south on Ridge Road. They breathed a collective sigh of relief, however, when the car did not follow them as they turned onto Bellus Road.

“See, you guys were just imagining things!” said Karen. Paul and Brandon looked at each other. They didn't share her confidence. Yet, as they headed down the road the car did not reappear and they began to think that maybe she was right after all.

Alex stirred next to her mother. “Where are we?” she asked.

“On our way to Uncle Brandon's house,” answered her mother.

Ben began to stir in the back seat as well. He yawned and sat up stretching. He looked around. “Dad,” he said as they headed down a hill and slowed for a stop sign, “There's that same car I saw at the hospital.”

Brandon glanced up at the rear view mirror. “Ben's right,” he said, “They must have passed Bellus, then doubled back thinking it would throw us off if we were getting suspicious. Well, I've got a few tricks of my own.”

He accelerated through the intersection, heading towards the lake. Just before the lake he turned right on West Drive and headed up the hill, careful not to exceed the speed limit yet not using his turn signal. A few hardy walkers and joggers were milling around in the picnic area getting ready for a brisk jaunt around the lake. Two dedicated fishermen headed toward a favorite spot near the top of the dam as the van reached the crest of the hill. Hayes slowed and put his turn signal on as if he were going to pull over in the parking area where the two fishermen had parked their truck and asked Paul to watch for the Jaguar.

“There it is!” said Paul, “They are turning slowly onto the road now.”

“Good! Now, tell me when you can't see them.”

Brandon angled the van into the parking area taking advantage of the crest of the hill and the curve in the road to temporarily hide them from the pursuing car.

“Can't see them!”

Brandon gunned the van suddenly and pulled back out onto the road. “Keep watching!” he called out.

“Still don't see them,” said Paul as he braced himself in his seat. Karen and the kids

were hanging on tight as well, wide-eyed. The van accelerated around several curves and through several dips and rises as Brandon concentrated on the road ahead through the steady swish-swish of the wiper blades.

“What's your idea?” asked Karen worriedly.

“Well,” answered Brandon, “I'm counting on them coming up the hill very slowly, waiting to see if we had indeed pulled over and if we were getting out of the van. At least that's what I would do if I were them. Anyway, when they get up to the parking area and find out we're not there I expect that they'll think we're on to them and will speed up to try and catch up with us. Either that or they'll break off and we may never know who they are or why they are following us. I'm betting that they'll follow us.”

“What then?” asked Paul.

“There is a spot coming up on the left where I can pull over and back the van up into the bushes. It's not a parking area but I've parked there before.”

“What if somebody is already parked there?” interrupted Karen.

“I'm trusting the Lord to have it reserved for us,” smiled Brandon, looking up at Karen briefly in the mirror. “Hang on, we're almost there!”

The van came around a sharp curve at the top of a small hill and Brandon pulled abruptly off the road and then hurriedly reversed the van behind some bushes and small trees. The new growth hid the van completely from anyone who may have been following them and the curve in the road nearly obscured the view of any oncoming traffic as well. They waited anxiously for a few moments when suddenly the dark gray Jaguar raced by.

Brandon paused until the car had gone around the bend and was out of sight. “Tally-ho!” he shouted as he pulled back out onto the road. “Let's see how they like being followed!”

“You dolt! You lost them!” bellowed the thin man to his partner.

“Hey! I thought they was gonna pull over back there! I didn't wanna spook 'em. I already thought we spooked 'em once earlier. They can't be very far ahead though, not unless they pulled off into that boathouse area back there. We haven't seen 'em in any of the other picnic areas that we've passed. Can't see 'em stopping off for a picnic in this weather. 'Sides, you're the one that stuck the wrong guy with the salamander juice.”

“Never mind about that! You just concentrate on finding that van—what?!”

The car was heading rapidly down the road when the red van suddenly appeared, as if out of nowhere, and roared up behind them. The driver looked in his mirror, shocked that he had so badly misjudged his quarry. Momentarily distracted he did not see two deer that bounded out of the woods just in front of him.

“Watch out!” yelled the thin man, grabbing for the wheel.

They skidded sideways, missing the deer by mere inches. The driver of the Jaguar fought to regain control when he hit a muddy patch on the road and the car went into a tight spin. Careening out of control the car left the road, bouncing through the parking area at a popular scenic overlook near the southern end of Hinckley Lake.

“Oh no!” cried Karen as the Jaguar smashed through the wooden railing and plunged over the steep hillside.

Brandon pulled the van quickly into the parking lot. “I didn't mean for that to happen!” he said, “I only wanted to startle them. Please, God, let them be all right!”

Paul jumped out of the van as it skidded to a stop. Karen was already opening the side

door as he reached for the latch. “Uncle Brandon! Call 911! I'll take Karen down and see what we can do! Ben, throw me that first-aid kit from under your seat!”

Ben grabbed the kit and tossed it to his dad. Paul caught it and ran with Karen to the side of the hill. The rain was thankfully letting up a little as they carefully made their way, half sliding, down to the overturned car nearly 100 feet below. They were soaked and covered with mud by the time they reached the car. It was strangely silent as they paused at the bottom of the hill.

“Here's the driver!” Paul called out to Karen.

She came around the car and took a look at him. He was half out of the car but the lower part of his body was pinned under the wreckage. His head was at an unnatural angle. Karen shook her head but felt for a pulse anyway. “Looks like he died instantly. Do you see the other guy anywhere?”

“No, he must have been thrown clear on the way down. He could be anywhere in this brush. We'll have to look for him.”

They separated and began searching in a circular pattern out from the car. Paul went to the right and Karen went to the left. Karen was about 20 feet up the hill from the car when she heard someone moaning. “Paul! Over here!” she hollered, “He's alive!”

Paul made his way as fast as he could over to where Karen had found the other man, barely conscious, wedged up against the base of a small cottonwood tree. Brandon was making his way down the hill by this time as well. Breathing heavily Paul asked, “How is he?”

“He's in bad shape. He's bleeding internally. Sounds like his lungs are filling with blood. Look at this,” she said pointing to a stick protruding from his side, “He must of hit a branch or one of those stubs when he was thrown out of the car and it broke off in him.” She looked at Paul seriously, “I don't think he's going to make it.”

Paul leaned over for a closer look when the man's eye's fluttered open. “You!” rasped the dying man, “You were supposed to die today—not me. This... This is most distressing...”

“Don't talk,” said Paul as Karen tried to do the best she could for the man, “We'll get you out of here. Help's on the way.”

“No,” protested the man, “I am not going to survive. I am dying. I welcome death. It will be a great release. We shall contend again in another life. Perhaps the next time you will not be so fortunate.”

“Next time?” Paul shook his head. “I'm sorry, there will be no next time. According to the Bible, 'it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment—’”

“Don't give me that superstitious drivel!” spat the man angrily, “The Bible is nothing but myth! You are a fool to believe such fairy tales!”

“No,” objected Paul, “The Bible is the Word of God. It is Truth; God's divinely inspired revelation to man. It tells us who we are, where we came from, and where we are going.”

“I know who I am. And I know where I came from, and where I am going! I am an enlightened human being, unlike you. I came from Mother Earth through a multitude of lifetimes and I will eventually in a few more cycles of reincarnation achieve a perfect state of union with the universe.”

“I'm afraid your wrong, my friend. You came from the creative hand of God, Creator of heaven and earth. He gave you life. He wants to give you eternal life. The Bible tells us that we are 'fearfully and wonderfully made'. But it also warns us that we have 'all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God—’”

“Bah! Don't talk to me about sin! It is you and your kind who have sinned, if there is such a thing! You, with your backward concepts of a false creator god who arbitrarily grants a heavenly paradise to those who placate him and capriciously condemns those willing to think for themselves to a burning hell. I find the whole concept repugnant and backward. I want no part of some old man sitting up on a cloud just waiting to cast a lightning bolt at someone when they don't kowtow to him sufficiently. Besides, I am not your friend. You represent those responsible for raping and pillaging this planet. I have sacrificed my life to nurture and protect my Mother. You are the one who will suffer when you die, not me.”

The man paused to cough. Red foam flecked at his lips.

“Listen,” said Paul earnestly, “You know that's not true. The Bible says in John 3:16, 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' The world was created perfect and man, Adam, was created perfect.

“Unfortunately, sin entered into the world. Romans 5:12 tells us that, 'Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned'. Now we are warned that '...the wages of sin is death', in Romans 6:23, 'but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

“God sent His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is literally 'God...manifest in the flesh', as Paul told Timothy, to pay for our sin by shedding His precious blood when He died in our place on the cross.”

“Jesus was not 'God.' He was just a man with great spiritual insight. An avatar. He died and went back to his Mother, just as I am about to do. If you possessed any spiritual discernment you would recognize that he was reincarnated as other great spiritual leaders such as the Buddha, Mohammed, and possibly the Dali Lama...” His voice grew weaker and trailed off as his eyes began to glaze over.

“Please,” begged Paul, “You need to trust Christ as your Savior before its too late! You know that you're dying. Right now you can confess Lord Jesus Christ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead and be saved. It's with your heart that you believe unto righteousness; and it's with your mouth that confession is made unto salvation. Romans 10:13 says, 'For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' Trust Christ as your Savior now. 'Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation...’”

“Salvation! That is nothing more than a pipe dream! You have nothing. I... I... Wha— what's happening? No! No! It's not supposed to be this way! That can't be real... Argh! Help! The fire... burning... No, nooo!” He grimaced. His body went taunt and then fell back limp.

Karen felt quickly for a pulse but there was none. He was gone. Gone into a Christ-less eternity. Brandon, who had arrived while Paul was talking with the man, shook his head slowly back and forth. “I'm so sorry,” he apologized to the dead man, “I didn't mean for this to happen.”

Paul stood up and wrapped his arms around his uncle. Sirens blared in the distance, coming closer every second. The rain had subsided but his shoulder was still getting wet from his uncle's tears.

## Chapter 3

It was nearly 2:00 PM by the time Brandon and the Brown's made their way wearily into Brandon's house near the center of Wildwood. It stood at the southwestern end of a row of three buildings. The buildings all stood along the same side of Front Street, a short road running diagonally between Center and Seven Hill Roads. Across the street lay Diagonal Park, a small triangle of green with a gazebo in the center, formed by the three roads. Ben Brown gamely volunteered to carry the luggage into the house while his mom and dad cleaned up. Drafting his sister, Alexandria, into service he made sure that his parent's bags were carried up to his dad's old bedroom first.

Brandon Haye's house was actually a restored and updated stagestop hotel, originally built in the mid-1800. At various times it had also served as a barbershop, a doctor's clinic, a general store, and the town's first post office. The building had a large front porch under a second floor balcony stretching across its entire front. The double front doors opened into a large room, which took up nearly half of the entire first floor. It had once been the front lobby. A broad chestnut paneled counter, dating back to the general store and post office days, stood toward the back of the room to the left of a wide balustrade staircase ascending gracefully to the second floor. Behind it was a modest sized room, which served as Brandon's office. The kitchen, pantry, and dining room were down a short hallway and, along with a small bathroom and an enclosed back porch, made up the rest of the first floor. Entry to the basement was off the back porch. The second floor had a narrow room along the front, which opened out onto the balcony. A central hallway provided entry to the six bedrooms and two baths upstairs. A smaller stairway at the end of the hall dropped down near the door to the back porch and provided access to the attic as well.

Brandon made for the kitchen where he put a kettle of water on to boil. While it began to heat he headed for the front room and turned up the thermostat to take the chill off the house as Ben brought in the last of the bags. His sister was laying on the floor trying to entice Brandon's calico cat, Sicillia, out from under the sofa. Brandon helped Ben take the remainder of the bags upstairs. He pointed out Ben's room, the same one that he had stayed in about two and a half years ago, and then took Alexandria's things into the room across the hall.

Heading back downstairs he noticed his little niece had fallen asleep on the floor by the couch. Reaching down he scooped her up and carried her gently up the steps to her room and laid her down on the bed. He opened a quilt and put it over her then headed out the door and down the hall. Knocking on Paul and Karen's door he called out, "I've got a pot of water on. Anybody want some tea?"

Back downstairs in the kitchen he turned the hot water on and selected a brown china teapot from a corner cupboard. It was larger than the one he usually used. When the tap water warmed up a bit he rinsed out the pot and then filled with hot tap water before setting it on a folded tea towel. He then removed an ornate, multi-color porcelain jar full of loose tea and filled a tea ball with it while he waited for the kettle on the stove to boil.

When the water came to a boil he emptied the now tepid tap water in the teapot and re-filled it with the steaming water from the kettle before dropping the tea ball in. He placed the lid on the pot and then set it back on the towel. Taking another, slightly larger towel, he wrapped it around the teapot and turned to the phone while Sicillia wound about his feet meowing plaintively.



“Krankovich and Krankovich, Attorneys at Law. How may I help you?” answered Mrs. Frieda Krankovich. The firm was a family affair. “Oh, Brother Hayes. I am so sorry to hear about Pastor Williams. Such a tragedy... Yes, Chuck got the papers off to the hospital this morning and has also been in touch with his son, John, Jr., he's the executor you know... Yes, that's right... He and Hazel will be coming in tomorrow. He's making arrangements now for someone to cover for him at his church on Sunday. Bill and Jackie Bartlett will be picking them up. How are the Brown's doing?”

They chatted for a few more minutes and then Mrs. Krankovich put Brandon through to her husband, Chuck. Chuck Krankovich was seated at his desk studying Pastor Williams' will and the Wildwood Baptist Church constitution when his wife put Brandon through.

“Hello, Brandon,” said Chuck as he picked up the phone, “How are you and the Brown's doing...? Yes, yes, quite a shock to us all, too. John, Jr., and Jackie were devastated to hear about their father's sudden death. They are calling the rest of the family and most of them will be coming in over the weekend. My son, Curtis, and Willie Sykes have been contacting the church for me. I'm glad you called, I've been going over Pastor Williams' will and remembered something curious. A few weeks earlier Pastor Williams entrusted me with a key to a safety deposit box. He asked me to make arrangements so that in the event of his death the key and the box's contents would go directly to next pastor of the Wildwood Baptist Church, even if he was only an interim pastor... Yes, it is unlike him. Would you mind if Frieda and I come over this evening? Yeah... Don't worry, Frieda says we'll bring dinner. If you get a chance pull out your copy of the church constitution and take a look at it... Thanks... Yes, I'll see you about six then. Bye.”

Brandon hung up the phone and pulled a glass mug bearing a red dragon and the word “Cymru” off the shelf behind him. He poured a little hot water from the kettle on the stove into it to warm the glass. Unwrapping the teapot, he removed the tea ball, set it in the sink, and then poured himself a cup of tea. He sat down tiredly at the kitchen table and stared sadly into his tea while stirring in a spoonful of raw sugar. Sicillia hopped up in his lap. Stroking her absent-mindedly he began to pray. Sipping the hot drink carefully, he prayed for Pastor Williams' family and the church. He also asked God's forgiveness for his foolhardiness resulting in the death of two men that morning, while possibly endangering his nephew and his family. He shook his head. “The LORD knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity,” he reminded himself.

Sicillia purred quietly as he scratched behind her ears, mulling over the day's events. Karen Brown interrupted his thoughts as she came into the kitchen. A quick shower had cleaned the mud off but the strain and sorrow still showed in her eyes. “How are you doing?” she asked.

“Better,” replied Brandon, “I have been sitting here thinking about things and talking to God about what happened. I know He has forgiven me but I still feel responsible for the death of those two men. It's just, I mean, I just wanted to know why they were following us. I can't help feeling that they are tied in somehow with Pastor Williams' death.”

“They are,” said Karen, “I mean it was the one man's umbrella that caused Pastor Williams' shoulder to become infected, though I have never known an infection to move that fast. Almost like there was some sort of toxin or poison involved.”

Karen turned to contemplate the mugs on the shelf behind Brandon. She picked out one with an intricate pattern of blue and green shapes and the word “TUNOA” emblazoned in bold

gold letters on the side. Ben had given it to his uncle the first time they had come back from Tunoa. "Still have your collection of international mugs," she observed. She poured herself a cup of tea and sat down, looking at Brandon's cup. "Cymru? That's Wales, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I picked up while doing a feature on the slate quarries in central Wales." He took a sip of tea and set his cup back down. "The dragon is their national symbol... Kind of fitting, don't you think? That old dragon, the serpent, sure was active today."

"Listen, don't beat yourself up over it, Uncle Brandon. Remember, 'we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.' God is in control. We have to move on. Here let me get you another cup of tea, it'll make you feel better. After you drink it you should go upstairs and get out of those muddy clothes. When you get cleaned up you and Paul can decide what to do next."

Brandon smiled as he handed her his cup. "You're right. Like Paul says, it doesn't do any good to argue with a nurse. Oh, by the way, the Krankoviches are coming over for dinner at six. Frieda's cooking so we don't need to fix anything."

They sat quietly for a few minutes. The phone rang, breaking the silence and causing Sicillia to meow loudly before hopping down to the floor. It was a contact of Brandon's who worked for the Ohio State Patrol. He just wanted to let him know that they had identified the two dead men.

"Hey, you really did us a favor!" the man said, "Those were a couple of bad guys. The FBI boys are real interested in them. In fact, they'll probably be contacting you later. Seems both those guys were on their hit parade. Called them domestic terrorists. Sounds like you got yourself the makings of a good story there. I'll fax their rap sheets and the accident report your way as soon as I get a chance. You take care, you hear?"

Paul came down about the time Brandon hung up. "I looked in on the kids on the way down," he said, "Ben's reading and Alex is asleep." He went over to the shelf and selected a beige cup with "Cairo" imprinted on it in a flowing, cursive script resembling a series of sand dunes running around its base. He poured himself a cup of tea and then went to refrigerator for some milk. Returning to the table he sat down and stirred in a couple spoonfuls of sugar before taking a sip. "Mmmm... You always could make a great cup of tea. Just as good as any I ever had in England. What kind is it?"

"Its a special blend from a friend of mine in Sri Lanka." answered his uncle. "He operates a tea plantation on Mt. Pidurutalagala, the tallest mountain on the island. I was covering the Tamil uprising in 1983 when I met a Sinhalese Christian, a Mr. Baud Degua. Stayed with him and his family for a couple of weeks. He sends me a kilo or two once or twice a year and I return the favor by sending him a couple pints of maple syrup each year. I showed his wife how to make buckwheat pancakes - they loved them."

"Isn't that who the church sent those Sinhalese and Tamil Bibles and tracts to a few years ago?" asked Karen.

"Oh, yeah," said Paul, "The church in Tunoa even helped out with a special offering. It was one of the first missions projects that we managed to get the whole church behind. Didn't he visit Wildwood once during a missions conference shortly afterward?"

"Yes, he did," replied Brandon, finishing his tea and setting down his cup. "In fact, he stayed right in this house while he was here. I believe it was the 1999 missions conference, about a year before you came back from Tunoa for your first furlough."

"Well, enough of this chit-chat," interrupted Karen, noticing his empty cup. She pointed

her finger at Brandon and continued, "You need to get upstairs and change those clothes!"

Brandon headed off upstairs, trailed by Sicillia, while Paul and Karen finished their tea. Karen was just telling her husband about dinner when the fax machine in Brandon's office came to life and began churning out several pages. "Check that, would you, Paul?" called Brandon from the top of the stairs, "It may be those papers from the State Patrol. If so, I'll look at them when I come back down."

Paul headed into his uncle's office. He ducked involuntarily as he entered. Oak bookshelves and cupboards lined the wall, extending over the doorway. It was almost like entering through a short tunnel. The fax machine sat on a counter that ran across the back of the room next to an ornate antique globe. Even as a kid he had always found his uncle's office a fascinating place. Pictures and souvenirs from around the world, along with a number of awards and citations, were scattered throughout the room giving it an eclectic museum-like appearance.

Three pages had already emerged from the fax machine and a fourth was printing when Paul got to it. He picked up the finished pages and sat down at the long oak desk, flanked by two low filing cabinets in the center of the room. He glanced briefly at the first page, a generic cover sheet, before turning his attention to the next two. They were the first of several comprising the accident report. He was surprised to learn that the car was registered to Narsch Industries. Interestingly enough, the car had been reported as stolen this morning at 9:15, close to the time that Pastor Williams had died.

Karen came into Brandon's office as her husband finished looking over the accident report. He slid the papers across the desk to her and turned to get several more pages out of the fax machine as the final page churned out.

He studied the papers for a few moments. "Interesting," Paul said, showing a picture to his wife. "Here's our friend from the airport." He shuffled through the pages. "And, here is the driver."

The driver's name was Donald Chattham. Originally from Portland, Oregon, Chattahm had been dishonorably discharged from the Marines about fifteen years ago due to involvement with several activist animal rights and extremist environmental groups. He had been involved in several scrapes with the law since then, mostly drug and alcohol violations as well as several counts of criminal trespass and property damage. Although an arson conviction landed him in the Oregon penitentiary with a 30-year sentence, he got out eighteen months later due to a technicality. Upon his release he disappeared for a year or so and was suspected by the FBI to have joined up with the Gaia Liberation Front (GLF), a little known domestic eco-terror group. He was strongly suspected of being involved in a recent string of refinery bombings in Texas and Louisiana.

The thin man, Carlton Chakal, was also a suspected member of GLF. Not as much was known about him though Interpol had named him a "person of interest" in the assassinations of several prominent industrialists in Belgium and Luxembourg. The FBI had been looking for him for similar reasons. They had reports that he had slipped into the country recently, probably through Canada, and suspected that he was somewhere in the Midwest. The accident report was the first hard lead they had gotten on him in over six months.

What little was known of Chakal showed him to be a shadowy figure with connections to a variety of leftist fringe groups. He was known to have contact with several Soviet-bloc intelligence services in the 1970's and '80's. He had funneled money for the KGB through a used bookstore in London to a variety of peace and disarmament groups in England and Europe in

the 1980's. His longest lasting operation had apparently been the clandestine funding of a women's peace group in the British midlands. The money had enabled the women to camp outside of a United States Air Force base to obstruct training exercises for several years after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher allowed the Americans to base mobile launched cruise missiles there.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990's, Chakal relocated to Belgium where he became involved with several leftist environmental groups. He dropped out of sight for a few years but a recent string of assassinations in Europe and America had brought him to both the FBI and Interpol's attention once more.

Paul whistled softly, "These guys were sure a couple of outstanding citizen's!"

"They sound like a couple of hitmen, to me," frowned Karen after she had a chance to look over the rap sheets. "Why were they after you?"

"I dunno," answered Paul, "But I have a hunch it has something to do with what Pastor Williams was trying to tell us."

"Well, whatever it is, its going to have to wait until after supper. The Krankovich's will be over in about an hour. I need to go get Alex and Ben up and moving. I'll send them down to help get the table ready."

Karen headed upstairs while Paul headed back into the front room. He set the papers down on the counter as he left the office and sat down on the couch. Picking up the remote control he tuned on the television set in the corner. The evening news was just coming on. The broadcast led off with a story about another suicide bombing in Israel, followed by an update on the situation in Iraq.

Paul found his eyes growing heavy as the newscast turned to an item concerning local peace protests in Cleveland. Several young people screamed at passerby's as they held up signs decrying the United States involvement in Iraq and branding President Bush a terrorist. One of the protesters caught Paul's eye, causing him to sit up and take a closer look. It was a young man with dreadlocks and a variety of facial piercings. He held up a sign proclaiming "REVOLUTION NOW!" in angry, bold red letters. His black T-shirt bore a blood red silhouette of a man with an upraised fist. Underneath, "Revolutionary Communist Party of Amerika" was spelled out in the same blood red color.

"As much as things change, the more they remain the same," thought Paul, remembering Carlton Chakal's rap sheet, as the station cut to a commercial.

Brandon Hayes came back downstairs as the news was coming back on. "This just in to the Action News Center," announced the newscaster, "A tragic accident in Hinckley claimed the lives of two men earlier this morning. Identities of the men are being withheld at this time. A spokesman for the Medina County Sheriff's office said that the two were driving a 2002 gray Jaguar that had recently been stolen from Narsch Industries in nearby Wildwood. Narsch Industries had no comment when asked about the car. Cause of the accident is unknown at this time. It is not known whether alcohol or drugs were involved but we have confirmed that the FBI is investigating. No other cars were involved but several people stopped to render aid immediately following the accident."

"What a day!" said Paul to his uncle. He stood up and retrieved the papers that he had left on the counter and handed them to Brandon. "Here's the fax from your buddy at the Sheriff's office. Seems like they managed to keep our names out of it, so far as the news is con-

cerned.”

“Seems that way,” said Brandon, “Hey, I was thinking about something while upstairs. Who's going to preach on Sunday? John Junior is coming in tomorrow but I'd hate to impose on him. He'll have enough going on with making arrangements for his father's funeral. Do you feel up to it?”

“Yeah, I can do it. Instant in season and out of season, the Bible says. Hey, maybe Kevin and Rebecca will come if they know I'm preaching. Let me have the phone and I'll give them a call.”

Brandon handed the phone to his nephew. He turned off the TV and headed for his office while Paul called the Farnham's. Sitting down at his desk he reviewed the accident reports and rap sheets, shaking his head. Finishing the papers he sat silently for a few minutes. He made a mental note to call a contact at the FBI on Monday if he had not heard from them by then. Setting the papers aside, he then reached into the drawer of the filing cabinet to his right, withdrew a copy of the church constitution and opened it up.

Meanwhile, several miles away, Simon Narsch was raging at his son, Arnold. “What do you mean, 'they had an accident'? How can they have had an 'accident'?! Someone or something is interfering with our plans. There is no way that I am going to be denied this time! That church property is vital and Paul Brown is the only obstacle in my way. His father, Andrew, may have prevented my last attempt but it cost him his life, as well as the lives of his wife and sister. The son will not be so lucky!”

Arnold stared pensively out the floor to ceiling windows. The darkening clouds echoed his dark mood. “I am as frustrated as you are, Father,” he began, “But we must be careful and take our time. The FBI is already delving into Chattham and Chakal and their connections with the Gaia Liberation Front. Fortunately Mr. Pruzak was able to file a stolen vehicle report this morning when we learned that Williams died. We cannot be connected to them or the GLF so we are safe there. The closest connection that they can make between us is our affiliation with the Gaia Society, which is a perfectly legitimate pro-environmental organization. The Society boasts many well-known political, business, and entertainment figures among its members. We cannot be held responsible for those members that want to take more direct action and stray into involvement with the GLF, even if we do finance them. Not that anybody can prove it.”

“I still don't like it,” fumed his father, “You know we don't have possession of each of the other ten sites. Consequently that church property is essential to our plans. The shamballah opening, as you well know, is located behind the church. When Mars reaches it's closest point to the Earth in August we will have our best chance to establish an antakarana bridge through the shamballah opening since 1943. It will allow us to establish a direct line of contact with the Luciferean Council of the Twelve and tap into the very power and strength of Gaia – the heart and soul of this planet. If we had all eleven properties we could make the antakarana bridge permanent. Unfortunately, recent revelations have made it clear that the younger Brown is an even bigger obstacle to taking over the Wildwood Baptist Church property than his father was.”

“What if we cannot get the church property in time? Any chance that we could sneak onto the church property and open the shamballah point anyway?” asked Arnold.

“Sneak onto the property!” laughed his father derisively, “Ha! And just how would you sneak your incredible bulk around in the woods in the dark? You'd wind up stuck between two trees! Besides, you know the ritual. We need that property!”

Arnold's face darkened even more. "I just thought we should have a back up plan in case we do not acquire ownership of the property in time, Father." he said indignantly.

"Yeah, that's your motto," mocked Simon, "Always be prepared. What a Boy Scout! However, it may be worth planning for, just in case."

Later on that evening, Paul Brown pushed himself back from the table. "That was a delicious meal, Mrs. Krankovich. I haven't had chicken paprikash in years."

Karen began clearing the table and setting out desert plates with Alex and Ben's help while Mrs. Krankovich went into the kitchen for the desert. "Hope everybody likes cherry strudel, she said.

"That's one of my favorites, Mom," said Curtis, who had accompanied his parents over to Brandon's house for dinner.

"They're all your favorites!" laughed his father, Chuck.

After everyone was done eating, the men adjourned into Brandon's office while the rest cleaned up. Paul marveled at how much Curtis looked like his dad. They were both short, stocky men with thin, precisely trimmed mustaches and round, wire-rimmed glasses. They could have passed for brothers except that Chuck Krankovich's face was more lined and his hair, what was left of it was thin and gray where his son's was thick and blond. Additionally, due to a close encounter with a land mine near the end of the Vietnam War, the elder Krankovich walked with a pronounced limp and often used a cane.

Paul and Curtis pulled a couple of folding chairs out of the closet while Chuck sunk into a comfortable chair across from Brandon. Brandon sat down behind his desk and pushed the fax report across to Chuck while the younger men arranged their chairs and sat down.

"Well, well, well," observed Chuck "This is quite a pair you folks got tangled up with." He quickly scanned the report before handing the papers to his son. "Any idea what they were after?"

"It seems they were after Paul here," answered Brandon.

"Yeah," interjected Paul, "The one guy, Chakal, is the guy who hit Pastor Williams with the umbrella at the airport. When he was dying he made some comment about me being the one who was supposed to die today. What do you make of that?"

"I think I'd like to see that umbrella!" said Curtis, looking up from the report.

"What do mean?" asked Paul.

"Well, from what your wife said about how Pastor Williams died," Curtis explained, "I sounds like there was some sort of fast acting neuro-toxin rather than an infectious agent involved. I see here in Chakal's rap sheet that he was involved with the KGB in England in the 1980's—"

"Of course!" interrupted Brandon, "I remember a KGB agent carried out a hit in London in the 1980's with an umbrella. He walked up behind his target on a busy street and injected him with ricin. Had a needle in the umbrella tip. Poor chap died shortly after that."

"But not as fast as Pastor Williams!" said Curtis, "I'd sure like to see the postmortem test results. Do you remember who the doctor was who saw him?"

"It was a Dr. Li Po," answered Brandon, "But I don't think you'll be able to find much out from him. The new privacy laws barely allowed him to let us know that Pastor Williams died, and we brought him in!"

Chuck Krankovich spoke up, "You forget, Brandon. I am Pastor William's attorney, or rather his estate's attorney. I'll contact the hospital tomorrow morning and see what I can find

out. If nothing else, John Jr. and I can pay them a visit next week. In the meantime, we need to consider the future of our little church.”

“Right you are,” agreed Brandon, reaching for his copy of the Wildwood Baptist Church constitution. “And, since all the deacons of the church, meaning Chuck and I, are present, I’d like to call an impromptu deacon’s meeting.”

“Agreed,” said Chuck, “And the first order of business, after we pray, should be, who is going to preach on Sunday?”

“Already taken care of. I figured John Jr. would be too caught up with funeral and family arrangements so I asked Paul earlier, if that’s okay with you.”

“Fine, fine. Let’s pray then.”

All four men bowed their heads as Chuck Krankovich led them in prayer.

“Amen!” said Brandon “Now, on to the second order of business then.

“Right, as much as I hate to say it, we need to form a pulpit committee. We also need to appoint an interim pastor,” said Chuck, “Which is why I asked you to look over the church constitution. Our constitution is very clear about the pulpit committee.

“Article VII, Section 1, Subsection A, Paragraph 3 states, ‘...When the office of the Senior Pastor is vacant the pastors and deacons of this church shall constitute a pulpit committee whose function shall be to search for and investigate suitable candidates for the office of Senior Pastor and to present them to the church for consideration...’

“Obviously that would be Brandon and I, the deacons. It also includes Paul here. Remember, as a missionary and ordained preacher sent out of the church he is, according to Article VIII, Section 6, Paragraph B, an assistant pastor. Consequently, he should be on the pulpit committee as well.”

“Huh,” said Paul, reaching for his uncle’s copy of the constitution, “I never thought about that. Let me see.”

As Paul studied the document closely, Brandon asked Chuck about the interim pastor. “That,” said Chuck, “Is a little more difficult. Article VII, Section 1, Subsection B, Paragraph 1 says that the Associate Pastor ‘...shall serve temporarily in the office of Senior Pastor when that office is vacant until it can be filled.’ Unfortunately, John Jr. was our Associate Pastor until he took the pastorate at Calvary Baptist out in Eagleton, Colorado, last summer.”

“Wouldn’t that mean Paul would become our interim pastor then?” asked Curtis.

“Not necessarily,” answered his father, “Paul is only an assistant pastor. Subsection C deals with assistant pastors but says nothing about any of them becoming interim pastors in the event that we have no associate pastor.”

Brandon thought for a moment. “What about this,” he said, “Our May business meeting is coming up in about a week and a half. Why not announce Sunday morning that we will discuss the issue and recommend making Paul, who is the only ordained pastor in the church, our interim pastor. We could put it up to a vote.”

“Hey!” protested Paul, “Don’t I get a say in all this?”

“Naah,” smiled Curtis, “Dad and Bro. Brandon have it all sorted out. You’ve just been volunteered!”

“Yeah, military style!”

The men talked for a few more minutes, making plans for Sunday’s services and the coming business meeting. Ben interrupted them a few minutes later to let them know that Mrs. Krankovich was ready to go. She and Karen had cleaned up the dishes and the kitchen and had

a good long chat as well. However, it was getting late and she knew that they had a lot to do in the morning.

After the Krankovich's were gone, Paul and Karen headed Ben and Alex up the stairs to get them ready for bed. They prayed with them and then joined Brandon back downstairs in the kitchen. Sicillia had come out of hiding and was impatiently waiting for Brandon to fill her food dish.

"I'd almost forgotten what a good cook Frieda is," began Karen as she poured herself a glass of milk. "We had a good talk while you men were talking shop. She talked with Janet Bartlett on the phone earlier this afternoon for awhile. Janet took it pretty hard, I guess. Seems she had an awful dream a couple nights ago. She was in sitting in the parking lot behind the church when a dark, foreboding presence seemed to almost overpower her. About the same time six men wearing black, hooded robes shuffled by carrying a coffin between them while a bluish haze seeped silently out of the woods like a malignant mist. In spite of her fear, she followed them into the woods and watched as they set the coffin down in a small clearing. The hooded figures left and, unable to restrain her curiosity, she found herself hurrying up to and opening the coffin. Horrified she looked down and saw her father lying there."

Karen paused to take a small plastic bag out of her purse. She selected out several vitamin pills for herself and Paul before putting the bag back into her purse.

Paul and Brandon waited patiently while Karen swallowed her vitamins. Paul held his vitamins in his hand while waiting for her to continue. "And...?" he questioned curiously.

"And, what?" asked Karen.

"And what happened after she saw her father in the coffin?"

"Nothing, that was it. She woke up in a cold sweat. It frightened her bad enough, though, that she had to wake Bill up and have him pray with her before she could get back to sleep."

"Kind of creepy," said Brandon. "However, on that cheery note I think I'm going to head off to bed myself. It's been a long day and I'm beat. You kids can stay up as long as you like. Just remember to turn off the lights. Be sure to close your door tight if you don't want Sicillia sneaking in with you sometime during the night. I'll see you in the morning. Good night."

Paul and Karen said good night to Brandon as he headed for the back door to make sure that it was locked and set the dead bolt. He made a final check of the front door as well before heading up the stairs. Meanwhile, Paul and Karen rinsed out their glasses in the sink and then adjourned to more comfortable chairs in the front room. Despite the hectic day neither of them was all that sleepy. Their internal clocks were still adjusted to Tunoan time.

Paul looked at the clock. "It's nearly 12:30 AM. That means its about 6:30 PM in Tunoa. Pastor Doberno should just be getting to the church for youth night. I should give him a call and let him know what's going on."

"Good idea," agreed Karen, passing the phone to her husband.

Paul took the phone and punched in the number. He waited a few moments for the connection to go through. "It's ringing," he said.

"*Nemu, Ta Emuge Vapue Pabtesta,*" answered a voice at the other end in Tunoan.

"*Vemuge, Geogiea Doberno! Ea neo uo, atu?*" said Paul.

"Ahlo, Bro. Paul!" said Pastor Doberno excitedly, "I am fine. 'Ow are you and Mees Kahren?"



They chatted back and forth a few minutes in a mixture of broken Tunoan and English while Paul filled Pastor Doberno in on the day's events. As the conversation wound to a close, Pastor Doberno promised that he and the church would be praying for them.

*"Ge'egiveo,"* said Paul, thanking him.

After Paul hung up he filled Karen on some of the latest news from Tunoa. They talked for another hour or so before finally turning out the lights and heading off to bed themselves.

Fortunately Brandon had night-lights and the top and bottom of the stairs. The full moon outside flooded the house with a silvery luminescence and mingled with soft glow of the night-lights as they climbed the stairway. They headed down the hallway toward their room but, hearing a noise, they stopped outside of Alex's room. Concerned, they pushed open the door and looked inside. Alex was sitting up in her bed clutching her pillow to her chest, crying quietly as she slowly rocked back and forth.

Karen rushed in and quickly gathered her daughter in her arms. "Alex, what's wrong?" she asked worriedly.

"Mommy, Mommy," sobbed Alex, grabbing hold tightly.

"Oh, Alex" soothed Karen, "It's all right. Mommy's here. You're cold—and you're shaking. Did you have a bad dream?"

"Daddy's dead!" cried Alex, "The bad men had him in a box in the woods!"

"No, no, baby," said Karen, looking up quickly at her husband, "Daddy's not dead. It was just a bad dream. Daddy's right here."

Paul hurried around to the other side of the bed and sat down next to Alex. "I'm right here, honey."

Alex looked up from her mother's embrace at her father. A lone tear trickled down her cheek and fell off her quivering chin as she regarded him intently in the moonlight. Then, reassured that it was him, she threw herself into his embrace, crying, "Daddy! Daddy! You're okay! The bad men tried to hurt you but your okay!"

Paul held her tightly for a few minutes and stroked her hair as he looked at his wife across the bed. He assured his daughter that he was fine and that it was only a bad dream. He did not press her to tell about her dream but she related what little she could remember to them on her own. Apparently she had seen several men carrying a large, heavy box into a bluish mist. Although she was scared she followed them to a clearing in the midst of some trees. After they set the box down she sneaked up to it and looked inside only to see her father lying inside.

"There, there," he comforted her, "Everything is fine. Mommy and Daddy are here and more importantly, Jesus is here too. Remember, He said, 'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.' There is nothing to be scared off. Do you want me to tuck you back into bed and pray with you?"

Alex looked up at her daddy with big, wet eyes. Slowly she nodded her head yes and allowed him to tuck her back under the covers. Paul held her hands while he prayed and asked God to put a hedge of protection around his daughter and allow her to sleep safely through the night. As he finished praying he noticed that Alex had dozed off and was sleeping comfortably. Karen kissed her lightly on the forehead and they crept quietly out of the room.

They didn't say anything for a several minutes as they got ready for bed. Crawling into the bed Karen said, "I'm scared, Paul. Her dream was eerily similar to Janet Bartlett's. She dreamed her father died too."

“Hey!” said Paul, putting a finger to her lips, “Your not going to let a little dream scare you, are you? We've been through a lot worse together. Besides, remember what the Bible says in Second Timothy 1:7: 'For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.' We've been through a rough day and the devil's just trying to frighten us. Let's pray and then get some sleep. Things will look a lot better in the morning.”

## **Chapter 4**

Paul woke up earlier than he expected. It was a few minutes past nine and the sun was already streaming through the partly open curtains. Yesterday's rain and drizzle had given way to a gorgeous spring morning.

Karen was sleeping soundly as Paul got up. “No sense disturbing her yet,” he told himself as he dressed quietly before leaving the room. Padding silently down the hall in his bare feet he paused outside of Alex's door and looked in. She was fast asleep, curled up on her side. Not used to the cooler temperatures, she had drawn the blankets up over her ears. Sicillia, the cat, was curled up on the bed like a little fur ball, tucked in behind Alex's knees.

Ben was still asleep as well. He had asked his dad to get him when he got up in the morning so Paul woke him up. Groggily he asked his dad what time it was. “It feels more like three in the morning,” he groaned when his dad told him it was after nine. “Can you get me up in another hour?” he asked.

Paul let his son go back to sleep as he headed back out into the hallway. His feet were getting cold walking around on the bare hardwood floors. “Not in the tropics anymore,” he smiled to himself as he headed back to his room for a pair of socks.

A few minutes later, downstairs in the kitchen, Paul put the kettle on for a cup of tea. A note was lying on the table and he picked it up and began reading: “Good morning. There is cereal in the cupboard or bacon and eggs in the refrigerator. Help yourself. Willy Sykes called earlier and would like to get together sometime today. Walked up to the post office. Stopping at the drugstore for coffee and a paper. Be back later.”

Paul set the note back down and selected a white mug with a picture of the Severn River Bridge on it. Setting the cup on the table he pictured his uncle with the rest of the Saturday morning coffee club lined up along the counter in the drugstore sorting out the world. He didn't expect him back much before eleven.

Opening up a cupboard above the microwave, Paul found several boxes and tins of tea and a jar of instant coffee. Selecting a PG Tips box from England, he pulled out a round teabag and set it on the counter. The water was beginning to steam faintly so he poured a little into his cup to warm it up. He set the kettle back on the fire and went to get his reading Bible from the other room.

Coming back into the kitchen he stole a piece of chicken out of the leftover paprikash and stuck it in a slice of rye bread while getting the milk out of the refrigerator. After thanking the Lord for his daily bread he took a bite and chewed on it while he fixed his morning cup.

Once his tea was ready he put the milk and sugar away and sat down to read. Paul enjoyed reading his Bible early in the morning before everyone else was up. It was quieter then

and he did not have as many distractions to contend with.

Cupping the warm mug in his hands, Paul bowed his head. The aromatic steam from the tea caressed his face gently as he prayed. Opening his eyes a few minutes later he inhaled the steam deeply before taking a sip. Setting the cup aside he opened up his Bible and took an index card out of the front. It was his memory verse for the week, Genesis 31:3.

He read the verse out loud quietly, "And the LORD said unto Jacob, Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred; and I will be with thee." Turning the card over, he said again from memory. He repeated the process four more times and then read the verse silently six more times before putting the card back in his Bible.

Paul then opened up his Bible to a bookmark in Second Corinthians. Taking out another index card from there he looked at it carefully. The top of the card said, "Through the Bible Reading Record (Alternating Old & New Testaments)." He used the card to keep track of his daily reading as he alternated back and forth through the two Testaments.

According to the card he was to read 2 Corinthians, chapters 6-10. This morning, however, he reached the end of chapter ten and decided to continue reading through the end of 2 Corinthians. After doing so he noted on the card that he was to start in Zephaniah 1 next time and in Galatians after that.

Placing the card and the bookmark back in his Bible at the start of Zephaniah, he turned to Psalm 94 where another card and bookmark were located. After reading that he scratched out the 94 and wrote 95 under it and replaced it in his Bible. From there he turned over to yet another index card at Proverbs 4.

Finishing up, Paul closed the Book and fastened the cover securely. He drained the last of his tea and looked at the clock. It was just about 10:30. Standing up he stretched and then set his cup on the counter before heading up stairs to wake up Ben and check on the others.

Karen met him on the stairs. She had gotten up a few minutes earlier and had gotten a quick shower before heading downstairs. She said that Alex was still asleep with the cat and Ben was just getting up so Paul headed back into the kitchen with her. As Karen selected a mug off the wall Paul put some fresh water on to boil. Karen laughed when he told her that Uncle Brandon was over at the drugstore drinking coffee with the Saturday morning gang.

Ben came into the kitchen as Karen was opening a tin of orange spice tea. Hungry as always he opened the cupboard to see what kind of cereal was available. Fresh milk was still a novelty for him after years of ultra-pasteurized box milk and he wasn't going to let any opportunity to have it get away from him.

The Browns chatted back and forth while fixing breakfast. Karen pulled out a skillet and began frying bacon and eggs. Paul put several slices of whole wheat bread in the toaster. When the toast was ready he set it out on the table along with some butter and homemade strawberry jam. While Karen was finishing up with the bacon and eggs, he went upstairs to wake Alex.

Alex did not remember much about the night before but she held on tightly to her daddy as he carried her down to breakfast. Sicillia, looking momentarily annoyed at the disturbance, soon curled up and was back asleep before they were half way down the stairs.

The Browns enjoyed a leisurely breakfast while they made plans for the day. Karen wanted to get to the bank and then do some shopping. Alex needed a warmer coat and she wanted to pick up a few things for the potluck at the church tomorrow. Paul mentioned that the Sykes' wanted to get together with them sometime during the day. He also needed to plug in

his laptop and send out a few e-mails as well as work on his message for tomorrow morning.

“Dad,” Ben paused between mouthfuls of cornflakes, “What did Uncle Brandon and Mr. Krankovich mean when they said they thought you should be the interim pastor?”

“Well, Ben, it means they think that, as the only remaining ordained preacher in the church, I should fill in as the pastor temporarily. At least until the church can find another pastor to replace Pastor Williams.”

“What if they don't find anybody else?” asked Alex.

“Don't worry. God already has the next pastor picked out. We just have to wait for Him to show us.”

“How will we know he's the right one?”

“God'll let us know. His Spirit will confirm the right choice in the hearts of His people, and to the man that He provides.”

The ringing phone interrupted their conversation. Paul answered it as Karen and the kids finished their breakfast. It was Kevin Farnham. He wanted to know if it would be all right if he and Becca stopped by. Becca thought Karen and Alex might want to go shopping while the boys spent some time together. Karen nodded her approval while clearing the table when Paul asked her.

A few minutes later Paul hung up. “They'll be here in about an hour,” he told his wife.

“That's fine,” she answered, “Gives me enough time to finish up in here and then get Alex ready. Where's the checkbook?”

A few minutes later, Paul settled in with his laptop at the dining room table. Plugging in the modem he began composing an e-mail to go out to a number of his supporting churches and friends. He sketched out the previous day's events and the plans to make him interim pastor of the church. Concluding with a request for prayer and a promise to keep them informed, he added the appropriate addresses and hit the send button.

Shortly after that, Brandon got home from his Saturday morning coffee group. “You would not believe how fast news of Pastor William's death and the accident in Hinckley got around! It was the talk of the drugstore this morning. Everybody wanted to know about it. I didn't tell anyone who the two in the jag were though. Just said the police were investigating. They couldn't believe that the car was stolen from Narsch Industries either. One guy works third shift as a security guard there. Said old man Narsch was still livid when he left about two in the morning.”

Paul let his uncle know that the Farnhams were on their way over and that the girls would be heading out shopping. Pausing, a thought occurred to him. “Hey! I've got an idea. How would you like to drive back over to Hinckley and have a look around? Maybe we can find something that will give us a clue what Chattham and Chakal were up to.”

“Great idea, Paul”

Ben piped up; “Can I go, too, Dad?”

It was nearly 12:30 when Kevin and Rebecca arrived. Karen, Becca, and Alex left shortly after they arrived so they could get to the bank on time. After they left, Paul asked Kevin if he wanted to head over to the accident site with them. Since the girls had taken the Farnham's new Jeep Cherokee the guys piled into the church van and headed off a few minutes later themselves.

Arriving at Hinckley Lake, Brandon turned off State Road onto West Drive. Heading past the official buzzard-spotting site, he slowed as he approached the overlook where the car

had gone over the side. Several police vehicles, representing the Ohio State Patrol, Hinckley Township Police, and the Medina County Sheriff's Department were parked there along with two park ranger trucks.

Brandon pulled up alongside a couple of nondescript sedans with government plates on them and put the van in park. "Looks like we weren't the only ones who wanted to look around!"

One of the Hinckley police officers came up as they got out of the van. "Sorry folks," he began, "This area is closed—."

He was cut off by a nearby park ranger who had been there yesterday. "Its okay, Charlie! These are the guys who reported the accident. Let them through." He pointed down the hill at two men wearing black jackets with "FBI" in big, bold yellow letters emblazoned on their backs. "Smith and Jones down there will want to see them."

"Mind if we look around while we wait?" asked Paul.

"No, not as long as you stay up here and behind the tape," answered the officer.

Ben walked over to the caution tape and stood watching the activity below. His dad and Kevin Farnham walked a short way up the road and then turned around as Paul described the accident in detail. Brandon, meanwhile, studied the tire tracks and skid marks intently, calculating in his head distances and speeds. The fact that two men died here without Christ yesterday sobered his mood as he replayed the crash in his mind.

"Dad! Uncle Brandon!" shouted Ben; "They found an umbrella!"

The men hurried over to Ben and looked over the edge. One of the FBI agents was holding a bent umbrella carefully while looking at the tip. He showed it to his partner and then started up the steep slope with it.

Arriving at the top he paused and looked at Brandon closely. "Brandon? Brandon Hayes?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"Josh McKay! Remember, Quantico, 1978?"

Brandon racked his brain for a minute. "Marine attaché, right?"

"Right, right!" said McKay. "Been a few years. Say, I was sure surprised to see your name come up in connection with this case. Guess I shouldn't have been," he chuckled. "Who's your friends here?"

"This is my nephew, Paul Brown, and his son, Benjamin. That there's Kevin Farnham. He wasn't with us yesterday."

"Well, its sure good to see you again! Say, I read the police report but its always better to hear it first hand."

Over the next several minutes Brandon and Paul took turns relating the events leading up to the fatal crash. Agent McKay interrupted occasionally with a few pertinent questions. Holding up the umbrella that he retrieved from the crash site when they finished he asked, "Does this look like the umbrella you saw at the airport?"

"Yeah," said Paul, "The thin man, Chakal, stumbled on his bad knee and accidentally hit Pastor Williams with the end of it, or so he claimed. Come to think of it, if I hadn't tried to keep the bags from falling he would have got me instead."

McKay examined the end of the umbrella while Paul was talking. Noticing a hole in the tip turned it back and forth a few times when all of a sudden the hidden hypodermic needle snapped out. He looked thoughtfully at it for a moment and then turned to Paul, "Is there any reason to suspect that someone would want to kill you?"

An hour or so later they were headed back to Wildwood. Agent McKay had promised to let them know what the tests on the umbrella needle turned up. “You know, Paul,” began Brandon, “I think McKay is right. I think you were the real target, not Pastor Williams.”

“I'd say that sounds crazy, Uncle Brandon, except it explains a lot. It would explain why they were following us.”

“And why Chakal said you were the one who was supposed to die yesterday instead of himself.”

“But why would any one want to kill Paul?” asked Kevin, “Especially at the airport, assuming that Chakal was actually trying to stick him with that umbrella.”

“That is the all-important question,” answered Brandon, “But I am beginning to think it might help clear up several other mysterious deaths and strange events over the years.”

Arriving back at Brandon's house the men went inside. The ladies were not back yet so they decided to head on over to the church for a few minutes. Brandon felt kind of guilty about missing visitation that afternoon but Chuck Krankovich had assured him that he and Willy Sykes could handle visitation without him today. Knowing that the Bartletts would not be there either didn't help. The least he could do was to help with some of the cleaning and setting up tables. Besides, he knew that his nephew was anxious to get over to the church as well.

Kevin called his wife before they left and told her to meet them at the church. They were between stores and had just stopped for a snack along the way. Alex, she said, was just fascinated with the self-serve soda fountains. Once she figured out how to use it she insisted on filling everyone else's cup as well.

Wildwood Baptist Church was located just off Center Road on Cleveland-Akron Road, “CAK” Road to the locals, in what amounted to a second, smaller town center. It was about a mile and a half from Brandon's house to the church and he often walked there when the weather was nice. Today, however, Brandon wanted to pick up his car before they headed over to the Style's house for supper.

Apparently the two town centers had enjoyed a friendly rivalry during Wildwood's early days. Both had boasted their own post offices, general stores, churches, barber shops, and stage stops. Over the years, the post offices had consolidated in the west center along with most of the churches, the town hall, and the library. The Baptist church, along with the old East Center Stage Stop, now restored as a restaurant, travel center, and truck stop, a small park surrounding a Civil War memorial, and several stately old homes were all that remained of the east center's former glory.

The original Baptist church had sat on the Civil War memorial site but it was torched by anti-abolitionists in 1859 and burned to the ground. Several fugitive slaves fleeing to Canada along the Underground Railway were rumored to have died in the flames. The community rallied to rebuild the church house just south of the original building in the area of Wildwood's front parking lot the following year. Several years later, at the close of the Civil War, the church donated the site of the original building to the town for a memorial park.

The church itself was located on nearly seventeen acres of mostly wooded land just south of the Civil War memorial. A large parking lot with two entrances fronted CAK Road. Wrapping around the south side of the building, the parking lot opened up behind the church. A third smaller drive running alongside the memorial provided access to Center Road from the back lot.

Brandon turned off Center and pulled into the back parking lot. A border of peonies was springing up along both sides of the driveway but would not be in bloom for a couple more weeks. Masses of irises and other spring flowers, along with several slightly overgrown shrubs just past their earlier springtime prime, splashed a variety of bright colors in glorious profusion about the memorial park. A somber gray-brown granite boulder stood silent vigil in the midst of the floral gaiety, its polished sides a mute testimony to the sons of Wildwood that had served and died in the War Between the States.

As they approached the church they could see the Bartlett's van over by the parsonage at the far side of the parking lot. Several other vehicles, including Willie Sykes' car, were parked at the back of the church along with a white minivan with out-of-state plates on it. As they drew closer they could see the Georgia peach on the plates and a bumper sticker on the back that boldly proclaimed, "WARNING: DRIVER OF VEHICLE SUBJECT TO SUDDEN DISAPPEARANCE DUE TO RAPTURE (1 THESS. 4:16-17)!"

Brandon looked at the minivan. "With everything that's been going on, I forgot Dr. Minger and his family were coming in today. He has a few meetings in the area and will be staying in one of our prophet's chambers with his family. He did our fall revival last year. Even baked a cheesecake for our potluck dinner."

"Dr. Minger?" questioned Paul. "I'm not sure I know him."

"He's a friend of Dr. Muriel."

"Down in Akron?"

"Yeah. Dr. Muriel's the pastor at Wooster Road Baptist. He had Dr. Minger in for a revival meeting about a year and a half ago. Pastor Williams liked him so much that he lined him up for all fall revival. He's scheduled to be with us again this fall. You'll like him. He's ex-military as well."

Brandon parked behind the church and they headed into the building. The back part of the building was newer and nearly twice the size of the front. The front had been built in 1960, replacing the old building that had once stood where the front parking lot now was. In 1978 the church built a second, larger auditorium, along with expanded Sunday school and office space behind the church building. A large, glassed in foyer connected the two buildings.

Farnham Contracting, owned and operated at the time by Kevin Farnham's father, had designed and built both buildings along the same New England architectural style common to Ohio's Western Reserve. Now owner and operator of Farnham Contracting himself, Kevin remembered working on the newer building as a teenager.

Due to the slope of the hill, the door actually entered into the basement, which served as a large fellowship hall. A well-equipped kitchen, several classrooms, a storage room, and a utility room filled out the remainder of the basement. A short hallway connected to the older building's basement. That section housed several more classrooms, another utility room, and a large, walk-in missions closet stocked with a variety of items for visiting missionaries and evangelists.

Mrs. Krankovich and her good friend, Jean Davidson, were busy in the kitchen when the guys walked in. "Oh, hello!" they said looking up from their work, "We didn't hear you come in."

Mrs. Davidson hurried from behind the counter, wiping her hands on her apron. "It was just so terrible to hear about poor Pastor Williams! Just terrible! Poor Janet is absolutely broken up over it... My, my, who is this handsome young man?" she asked, embarrassing Ben.

“It is so good to see you folks again!” continued Mrs. Davidson, “Where is Karen and your daughter? I’ll bet she’s turning into a pretty young lady. Oh, I am so sorry. We had planned to have a reception for you and your family here last night but, under the circumstances...”

“Good to see you again, Mrs. Davidson. How’s your husband doing?” said Paul as Ben ducked his head, blushing slightly.

They chatted in the kitchen while Mrs. Krankovich got some coffee for the men and a glass of milk for Ben. Mrs. Davidson, alternating back and forth between asking about the Browns and Tunoa and commenting on yesterday’s tragic events, fixed some sandwiches for them. “Can’t have you missing lunch!” she said.

They had no sooner bowed their heads to say grace when they were interrupted by Willie Sykes and Dr. Minger clumping down the steps behind them. They had become good friends over the past year or so. Sykes was a short, wiry young man, still in his late 20’s, a bundle of nervous energy. Dr. Minger was surprisingly young as well, only about five years older than Sykes. He was of a much calmer nature and nearly a foot and a half taller.

Spotting the men in the kitchen, Sykes rushed in to greet them. Dr. Minger stood quietly in the hall while Sykes talked excitedly with the others. A moment later, Sykes remembered that he was there and motioned for him to come in. “Oh, I’m sorry, Dr. Minger! I almost forgot about you! Come in, come in! Let me introduce you! You know Mrs. Davidson, Mrs. Krankovich, and Brother Hayes, of course.” Gesturing toward Paul, he continued, “And this is Brother Paul Brown. He’s a missionary to Tunoa out of the church here. That’s his son, Benjamin back there. And this other guy is Kevin Farnham. His dad helped build this building. Pray for him, he needs to get back in church, ha, ha!

Dr. Minger shook hands as he was introduced around. “Name’s Sam,” he said, “My wife and kids are getting settled in one of the prophet chambers upstairs. We have some meetings in the area and will be staying here for the next two weeks. Pastor Williams graciously allowed us—,” He stopped himself quickly. “I’m sorry...” he began as Mrs. Davidson wiped a tear from her eye.

“That’s alright,” said Brandon, “Its been hard on all of us today. Anything we can help you bring in?”

“No, we brought everything in upstairs before moving the car around back. We were just coming down to see what we can do to help.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Krankovich, reaching for another loaf of bread and some lunchmeat, “You can start by having your family come down for some sandwiches. And you,” fixing her gaze on Willie Sykes, “Can run over to the parsonage and tell the Brother Bartlett and Pastor John to come over for a bite to eat as well.”

Karen and Alex came in with Rebecca Farnham while Dr. Minger was heading back up the stairs. They met Sykes on his way out and headed into the kitchen with the others. Mrs. Davidson fussed over how big “little Alexandria” had grown and how much she looked like her mother.

A few minutes later the Minger family came downstairs. Dr. Minger introduced his wife, Carla, and his three children to the Browns and Farnhams. The oldest, Serena was the same age as Ben. Matt was two years younger and Lizzy, short for Elizabeth, was the same age as Alex.

Dr. Minger had brought down one of his prayer cards, which he handed to Paul. It had a picture of the Mingers on the front. Bold, block letters proclaimed, “I. Sam Minger Ministries”.



Their motto, "Helping the local church keep the Gospel Light burning bright!" ran along the bottom of the card.

"What's the 'I' stand for?"

"Ichabod," laughed Mrs. Minger.

"I see why he goes with Sam, especially with being an evangelist," Paul joked back.

Bill Bartlett and Pastor John Williams, Jr., arrived a few minutes later as Mrs. Davidson and Mrs. Krankovich finished putting together a platter of sandwiches. After greeting everyone, Pastor John asked the Lord's blessing over the food and the group dug in hungrily. Karen and Becca, who had eaten earlier, refused anything to eat but took the coffee that was offered to them. Alex managed to find room for another sandwich, however.

Pastor John informed them that the funeral was being planned for Friday in order to give the coroner's office time to finish its investigations. His sister, Julie Morgan, and her family would be driving in on Monday from Maryland. Her husband, Daniel, was pastor of the Maranatha Baptist Church in Wapetiton. Since he had a wedding today and a baby dedication tomorrow they were not able to come right away. Also, an anonymous donor in their church had provided the money to fly his other sister, Jackie Martino and her daughter, Shawna, up from Samoa.

"Assuming they can get on the Sunday night flight they should make it in time for the funeral, too. My brother, George, is unfortunately not able to leave Albania right now so he won't be here."

They finished eating and the ladies began cleaning up and finishing preparations for tomorrow's dinner. Meanwhile, the men began setting up tables and chairs in the fellowship hall. The kids pitched in as well but after awhile Paul and Dr. Minger gave them permission to play. They scampered off happily to explore the building together while the men began to talk about Pastor William's death and the incident with the two Global Liberation Front guys, Chakal and Chattham.

Brandon also brought up the need to appoint an interim pastor and set up a pulpit committee. "Although our church constitution isn't real clear on it, Brother Krankovich and I thought that Paul here would be our most logical choice for interim pastor."

"I would agree with that," said Pastor John. "From what I remember, it would have been me if I were still the associate pastor. However, after I left last summer Dad never got around to appointing another associate. Since Brother Brown is now the only ordained pastor in the church I think that would honor the intent of the constitution."

"That's what we thought," agreed Brandon. "We thought we would announce it that way tomorrow morning and tell the folks that we would vote on it next week at our May business meeting, just to make it official—."

A loud crash and the sound of breaking glass upstairs suddenly interrupted their discussion. Racing upstairs they found the kids looking at a large black crow lying stunned and bleeding in the midst of a sea of shattered glass. Serena was helping her sister up who had been standing by the widow when the bird crashed through the glass. Lizzie was crying and holding her left arm gingerly. It bled profusely where she had been struck by flying glass.

Karen, who had followed closely behind, quickly ran over to the little girl. Her dad was already there when she came up behind him. "I'm a nurse," she said, "Do you want me to look at her arm?" Sam looked at his wife who had just come up the stairs and into the lobby. Looking back at Karen, he nodded.

Brandon headed to the church office where he retrieved a first aid kit. Looking closely, Karen found a jagged piece of glass sticking out of her forearm. "You are a fortunate young lady." Turning to Dr. and Mrs. Minger, she continued, "Another quarter inch to the left the main artery would have been severed."

Karen gently removed the glass with a pair of tweezers from the first aid kit and carefully cleaned the wound. She applied a sterile gauze pad and pressed lightly yet firmly for a few moments until the bleeding stopped. "I don't think she'll need stitches but you should have somebody look at it. When was the last time she had a tetanus booster?"

"There's an urgent care center in Fairlawn," volunteered Sykes, "I can run them down. I'll bring my car around so she doesn't have to go down the stairs."

While Karen took care of Lizzy, Paul and Ben managed to get a towel from the nearby nursery over the bird. Surprisingly enough, it was still alive and began to struggle as Paul carried it outside. Setting it down in the parking lot away from the building he stepped back with his son as the bird struggled to its feet and shook off the towel. It stood there blinking at them for a moment before taking a few wobbly steps. Then, with a quick shake of its head, it flapped its wings a couple of times and took off.

"CAW, CAW! CAW, CAW!" rasped the bird loudly as it gained height, circled the church, and headed off to the southwest.

Paul and Ben joined the others inside the atrium, which connected the two buildings together. The north and south walls, which were predominantly glass, along with the large skylights above gave the room an open, airy feel. Several small palms and tropical plants clustered in corner planters, added to the effect.

A large map of the world surrounded by missionary prayer letters and cards graced the east wall, just to the right of double doors leading into the old building. When switched on, a multitude of red and green lights lit up the map representing the church's missions involvement around the world. Red lights represented church planting projects while green showed church helps and growth ministries. A single gold bulb in Ohio, midway between Akron and Cleveland, represented Wildwood Baptist Church.

Another set of double doors on the opposite wall opened into a broad hallway that led to the main auditorium. The smaller sanctuary in the older building was used primarily for junior church and other activities. Two other doors, on opposite sides of the main hallway provided access to the two prophet's chambers from the atrium. The Mingers were staying in the far apartment while the second was being readied for Pastor John's sister, Julie, and her family.

Willie Sykes got into the car with Lizzie and her dad. Mrs. Minger reluctantly agreed to stay behind with the others rather than leave her other two children behind. She gave Lizzie a kiss and said she would meet them over at the Sykes house later on.

Suddenly remembering the evening's dinner plans, Sykes glanced at his watch and hit his head with his other hand. "Oh my, I just about forgot! I'm supposed to be throwing some steaks and burgers on the grill in a couple of hours. I better call Laurie and tell her I might be late!"

A few hours later they were gathered at the Sykes' house enjoying steaks and burgers fresh off the grill. Lizzie, whose bandaged arm had not needed stitches, was her old self again, happily playing with the other kids.

Meanwhile, Pastor John had joined his wife at his sister's house along the rest of the Bartletts and the Krankovich's. They were planning to review Pastor William's will as well as

begin making plans for the funeral later on in the week.

In stark contrast to the warm family gatherings elsewhere in Wildwood, Simon Narsch was huddled alone over his blue sapphire in his cold, dark office. Chanting softly to himself he suddenly jerked back in his seat, bathed in the reflected iridescent indigo glow of the crystal before him. Struggling to breathe, his hands clawed at his throat as if trying futilely to break the grasp of an invisible assailant. Slowly an unseen force raised Simon up into the air and held him dangling above his chair before flinging him across the desk. He landed face first, sprawled out on the carpet in the middle of the floor.

He lay motionless for a moment, gasping for breath. Painfully he raised himself to his knees and crawled over to the couch and pulled himself up. Nothing seemed to be broken so, after resting a few minutes, he hobbled slowly back to his desk. Grabbing the phone he dialed his son's number.

## **Chapter 5**

Sunday morning arrived bright and clear. It promised to be a warm spring day. The Browns had slept well that night and Alex had not been plagued by any more bad dreams. After a quick breakfast of cereal and a brisk cup of tea, Paul grabbed his Bible, making a couple of last minute notes as the rest of his family finished getting ready for church.

They arrived early at the church, just a few minutes before nine. Brandon unlocked the basement door and walked into the fellowship hall. Freezing in mid-stride he stared, dumbfounded, at the room. It looked like a tornado had struck it. Tables and chairs were tossed about and all the decorations had been torn from the walls.

Cautiously entering the room he motioned for Paul to join him while Karen kept the kids back. Silently, he checked the room with Paul. Finding nothing, they looked in the kitchen which, oddly enough, did not seem to have been touched. Telling Karen and the kids to wait outside they raced up the stairs to check on the Mingers.

Brandon knocked on the door to the prophet's chamber while Paul glanced around the atrium. A sudden movement at the south doors caught his eye. A large black crow pecked noisily at a small vial tied with a cord to the door. Catching sight of Paul, it cawed noisily several times before flapping its wings and taking off. There was something oddly familiar about the vial but Paul decided to wait on investigating it until after they checked on the Mingers.

“Good morning!” greeted Dr. Minger jovially as he opened the door and stepped out into the atrium. “Carla will be out with the kids in a few minutes. I was just getting ready to head downstairs and see if anyone had turned the coffeepot on yet. We've got a microwave in the room but fresh perked is always better than instant. Besides, I...” His voice trailed off as he noticed Brandon and Paul looking at him curiously. “Hey, is everything alright?”

Brandon spoke first, “That's what I was just about to ask you”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for starters, everybody sleep well last night?”

“Like a bunch of proverbial logs!”

“Did you hear anything? Any noise downstairs?”

“No, not a bit. When we got back last night we went to bed right away. Don't remember anything else until the alarm went off this morning. What's the matter?”

“Not sure. Take a look downstairs.”

The men headed back down to the fellowship hall. Paul glanced back at the vial on the outside doors again and decided to head around from the basement to investigate. Arriving downstairs, Dr. Minger gasped in disbelief at the disarray.

The Krankovichs arrived about the same time at the outside door. Like the others before them, they froze in the doorway. “Oh my! Oh my!” said Mrs. Krankovich repeatedly, nearly dropping her foil pan full of stuffed cabbages.

Mr. Krankovich entered slowly and joined the men as they poked about trying to figure out what happened. “Wait till the Bartlets see this! Bill and Miss Janet put up all those decorations practically by themselves. They followed us in with Pastor John and Miss Hazel. I think they pulled around to the front to open the main doors upstairs.”

“That reminds me!” said Paul starting suddenly for the door. “There was something tied outside to the doors. I wanted to check it out before anyone disturbed it.”

Paul edged around Mrs. Krankovich who still seemed to be in shock and sprinted around the outside of the building. Coming around the corner he saw the Bartletts and the Williamses, who were being joined by the Sykes family, looking curiously at the small bottle hanging on the doors. “Don't touch it!” he yelled as he ran toward them.

His warning came too late. Bill Bartlett untied the cord and held it up to look at the vial more closely. It was a small, cobalt blue bottle about three-quarters full of what looked like some kind of cloudy oil. Grabbing it between his thumb and forefinger to steady it he yelped suddenly. The vial burst with a loud pop between his fingers, spraying its oily contents all over the front of him.

Bill mopped his face with his handkerchief and tried to wipe some of the oily residue off his jacket and tie. “I'm O.K.! Just startled me a little. I might have to run home and change my coat though.”

All that was left of the vial was a few small shards of glass on the cement. The cord, stained by the oil, lay where Bill had dropped it. Brandon and Dr. Minger had arrived back up in the atrium by now and Brandon opened the door from the inside. The others quickly headed inside, greeting one another and talking about the exploding bottle. Brandon told them about the basement while Paul examined the remains of the vial and cord.

“What do you make of that?” asked Willie Sykes, coming over to Paul.

“I'm not sure. It kind of reminds me of a Tunoan oil curse. But it beats me why there would be one here.”

“A Tunoan oil curse?”

“Yeah. The Tunoans would fill a small thin glass bottle or vial with a special kind of oil which slowly turns to a gas when exposed to direct sunlight. The pressure in the bottle grows and when it is disturbed it can burst easily.”

“Where's the curse come in?”

“They would take it to the local shaman who, for a donation, would place a curse on the oil. The bottles would then be hung around a plantation or other place where they wanted to keep people out. Everyone seeing the bottles would know that the area was 'Ae-Te' - forbidden. Anyone trespassing would be likely to break one of the bottles and get the oil, as well as the curse, on him.”

“What kind of curse?”

“Well, that would depend on the shaman and the size of the donation. It could be sickness, bad luck, or even death. Usually it would just put them under the control or influence of the either the shaman or the property owner.”

“Is there any way to break the curse?”

“Yeah, the family of the person suffering from the curse can give a sizable donation or a valuable possession to the shaman who placed the curse.”

“I got another question. You said earlier that you saw a crow pecking at the vial. How come it didn't explode then?”

“Beats me,” answered Paul, “Maybe it wasn't meant for him.”

Paul and Willie joined the others inside and together they pitched in to clean up the basement fellowship hall while Bill Bartlett headed home to change his coat and tie. Others joined in as they arrived and they were able to finish most of the work before Sunday school started at 10:00 AM.

Pastor Williams' death was announced during the Sunday school opening exercises. A few had not heard and could hardly believe it. When the various classes were dismissed, most of the adults stayed in the main auditorium. The Pastor's Class was combined with Brandon Hayes' Senior Saints class.

Janet Bartlett looked around for her husband as the others headed off to their respective classes. They taught the Beginners Class together and he wasn't back yet.

Brandon continued his series on great men and women of the Bible that he had been presenting over the last several weeks. He surveyed the life and ministry of Moses. Toward the end of the lesson he brought out how God provided a leader, Joshua, from among the people to replace Moses at the end of his life. Applying that to the present situation, Brandon assured his class that God would not have called Pastor Williams home if He had not already provided for a new pastor for the church.

Class ended a few minutes before 11:00 AM and the others, along with a few latecomers began filtering into the auditorium. Some of the people stood around in small groups discussing Pastor Williams' death and speculating on how it would affect the church. Others greeted the Browns, Pastor John and his family, and the Mingers. Paul was excited to see the Farnhams come in as well.

Up front, Mrs. Davidson headed to the piano and began playing a medley of hymns. As the music began to make itself known the people began finding their seats. Janet Bartlett looked a little uneasy. Her husband, Bill, had missed their Sunday school class and was still not back.

Brandon and Chuck Krankovich headed to the platform. On the way up they motioned for Paul and Pastor John to accompany them. Seating on either side of the pulpit they waited as Mr. Davidson came forward to lead the singing. Having everyone stand they sang all four verses of number 55, “When We All Get to Heaven.”

Bro. Krankovich stepped forward as the final “...shout the victory!” rang out. “As most of you know,” he began, “The Lord has seen fit to call our dear Pastor home to be with Him this past Friday. Our heartfelt prayers go out to his family at this time of loss and to every member of the Wildwood Baptist Church. Pastor Williams' son, whom we all know as Pastor John, flew in with his family yesterday to take care of his father's affairs. I would like him to come at this time and open this morning's service in prayer.

Pastor John took Mr. Davidson's place at the pulpit and began to pray. A few people

began to weep as he prayed and the whole congregation was visibly moved by the time he finished. Stepping back, he stood quietly, wiping his eyes with his handkerchief.

A sudden disturbance in the back of the room broke the silence as Brandon headed to the pulpit for the opening announcements. Bill Bartlett made his way rather noisily down the side aisle to join his family. Janet looked at him sharply as he sat down heavily in the pew next to her with a loud sigh. He had changed his coat but had not worn a tie, which was not at all like him.

Motioning for the people to sit down, Brandon reviewed several coming activities and recognized the Mingers along with the Browns and Pastor William's family. He then mentioned the plan to consider approving Paul Brown as their Interim Pastor at the coming May business meeting.

"Why wait?" interrupted Bill Bartlett from the congregation.

Brandon was somewhat taken aback by the unexpected and uncharacteristic interruption, "Excuse me?"

"Why not have a business meeting right now?"

Brandon blinked a couple of times, looking, along with the rest of the congregation, at Bill.

"Hey," said Bill as his wife dug her elbow in his ribs, motioning for him to hush, "We all know who Paul is. He's a good guy. Now that John's not here he's the only ordained preacher in the church. Why not have the business meeting right now and take care of it. No sense putting things off."

Brandon looked over at Chuck Krankovich. He was just as perplexed as Brandon was. Turning back to the congregation he began to speak but was interrupted again.

"In fact," continued Bill, rising to his feet, "I move that we open a business meeting right now to consider appointing Paul Brown as our Interim Pastor!"

His embarrassed wife tugged futilely at his coat, trying to get him to sit back down.

Bill wheeled around. "I've got a motion on the floor. Who's going to second it?" he demanded, looking at the stunned crowd.

The auditorium was uncomfortably silent. Only the swish, swish of the overhead ceiling fans and the faint rumble of an eighteen-wheeler pulling out of the nearby travel center disturbed the silence. The sweet spirit that had pervaded the earlier Sunday school hour vanished. A vague oppressive sensation gnawed at the edges of the room as people shifted nervously in their seats.

A short, stocky man in his mid-30's stood slowly in the back of the room. It was Dan Logan, one of the last people that Pastor William's had led to the Lord before his death. He had only been baptized and joined the church a few weeks ago. Nearly 15 years working on the loading docks at Narsch Industries had given him a wide bulldog stance and a personality to match.

"I know I'm new here," Logan began in a low, gravelly voice, "But I know you can't function without a leader. If Reverend Brown is okay with Bill Bartlett, he's okay with me. I second the motion."

Chuck Krankovitch motioned for Brandon and they whispered back and forth for a few moments. Chuck headed back to the pulpit with Brandon and began to speak, "This is highly irregular and, in my opinion, highly inappropriate. But, as we have a motion on the floor which has been duly moved and seconded, Brother Brandon and I reluctantly agree that the motion must be voted on. However, we do have one stipulation that we must insist on. If the member-

ship votes to convene a business meeting right now, as has been put forth, we must put it off until the end of this morning's service, as has been our usual practice.

"Fine with me," said Bill with Logan nodding in agreement, "Just as long as it's this morning."

"Very well. We have a motion on the floor to convene a business meeting this morning to consider appointing Paul Brown as our Interim Pastor at the close of this morning's service. All in favor, say 'aye'."

The "ayes" carried the motion forward – barely – and the service moved on.

The welcome song was more subdued than usual this morning. A certain tension still seemed to fill the congregation. Brandon and a few others noticed that Bill Bartlett did not move from his seat while everyone was shaking hands. He did not drop anything in the offering plate when it went by either.

Pastor John and his wife, Andrea, came forward just before the message to sing after the final congregational song and the Junior Church workers and children were dismissed. They had chosen "Precious Hiding Place," by Avis B. Christiansen for their special.

"I was straying when Christ found me  
In the night so dark and cold;  
Tenderly His arm went round me  
And He bore me to His fold.

"Precious hiding place,  
Precious hiding place,  
In the shelter of His Love;  
Not a doubt or fear,  
Since my Lord is near,  
And I'm sheltered in His love."

It was an old song, unfamiliar to most. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit used it to calm hearts and center people's attention back on the Lord, especially as they listened to the words of the last verse...

"Tho' the night be dark around me,  
I am safe, for He is near;  
Never shall my foes confound me,  
While the Savior's voice I hear.

"Precious hiding place,  
Precious hiding place,  
In the shelter of His Love;  
Not a doubt or fear,  
Since my Lord is near,  
And I'm sheltered in His love."

Several "Amen!" rang out as they headed back to their seats and Paul Brown walked up to the pulpit to preach.

“It is good to be back,” he began, “Let me express my sympathies for Pastor Williams' family and to the church. If you would, please, let's stand for a minute of silent prayer before I begin.”

The congregations rose to its feet and stood silently. A minute later, Paul continued. “Amen. You may be seated. Turn with me this morning to Psalm 116...”

He began reading in the first verse and continued to the end, emphasizing verse 15 in particular: “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.” Bowing his head he prayed and asked the Lord to help them center their heart's and mind's attention upon Him and to bless the message and to shape it to meet the need of each person gathered there. Finishing his prayer he began expounding upon the text and applying it to the death of Pastor Williams and of all those who have trusted Jesus Christ for salvation.

Nearly 40 minutes later Paul brought the message to a close with a final thought. “Pastor Williams' death, while sad to us, was precious to the our Lord in heaven. It was precious to the angels in heaven. It was precious to the saints in heaven. It was precious to Pastor Williams who is now in heaven.

“Let me ask you, will your death be precious to the Lord? Will your death be precious to the angels? Will your death be precious to the saints? Will it be precious to you? Or will it be tragic because you failed to trust Christ as your Savior before it was too late?

“Let's stand with heads bowed and eyes closed, as Mrs. Davidson comes and Mr. Davidson comes to lead us in a song of invitation...”

Mrs. Davidson began to play “Glory to His Name” softly as Paul challenged the congregation to allow the Holy Spirit to search their heart's respond to His convicting and leading in the matter of salvation or a closer walk with the Lord.

Mr. Davidson began to sing softly as Paul continued to encourage people to respond. Several began to slowly make their way to the front where they knelt in prayer. Brandon, Mr. and Mrs. Krankovich, came forward to assist several who needed someone to pray with them.

Mrs. Krankovich dealt with a young woman, Melissa Hoffman, who had recently moved to Wildwood and was visiting for the first time. She had realized for the first time that she was religious but lost. Tears filled both her and Mrs. Krankovich's eyes as she bowed her head and began a simple prayer of faith, confessing her sin and committing herself to the Lord Jesus Christ as her personal Savior.

Brandon wiped a tear from his eye himself as Kevin and Rebecca Farnham came forward and motioned for him. The Holy Spirit was dealing with them about being out of church and they wanted Brandon to pray with them as the recommitted themselves and their family to the Lord.

Bill Bartlett came forward as well and fell to his knees. Chuck came up alongside him and laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Bill turned to Chuck, “I'm sorry. I...I don't know what came over me. I didn't want to be so obnoxious but... I just don't know. Ever since this morning I just haven't been myself. I'm even having trouble praying. Could you pray for me? Please?”

Following the invitation, Brandon invited everyone to stay for a fellowship dinner downstairs following the business meeting. In spite of its unorthodox start, the meeting itself went well. After a short discussion and review of the church constitution, a simple hand vote was taken. Paul Brown was unanimously approved by the church as its Interim Pastor. Paul and the two deacons, Brandon Hayes and Chuck Krankovich were also appointed to serve as a pulpit committee to search for a new pastor for the church.



Afterwards they adjourned to the fellowship hall in the basement. Originally planned as a welcome home meal for the Brown's, it had become, due to recent events, a more somber reunion. The men had done a wonderful job in redoing the decorations and resetting the tables. The food, as usual, was plentiful and delicious.

Memories of Pastor Williams wafted around the room along with the aroma of fried chicken, cabbage rolls and roast beef. The Browns sat up front at a special table along with Pastor John and his wife, Andrea. A number of people stopped to talk, sharing their condolences with the Williams and their congratulations with the Browns.

By 2:00 PM the gathering had begun to break up. The ladies began cleaning up the leftovers and storing some away for after the evening service. A number of the teenagers and men jumped in to help with the clean up as well. An hour later most everyone was gone and Brandon dropped the Browns off back at his house on his way to the afternoon service at the nearby Pine Hills Care Center. The time change from Tunoa to Ohio was catching up with them and they wanted to get a nap before the 6:00PM service.

Across town another dinner was underway. Arnold Narsch hungrily stabbed a generous slab of ham and dropped it onto a thick piece of rye bread heavily slathered with mayonnaise. He was sitting at one end of a large walnut dining table. His father, Simon, watched him impatiently from the other end while sipping a cup of strong, black Kona coffee. A half-finished lobster tail and the remains of a small Greek salad with feta cheese lay on the table in front of him. Two servants stood by discreetly while the two men ate.

Topping his sandwich with a thick slice of Swiss cheese and several garlic dill pickle spears, Arnold covered it with a second piece of bread, grabbed a handful of imported Lebanese black olives and leaned back in his chair. Smacking his lips eagerly, he carefully sliced his sandwich into three triangular segments before taking a large bite.

“Arnold! Please!” reproached his dad; “Must you make such a pig of yourself?”

“Its only my third sandwich, Father,” replied Arnold with his mouth full, as one of the nearby servants stepped forward with a bottle of white Bordeaux wine to refill his glass.

“If ever there were proof of the adage, 'You are what you eat,' you, my son, are it. You disgust me! Now if you can pay a little more attention to me instead of your plate, maybe you can update me on this morning's events.”

Arnold ignored his father's insults. “Well, Dan Logan called less than an hour ago. You know Dan. He's our warehouse foreman. He's managed to worm his way into the church and has been slowly trying to influence a few key members. His position seems to have been benefited somewhat by the untimely death of Reverend Williams. Seems they now view him as one of the last fruits of the good Reverend's labors.”

Arnold paused to extract a piece of gristle stuck in his teeth with a toothpick before continuing. “Those people are so gullible,” he said disdainfully.

## **Chapter 6**

“BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP!” went the alarm at 7:30 Monday morning. Paul

Brown rolled over and smacked the snooze button for the third time. His wife elbowed him in the ribs and reminded him that he had an appointment with Uncle Brandon and Mr. Krankovich at the bank at 9:15 this morning. Grudging he slid out of bed and reset the alarm for two hours later. Remembering to put on his new pair of slippers, he padded groggily down the hall to get ready.

Twenty minutes later Paul headed downstairs. Brandon had been up for nearly an hour and had already made a pot of tea. It was drizzly and cool out this morning, reminding Paul of his Air Force days in England. Feeling a little bit nostalgic he grabbed a mug sporting a bold Union Jack and poured himself a steaming cup before sitting down across from his uncle.

“Bill Bartlett was certainly acting a bit odd yesterday,” said Paul, stirring a couple of spoonfuls of sugar into his tea.

“Yes, Chuck and I were very surprised how he pushed to have the business meeting right away rather than waiting for next week. Quite unlike him.”

“At least he was a bit more subdued during the evening service.”

“True, but he still wasn't quite himself.”

Paul poured some milk into his tea and sipped it thoughtfully. “He seemed fine on Saturday. His wife said he was all right Sunday morning, too, at least until that bottle of oil burst on him. Uncle Brandon, did I ever tell you about the Tunoan oil curse?”

Brandon Hayes listened intently as his nephew explained the Tunoan oil curse. He had not heard of it specifically but was familiar with similar concepts from other parts of the world. When Paul finished Brandon leaned back in his chair and observed, “If that is what happened to Bill, then who and why?”

“Well, Uncle, that's something we will have to trust the Lord to reveal to us in His time.”

Brandon finished his tea and looked at the clock. They had nearly an hour to spare so Brandon headed off to his office to get a few things ready for the mail while Paul got his Bible and began to read. At nine o'clock Paul went up to make sure Karen was awake, checked on the kids. Alex was still sound asleep with Sicillia curled up at her feet. Ben was up and dressed and wanted to go with his dad. Jet lag had not bothered him as much as his sister. A few minutes later they clumped down the back stairs and climbed into the car with Brandon.

Arriving at the bank a few minutes after nine they found Chuck Krankovich and his son, Curtis, already there waiting. Heading inside, Chuck spoke with Mr. Thompson, the bank manager, who ushered them back to the vault housing the safety deposit boxes. They signed in and while one of the tellers brought out a slim, metal box, and laid it down on the table in front of them.

Producing a key from his wallet, Chuck Krankovich handed it over to Paul who carefully inserted it into the lock. Paul jiggled the key a little as he turned it before a dull click came from inside the recalcitrant lock. The men watched intently as Paul slowly lifted the cover. Not knowing exactly what to expect, they were surprised to find it filled with a number of newspaper clippings and some old photographs. A business-sized envelope addressed simply, “To the new Pastor,” lay flat across the bottom of the box as well.

Paul emptied the clippings on the table. Some were relatively recent while others were yellowed with age. The men sorted through them, reading bits and pieces aloud, while Paul opened the envelope.

Brandon whistled softly before observing, “These things must go back nearly 50 years.”

“Yes,” agreed Chuck, “It would seem that Pastor Williams began collecting them

shortly after he became the pastor in 1953. Most of them have to do with unexplained or violent deaths, murders, and suicides. “There's also a bunch dealing with hauntings, ghosts, UFO's, and other unexplained phenomena in and around Wildwood over the years.

“Look at this,” said Curtis, “Here's an article from the mid 1950's. It says, '...living up to its reputation, Wildwood continues to lead the area in weird and unexplained happenings. Ed Morgan, of North Hametown Road, claims that a bright, glowing disc ran his car off the road last Friday night. Morgan, who denies drinking, said his car overturned in a ravine along the road and several small gray men with large round heads came out of the flying disk and surrounded him as he tried to crawl out of his car. The Summit County Sheriff's office reports that calls from Wildwood have been running three times higher than surrounding communities during the recent UFO flap.’”

“Here's more,” said Brandon, “Listen to these headlines: 'Killer Intersection Claims Family;' 'Lightning Strike Kills Golfers at Local Course;' 'Strange Happenings in the Wildwood;' 'Teen Suicide Pact Desecrates Civil War Memorial;' 'Local Town Listed in New Book: Number 24 in 100 Most Haunted Places in Ohio.' Some of these are really bizarre.”

“I always knew Pastor Williams had an interest in these things,” said Chuck, “But I guess I never knew how much.”

Paul, meanwhile, had opened the envelope from the bottom of the safety deposit box and began to read it.

“To my successor,” the letter began. “If you are reading this it is most likely that I have died either suddenly or unexpectedly. Please prayerfully consider what I have to say before dismissing it. My predecessor, Pastor Hunt, originally shared with me what I want to pass on to you.

“As you may know, Wildwood derives its name from the dense forest that dominated this area when it was settled in the early 1800's. The first settlers to arrive here came from Connecticut. Finding the area was largely avoided by the local Indians who believed that 'wild and untamed' spirits roamed the woods, they settled in without much opposition. Using a rough translation of the Indian's name for the area, they named their new settlement, Wildwood.

“They ignored the Indian stories as ignorant superstitions but were plagued by accidents and unexplained happenings. Finally, in 1808, they got together and sent back to Connecticut requesting a preacher be sent to start a church in the hope that it would hold back what they viewed as the 'forces of darkness at work in the wilderness.’

“In the spring of 1809, a brash young preacher by the name of Ian Hayes arrived from Hartford, Connecticut, with his young wife and baby girl. A gala celebration was held to welcome them and church services began the following Sunday. Several months later the people came together in a log cabin about half a mile north of the present church location on Center Road and organized the Wildwood Baptist Church on August 11, 1809.

“They met there for a nearly two years until a tragic fire took lives of Pastor Hayes' wife and daughter and destroyed their cabin in 1811. Injured himself and devastated by his loss, Pastor Hayes went back to Connecticut to recover.

“Three years later, he returned to Wildwood. Older and wiser, and with a greater confidence in the Lord, he soon gathered a number of the former members together and reorganized the church. With renewed zeal, tempered by a deeper understanding of the Word of God, Pastor Hayes led the church in a month long revival. Church members reconsecrated themselves to the Lord and determined to raise a new building dedicated to the Lord's work in the very center

of 'the devil's dominion'.

“The new meeting house was raised on the corner of Center and CAK Roads, where the Civil War Memorial sits today. Pastor Hayes remarried a short time later and built a log cabin next door to the church where he began raising a new family.

“Things were fairly quiet until 1823 when two of his sons, along with a neighbor boy fell into a hole in the woods behind the church. Apparently they were hunting squirrels when the ground gave way under them. His one son, Thomas, managed to grab a tree root as he fell in and pulled himself out. Unable to help the other two, he ran back for help.

“As the story goes, Pastor Hayes and several other men followed Thomas back into the woods but were unable to rescue the boys. A thick, dark mist oozed out of hole, preventing them from seeing down in it.

“One of the men volunteered to go down so they tied a rope around his waist and lowered him slowly into the hole. Supposedly they lowered him down about 20 feet, almost to the end of their rope, when they felt him thrashing and jerking on the other end. They hollered down but got no answer so they began pulling him back up as quickly as they could.

“He was about half way up when all of sudden something began to pull him back. The men strained to hold him but whatever was pulling was too strong for them. They quickly looped the rope around a nearby tree and strained to keep from being drug in themselves as they refused to let go.

“Pastor Hayes, who was closest to the edge, said later that it was as if the mist had shaped itself into icy chains around his feet, dragging him in. He cried out to the Lord with a loud voice as he felt himself slipping over the edge.

“The pulling stopped abruptly, causing the men to suddenly pitch backward. Falling onto each other and nearly losing their grip on the rope, they quickly recovered and pulled their friend out of the pit.

“Pastor Hayes, the first see him, fell back in shock as he reached out to pull him up over the edge. The man was cold as ice and as pale as death. His thick black hair had turned white. The only evidence that he was still alive was his wide staring eyes and a few flecks of foam that formed at his thin, taunt, bluish lips as he panted rapidly. He looked, like he had seen the devil himself.

“They brought the man back to the church and one of the men immediately began ringing the church bell. Another raced of on his horse to get the doctor who lived about a mile away. A second rescue party headed off into the woods. The mist had cleared away but they were unable to find any trace of the boys.

“According to the story Pastor Hunt had heard, the church held an all night prayer vigil for the boys, and the man they had pulled out of the hole. Several days later they fitted the hole with a thick wooden cap and covered it with several feet of dirt.

“Apparently, some sort of marker was placed above the hole as both a warning and a memorial for the two boys that were lost in it. What sort of marker, I do not know. Its location is unknown as well.

“As you can see by the clippings included in the box with this letter, I have chronicled a series of accidents, mysterious and tragic deaths, and various strange happenings in Wildwood through the years. What you may not notice is that these events seem to run in two cycles of twelve and thirty years each.

“Every twelve years there seems to be a peak of bizarre, violent, and odd events. Pastor Hayes wife and children were killed in 1811. His son and the other boy died in twelve years

later in 1823. The Wildwood Baptist Church building burned along with, if the rumors are true, a number of escaped slaves in 1859. The cycle continues down through the years. For instance, Deacon Brandon Hayes wife, along with his sister, Kathleen Brown, and her husband, Andrew, died at one of the twelve year peaks, in 1979.

“The second cycle, the thirty-year cycle is similar to the first. The major difference is that it seems to correspond to a surge in weird, almost supernatural phenomena. The latest peak was in 1973 when a rash of UFO sightings was reported in and around Wildwood. It was also one of the roughest years for our church as well.

“Occasionally these two cycles coincide with each other. Those years seem to be the worst. For example, it was in 1823 that the story of the hole occurred. The next convergences came in 1883, the year of the Wildwood earthquake, and 1943 when the old state mental hospital burned down out on Nathaniel Road, killing 89 residents and five area firefighters. Narsch Industries nearly bought the church property that year as well. They claimed they wanted to locate the headquarters of the Narsch Foundation here along with a research and conference center.

“The next convergence will occur in 2003. I am confident that the good Lord will see us through yet trepidatious about what might happen. I also fear that Simon Narsch will redouble his efforts to obtain our property between now and then for his one-world, new age Foundation.

“Please consider this letter and the enclosed information prayerfully. I believe the devil is hard at work in Wildwood opposing the work of God.

“May the Lord bless you as you assume the oversight of His church.”

The letter was signed simply, “Bro. John.”

## **Chapter 7**

Later that morning, after a late breakfast at the East Center Stage Stop, Paul and Brandon gathered in the church office with Chuck and Curtis Krankovich. Dr. Minger and Willie Sykes, who had joined them for breakfast, were there as well. Ben and Dr. Minger's son, Matt, headed outside to play while the men talked.

An overturned copier paper box lay along side of a small folding table set up in the middle of the room. Mr. Thompson, the bank manager, had given them the carton to carry the safety deposit box contents back to the church.

They sorted through the clippings, arranging them chronologically across the desk. Curtis kept track of the clippings, logging each on a yellow legal pad. Pastor Williams' letter was passed around as well for each man to review.

Willie, who ran a computer consulting company, had taken the day off to help build a web site for Dr. Minger. Consequently he had brought in his laptop, a unique machine of his own design, in with him. Out of curiosity, he began to enter the dates and locations for each incident into his computer. As the others shuffled through the papers he shuffled through the data with a variety of filtering and pattern finding programs.

“Whoa...Hey! Look at this!” Willie turned the laptop around so that the others could

see the screen. “I was fiddling around, trying to find some sort of pattern or relationship – other than the twelve and thirty year cycles – to these incidents and, just a second...” He tapped a few more buttons. “Take a look!”

The room went silent for a moment. Only a slight whirring from the fan on Willie Sykes computer disturbed the silence.

“Unbelievable,” breathed Dr. Minger.

Paul stared at the screen for a few seconds. Abruptly turning away, he grabbed a box of colored pushpins from the counter behind him. Heading over to a large map of Wildwood and the surrounding areas hanging on the wall, he pointed to the legal pad in Curtis' hand. “May I borrow that?”

Taking the pad he began sticking pushpins into various locations on the map. Realizing what he was doing, Brandon began to help as well. The others watched in amazement as the pattern on the computer screen gradually took shape on the wall map.

When they had finished, Paul and Brandon stepped back from the wall. Nearly all of the incidents collected by Pastor Williams were clustered into eleven points. Five of the points formed a large outer ring. Five more points formed a smaller inner ring surrounding a central point.

Chuck handed Paul some red yarn from one of the cupboards. Stepping back up to the map, Paul attached the yarn to a pin in one of the clusters and then began stretching it back and forth between the outer clusters according to the image on Willie's computer. Reaching the last cluster he took out his pocketknife, cut the yarn, and tied it off.

Stepping back again, he looked at the perfect image of an inverted red pentagram centered over Wildwood with the church near its center.

Karen Brown had woken that morning with an uneasy feeling. Call it premonition or a woman's intuition. Maybe it was a combination of the time change and recent events. Whatever it was it nagged at the back of her mind as she went to wake up her daughter, Alex. It didn't go away while preparing breakfast.

Alex chattered on about the church, Uncle Brandon, and Wildwood while they ate their pancakes. The chatter put Karen at ease and she managed to put aside her earlier fears while they ate. She even found herself laughing a bit watching Brandon's cat, Sicillia, convincing Alex to part with a few bits of sausage. “That cat will have her trained in no time,” she chuckled to herself.

Leaving, Alex, to clean up in the kitchen, Karen went into the living room to call her parents. Her father, Jessie Florensen, was getting over the flu and she was still a little concerned about him. He had been sick enough to keep him and Karen's mother from traveling to Ohio to welcome them home from Tunoa on Friday. Her mother, Louise, answered on the fourth ring.

Louise apologized again for not being at the airport when they arrived. Jessie was doing much better, she said, and, against her better judgment, was outside planting beans.

”Mom!” protested Karen; “Dad shouldn't be out working in the garden! Tell him his nurse said he needs to get back inside and not overdue it!”

“You know how your father is, dear! He hasn't had a fever since yesterday afternoon and was feeling as fit and frisky as new colt this morning. He's been itching all weekend to get out in the garden. Your brother, Glenn, came over and retilled some of it Saturday morning just to keep him off the tractor. I managed to set out two dozen tomato plants and a dozen peppers

Saturday. Threatened to plant your father with them if he didn't stay in the house. He is doing a lot better though.”

“Well, just make sure he drinks plenty of water—not coffee. Water and rest. Last thing we need is for him to come down with pneumonia. Is Glenn still planning to bring you and dad up later this week?”

They talked for several more minutes. After hanging up, Karen got her Bible and sat down in the living room with Alex for a quick mother-daughter devotion before getting on with the day. She felt a little better after talking with her mom.

Putting her earlier concerns aside, she knelt beside the couch with Alex. After they prayed they turned to Alexandria's memory verse from Sunday school, Genesis 22:14, and read it out loud together, “And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.”

“What does 'Je-ho-vah-ji-reh' mean?” asked Alex, sounding out each syllable carefully.

“Well, the key to it is right here at the end of the verse, 'In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.' Jehovahjireh literally means that Jehovah, God, will see to it, meaning that the Lord will provide.”

“Like He provided a ram in place of Isaac?”

“Right! And what do you suppose it means for us today?”

“Does it mean that we can trust God to give us what we need when we need it?”

“I couldn't have put it better myself! Now, let's go over it a few more times to memorize it and then we'll join Daddy and Ben at the church.”

Karen and Alex put on sweaters and light jackets. They were still adjusted to the warm tropical weather that they had left behind a few days ago. Alex was anxious to try out her new sneakers, though she was more comfortable in sandals or flip-flops. Heading out the door, Karen spotted the letter that Pastor Williams had given Paul in the van lying on the counter. Glancing over it briefly she folded it up and put it back in its envelope and put it into her pocket.

The late morning sun was quickly driving away the early morning chill as they crossed the park and headed down Center Road. Alex, curious as always, skipped back and forth, sometimes racing ahead or lagging behind investigating flowers and pausing to look at some of the houses and the occasional squirrel along the way. Her mother kept a careful eye on her, reminding her occasionally to stay back from the street. The traffic moved a bit faster here than in Tunoa where huge potholes, frequent puddles, and darting pedestrians conspired to make it hard to go over twenty-five miles per hour.

Nearly thirty minutes later they arrived, slightly out of breath, at the church parking lot. Alex spied her brother, Ben climbing a tree at the back edge of the parking lot with Dr. Minger's son, Matt. Matt's sisters, Serena and Lizzie were picking dandelions nearby. With her mom's permission Alex scampered off in their direction while Karen headed into the church.

Karen walked into the office moments after her husband stepped back from the map on the wall. The sight of an inverted red pentagram on the wall of the church office startled her. Regaining her composure she looked a little closer at the occultic symbol outlined over the town. A sudden thought occurred to her and she drew the envelope that she had pick up back at the house and opened it up.

Paul looked at her curiously. “I know that look. What are you thinking?”

Karen paused for a moment, studying the list of properties that was in the envelope. “Paul,” she began, scanning the list and comparing it to the map, “Why didn't you use just one

pin for each of these properties?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, look.” She pointed to the bottom point of the pentagram. “This is about where 2466 CAK Road would be. Up here and here,” pointing to the top two points, “Should be 5232 Seven Hills and 5171 Mystic.”

The men gathered around Karen while she read off each of the eleven properties on the list. Sure enough, all eleven corresponded to each of the eleven clusters of pins on the map. Each property, with the exception of the church property were located either at one of the five points of the pentagram or at one of the five intersections of the yarn strung from point inside the pentagram.

“With everything going on the past few days, I completely forgot about the envelope Pastor Williams had given us in the van,” apologized Paul.

“Don't feel bad. I forgot about it too,” confessed Brandon.

“Well, we have it now,” said Chuck, “Let's see what we got here. I recognize a couple of these properties right off. The CAK Road address is where the Clearwater Tavern is located. Its owned by Arnold Narsch – he tried to put an adult book store in there several years ago but we managed to keep them out. There's the old orphanage property there on Nathaniel. Narsch Industries bought the property from the state shortly after the fire.”

“Several other points are connected to the Narsch's as well,” interjected Brandon, “Look here's the Narsch Foundation's Enlightenment Center up on Mystic and Narsch Industries headquarters up over here on Seven Hills. Down there is a youth hostel operated by the Gaia Society, which Simon Narsch is active in. That would be our best bet to link this list with the Gaia Liberation Front.”

“Hey! There's your house, Mr. Hayes,” interrupted Curtis Krankovich tapping the map, “It's on the list, too.”

“Yeah, Arnold Narsch tried to get me to sell after my wife, and Paul's parents, were killed back in '79.” Brandon tapped the map thoughtfully with a forefinger. “Paul's parent's owned this other property, which is also on the list. I kept him from getting it, too—sold it to Paul's cousin Dennis Brown. He sold it to Arnold a few years later though when he went into politics. Seems like the Narsch's either directly own or have tried to buy up every property on this list, including the church. But why?”

Dr. Minger, who hadn't said much, had been studying the map and the list that Karen had brought in. He noticed the aerial photograph that had fallen out of the envelope that the others had overlooked. His attention was drawn to the strange symbol made up of two small equilateral triangles, connected by a smaller rectangle and the reference to the shamballah opening scribbled on it.

Excusing himself for a minute, Dr. Minger headed over to the prophet's chamber where he was staying to retrieve a book from his briefcase. He thumbed through the book as he returned to the church office.

“I think I have something here!” he announced excitedly. “I've been doing some study on New Age and the occult for a booklet I'm writing. And, well, look at this...”

Holding the open book in front of him he showed them a section featuring a glossary of New Age and occult terms and symbols. “Look, here on page 379. There's that weird symbol that's drawn on the aerial photo of the church property. Says here that it's an ‘Antakarana Bridge’. It represents a bridge between man and Satan. Now, look at page 408: ‘Shamballah –



dwelling place or residence of Lucifer and the Masters of Wisdom'.”

“Who're the Masters of Wisdom?” asked Willie.

Dr. Minger flipped back a couple of pages. “Let's see...here it is. The Masters of Wisdom are identified as the archdemons of Satan, his top lieutenants.”

Paul furrowed his eyebrows and chewed on his lower lip. “Well, it seems like there's a bit more going on here than we realized. I think we better have a word of prayer and then take a walk out back. Karen, would you mind checking on the kids while we pray?”

Karen left the room as the men knelt to pray. The sense of foreboding that she had felt when she woke was back, stronger than before as she left the building. Worried about what might be out in the woods, she did not want to alarm the children. She didn't see them but she could hear them hollering in the woods behind the parking lot. Hurrying toward the woods, she called out, “Benjamin! Alexandria! Come out of those woods right now! There's poison ivy back there. You'll be covered from head to toe!

“Mommy! Mommy!” little Alex came running out of the woods crying. Dr. Minger's daughters were close behind. “I saw the box! I saw the box the bad men put Daddy in!”

## **Chapter 8**

Ben and Matt stood inside a small clearing just a short way into the woods. They stared uneasily at a shallow pit in front of them. The air almost crackled with energy. It was as if an electric charge pervaded the area, causing the hairs on the back of their necks to stand on end.

An ancient ginkgo tree, perhaps 75 feet tall, had toppled during a recent spring storm. Its aged roots, which had not quite given up their hold on the heavy clay soil beneath the soft forest loam, had scooped out a broad shallow pit, perhaps ten feet across and several feet deep. Its peculiar leathery fan-shaped leaves still retained a dark gray-green color.

There, down in the bottom of the pit, lay what looked like an ancient decaying wooden box protruding out from under the roots. Cold air seemed to seep out of the cracks, or was it that all the heat from the surrounding area was being sucked into it? It was hard to be sure.

The boys eyed the box cautiously. Neither wanted to admit he was scared but neither was willing to get much closer.

“Wow...” breathed Ben, “Look at that.”

“It looks old,” offered Matt. “What do you think's in it? Buried treasure?”

“I dunno. What if its not what's in it but who's in it?”

“Wanna take a look?”

“Sure... But...”

“Well, it is kind of muddy—not that that bothers me! It's my mom. She'd be upset. I only have one other pair of shoes with me, my church shoes.”

“Yeah... I know what you mean. My mom wouldn't be too happy either.”

The two boys stood there, afraid to get closer but not wanting to leave either. Ben turned up the collar on his jacket against a sudden chill in the air. He wondered briefly if it was just his imagination.

Matt picked up a baseball-sized rock near the edge of the pit. Taking aim he threw the stone at the box. Other than punching a hole in the side, nothing happened.

“Cool,” breathed Ben as he picked up a rock himself. Taking aim, he hit the box on its top, slightly to the left of where Matt had hit it. Another crunch and another hole.

“Watch this!” said Matt, winding up with another rock. Holding his hand up he prepared to throw – and froze. A dark heavy mist was slowly seeping out of the holes and cracks in the moldering wood. It had a thick, bluish quality and hung low in the pit. The rock dropped, forgotten, out of Matt's hand.

Matt and Ben moved closer to each other and edged cautiously closer to the pit. Mesmerized they stared into the swirling mist that was now obscuring the wooden box, filling the pit. Standing at the very edge now they felt as if a subtle, yet powerful, force was drawing them in. They leaned forward, gazing intently into the depths of a murky pool.

Leaning... Staring... Closer... Closer... The dirt along the edge of the pit began to crumble and give way under their feet.

Karen reassured her daughter that everything was fine and asked her where the boys were. Dr. Minger's daughter, Serena, said that they were looking at a fallen tree. At the base, where it had uprooted, they saw what appeared to be a large wooden box sticking out of the dirt. The boys wanted to look in it but Alex had gotten scared and ran back to the church.

“Where?” asked Karen.

“Back there,” pointed Serena, “There's a path by that big tree. It goes back into the woods where we found the pit. Its not far.”

“Thanks! Take Alex and your sister inside. Your dad is in the office with Alex's dad. Tell them what you saw. Tell them that I went to check on the boys as well.”

“Yes Ma'am.”

The girls ran into the building to find their dads while Karen hurried in the direction that Serena had indicated. She found the path easily enough. It looked like a heavily used deer trail winding into the woods behind the church parking lot. “Ben! Matt!” she hollered as she jogged along it.

Ben's mind seemed clouded by the same malevolent mist that now filled the pit in front of him. He could feel himself losing balance as the dirt began to give way under his feet. He was dimly aware that Matt was starting to fall into the pit as sudden sound pierced the fog like distant foghorn.

“Benjamin Paul Brown! Where are you?!”

Ben shook his head and blinked his eyes. Momentarily confused he looked around just in time to see Matt topple over the edge of the pit. Without thinking he lunged to the side, grabbing Matt's arm just in time, nearly tumbling into the pit himself.

He felt a powerful tug on his shoulders and fell hard on his side, slightly away from the pit. Matt fell on his chest, half in and half out of the pit. He started sliding in as if being pulled, his eyes glazed with fear. Ben managed to get both hands on Matt's arm while breathing a quick prayer for help.

“Benjamin Paul Brown! Where are you?!” shouted Karen again as she came upon a small clearing with a large fallen tree. She hurried forward and came around the tree just in time to spot Ben grab Matt and fall to the ground. Incredulously, both boys seemed to be being

pulled slowly into the pit.

“Ben! Matt! Hang on! I'm coming!” Karen ran around the pit and threw herself to the ground alongside her son. She grabbed Matt's other arm and began to pull and pray.

Paul and the men were praying in the church office when the girls burst into the room. He started to reprove Alex for disturbing them but caught sight of the look on her face. “Alex, what's wrong!”

“I saw the box, Daddy! The box that the bad men tried to put you in! Ben and Matt are out in the woods looking at it.”

“Where's Mom, honey?”

Serena spoke up, “Mrs. Brown said to let you know what happened and to tell you that she went out to find the boys.”

The men looked at each other uneasily. “I have a bad feeling about this,” said Paul.

Paul and the men headed out of the office toward the parking lot. Serena led them down the path toward the clearing where Karen and Paul were struggling to keep Matt from being pulled into the pit. It looked like they were losing the battle.

Dr. Minger ran forward and grabbed his son's shoulders and pulled as well. Paul rushed to take Karen's place while Willie Sykes replaced Ben. Both fell back exhausted while the men continued to tug on Matt's arms and shoulders.

The men dug in their heels but could feel the soft ground begin to give under their feet. It was as if they were battling some powerful, irresistible force. Despite their efforts they could feel Matt starting to slip out of their grasp.

“Dear God,” breathed Karen in a quiet voice as she held the three crying girls in a huddle well away from the pit, “Please help us!”

Paul, sweating profusely despite the chill, knew he was losing his grip. Desperate, he prayed for help while struggling to hold on. A sudden realization pierced through his thoughts like a flash priority message from headquarters.

“Uncle Brandon! It's the shamballah opening!”

“Of course!” snapped Brandon, “Quick! Chuck, Curtis! Start praying! Only the Lord can help us!”

Brandon and the others quickly dropped to their knees, calling on the Lord. Claiming their position in Jesus Christ as believers, they plead the blood of Christ over Matt and the men holding onto him. They implored God to break the hold on Matt and deliver him from the pit.

“In the precious Name and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the power His shed Blood,” cried Paul, “I command whatever devil or demonic force has a hold of this boy to loose him now!”

There was one last horrific tug, wrenching a loud, painful cry from Matt's lips. It was as if something in the pit had made one final attempt to yank him out of the men's hands. At the same time the men felt a powerful grasp on their shoulders and hands, pulling them abruptly back from the edge. They fell in a heap with Matt on top of them.

Praising and thanking the Lord, they quickly got to their feet. Dr. Minger wrapped his arms around his son sobbing, “Thank God! Thank God you're safe!” over and over.

Karen cautioned the girls to stay where they were and rushed over to examine Matt. Other than being cold and sore from nearly being pulled into and somewhat shaken, he seemed to be all right.

“Look, Mommy—” began Alex, pointing at the pit.

“Alex! I told you to stay back with Serena and Lizzie. It's not safe...” Karen's voice trailed off as she, and the others looked where Alex was pointing. The heavy mist was draining back into a gapping hole. Moldering fragments of rotten wood lay scattered around it as if something had burst up and through the old wood.

“What now?” asked Curtis.

“Well,” answered his dad, “It might be prudent to rope this area off before someone else falls in.”

Heading back to the church the men made for the church office while Karen herded the children downstairs to the kitchen. Mrs. Sykes and Mrs. Minger had just returned from shopping and were putting some ice cream in the freezer when they arrived.

They were shocked to hear what had happened in the woods. Carla Minger grabbed her son and held him tightly for a few minutes. Pausing to wipe away a tear, she held him at arm's length and looked him over closely. Satisfied that he would live she reprimanded him for going near the hole while Mrs. Sykes dished out some ice cream for the kids.

Matt, somewhat embarrassed as any 12-year-old boy would be by all the fuss, secretly enjoyed the attention. It was reassuring to know that his mother loved him enough to care for him, though he would never admit it out loud. Besides, the ice cream looked pretty good. It looked even better when Mrs. Sykes gave him an extra scoop.

The men, meanwhile, had gathered upstairs in the church office. They knew that something had to be done about the hole in the woods before someone else went near it. Curtis said that there was an unused roll of caution tape down in the utility room from last year's parking lot repair. He volunteered, along with Willie and Dr. Minger to go and cordon off the area around the hole with it.

“Just be careful,” warned his dad, “You saw how dangerous it can be.”

As the three left the office, Paul turned to his uncle and Mr. Krankovich. “Well, I think we can guess why the Simon and Arnold Narsch want this property so bad. I'm afraid things could get a lot worse if we don't do something right away. After all, we're practically sitting in the center of a giant pentagram right at the sixty-year convergence of the twelve and thirty-year cycles that Pastor Williams mentioned in his letter. I think we should call the church members and have an emergency meeting this evening.”

“Good idea, Paul,” said Brandon; “They should know what is happening. We should have a time of prayer as well. Who knows what the Enemy will try next.”

Pastor John and his sister, Janet Bartlett, came in as Brandon retrieved a copy of the church directory from the desk. Paul showed them the letters and the map and told them what had happened in the woods. Pastor John agreed with his concern but said they had another problem to contend with at the moment.

Motioning for Paul to follow him and Janet, he headed down the hall to his father's office. It was untouched from the last time that Pastor Williams had been in it nearly four days ago. Once inside he turned to Paul. “Its about Janet's husband, Bill. He just hasn't been acting right ever since yesterday morning...”

Across town, another meeting was just concluding. Arnold Narsch was seated behind a large metal desk in the shipping office of Narsch Industries. The ancient wooden chair creaked and groaned ominously under his weight as he shifted positions uncomfortably. The thin foam pad was too worn to provide much comfort to a man of his bulk.

The warehouse foreman, Dan Logan, stood nervously in front of him. “Yes, Mr. Narsch, I understand, Sir. 2:00 AM. That's right. I'll make sure the package is there on time. You can count on me, Sir.”

“Good, good,” purred Arnold, “And make sure your friend, Bill Bartlett is there to share in the festivities. If there are any, shall we say, complications, we may find him useful.”

“In-in what way?” stammered Logan.

“My dear fellow, you merely illustrate why you are a lowly shipping clerk and I,” Arnold nodded his head condescendingly toward Logan, “And I am head of this company. Mr. Bartlett may prove to be a bargaining chip or perhaps either a sacrificial lamb or a scapegoat. Now, be a good fellow and hand me my walking stick.”

Logan turned to retrieve an ornate mahogany walking stick from beside the door for his boss. The highly polished bronze tip at the bottom contrasted with the dark wooden shaft. An unusual ivory inlay underneath an ornate raven's head formed the top. The raven's head, copied from the Narsch Family coat of arms, was carved from a particularly dark piece of ebony. Two rounded, bronze colored opals were set in the wood for eyes.

The chair gave one final groan as Arnold Narsch leaned forward and pulled himself to his feet. His eyes narrowed as he reached for the walking stick. Leaning toward his employee slightly, he whispered menacingly. “Not a word of this. Not to anyone. I will not tolerate another fiasco!”

## **Chapter 9**

The parking lot was already beginning to fill up when Paul Brown and Brandon Hayes pulled in. Paul's wife, Karen, had stayed home with the kids. Carla Minger and her three had come over to spend the evening with them as well.

It was good to see Kevin and Rebecca Farnham drive in as they were getting out of the car. He really seemed to have a change of heart since rededicating himself to the Lord during the Sunday morning service. He was excited about getting back into the church and wanted to make up for lost time. Ephesians 5:15-16, “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” was, he told Paul on the phone, his new motto.

Despite the short notice, there was a good turnout. The Krankoviches and the Davidsons were already there along with Willie Sykes and Dr. Minger. Though no longer members, Pastor John and his wife Andrea were there with his sister, Julie Morgan and her husband, David. They had just arrived from Maryland an hour earlier. Bill and Janet Bartlett arrived a few minutes later along with Dan Logan. It was a tribute to Brandon Hayes' and Chuck Krankovitch's hard work on the phones all afternoon that so many were there.

Paul stepped up to the pulpit at 7:00 PM and called the emergency meeting to order. After asking his uncle to open in prayer, he briefly outlined the various materials that Pastor Williams had left in the safety deposit box. While he spoke, Willie Sykes projected digital photos of some of the items on the screen alongside Paul. Sykes had taken the pictures earlier and loaded them into his laptop, which was plugged into a video projector.

There was a collective gasp as the picture of Wildwood with an inverted red pentagram came up on the screen. Using a small laser pointer, Paul pointed out the various points and line intersects as he reviewed some of the incidents associated with each area.

Zeroing in on the center of the pentagram, Paul recounted the story of Pastor Hayes and the hole that swallowed up his son and a neighbor boy in the woods behind the church. Brandon Hayes and himself, he pointed out, were the direct descendents of Pastor Hayes son, Thomas, who had managed to escape the hole.

“According to Pastor Williams, the men covered the hole with a thick wooden cap, buried it under several feet of dirt, and set some sort of marker on top of it as a memorial.” Paul paused before continuing. “Pastor Williams did not know what the site was marked with. Neither did we, until today. Willie...”

Willie Sykes tapped his computer and a picture of the fallen ginkgo tree with caution tape around it filled the screen.

“Hey!” someone called out from the back of the room, “What happened to that tree? That's on record as the oldest ginkgo tree in Summit County. My grandfather said that was the first ever planted in the Western Reserve. Early 1800's, he said.”

“Yes,” agreed Paul, “I remember writing a report on it when I was in college. However, I now believe that this tree was the marker placed over the site of the mysterious hole that Pastor Williams wrote about.”

The picture changed to a close up of the upended roots and the scooped out pit under them. Bits of rotten wood stuck out awkwardly from the soft dirt in the hole.

“The recent rain must have softened the ground around the tree. The leaves have hardly begun to wilt so it could not have come down too long ago. More importantly, you can see the remains of the wooden cap that was buried under it back in 1811—.”

“How do you know that's the same hole?” interrupted Dan Logan.

“Well,” answered Paul, “Let me tell you what happened there this afternoon.”

A stunned silence filled the auditorium as Paul related how his son and Dr. Minger's had nearly fallen in. Several people expressed concern for Dr. Minger's son who had nearly been swallowed by the pit. Dr. Minger reassured everyone that his son was a little sore but otherwise seemed to be none the worse for the experience. He cautioned them that it was only through the power of God that Matt had been freed from whatever it was that had gotten a hold of him.

“Consequently,” concluded Paul, “That is why we called this meeting. We are faced with a grave situation here. We have reason to believe that the hole represents what occultists and New Agers refer to as a shamballah opening. It's supposed to be a direct opening to the dwelling place of Lucifer and the Masters of Wisdom. Of course, the 'Masters of Wisdom' are nothing more than fallen angels or devils.

“The idea, however, is that the opening provides direct access to the wisdom and power of Lucifer, who they consider to be the true God. It's all a part of the lie of the Devil, though. We know that Satan is, according to 1 Peter 5:8, walking about 'as a roaring lion...seeking whom he may devour'. It would also explain why this area has been a center of demonic activity throughout its history.

“I believe that we, as a church, need to confront what amounts to a satanic stronghold right in our backyard. It won't be easy, though. The Devil never likes to give up territory. That is why I am calling on you, and me, as a church to covenant together in prayer and fasting between now and Wednesday evening.”

Paul paused while the lights were turned back up and Sykes turned off the video projec-

tor. "In the meantime, I would like to open this meeting up for discussion and questions. Afterwards, for anyone who would like to stay and pray with us tonight, we'll keep the church open for as long as we need to."

The questions and discussion started almost immediately. While many expressed worry and fear, Paul reminded them of God's promise in 1 John 4:4: "Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world."

Another group wanted to head out into the woods right away. They were ready to storm the very gates of hell and take on the devil himself. Paul cautioned them against taking such rash action by reminding them of the inability of the disciples to cast an evil spirit out of a young boy in Matthew 17. "Remember, Jesus said '...this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.'"

Still others, however, voiced a different plan. Led by Bill Bartlett, much to the chagrin of his wife, a small but vocal group asked if it would be better to just relocate the church elsewhere. After all, Bill pointed out, Dan Logan knew that Narsch Industries was looking for a location to build their new distribution facility. He was reasonably sure they would be willing to pay a fairly substantial amount of money for the church property due to its desirable location.

When Bill called for a vote on the issue, Logan seconded it. Several others nodded their agreement. Paul balked on bringing such an extreme measure to a vote on such short notice. Fortunately, most of the rest of the church voiced their opposition strongly enough that Bill retracted the motion.

Logan, angered by the congregation's refusal to vote on selling the church to Narsch Industries, jumped to his feet. "You'll regret this!" he snapped, "That thing in the woods is bigger than you are. You'll never beat it. You people are too stupid to know when you've been defeated. If you'd get your collective heads out of that dumb Bible of yours long enough to think straight for once in your life you'd realize how duped you've been. I've had enough of this charade!"

He grabbed Bill by the shoulder. "This isn't working! Let's get out of here"

Bill looked momentarily confused. He looked up at Dan and then at Paul. A look of resolve came over his face as he turned back to face Dan again. "No," he said quietly, "No, I won't."

Logan's face became beet red. The sinews of his neck stood out like taunt piano wires as he glared down at Bill. Clenching and unclenching his fists slowly, he looked like a bull getting ready to charge. Then, abruptly, he spun on his heel and stomped furiously out of the surprisingly quiet room.

Shocked, the congregation stared after him in disbelief. The whole room flinched involuntarily as the door slammed behind him. A few moments passed before someone spoke. It was Kevin Farnham.

"Bad day at work?"

The meeting went on for a few minutes more before breaking up at about 8:20 for prayer. Mr. Davidson came forward and led the congregation in "Onward Christian Soldiers." They sang tentatively at first but gained strength as they reached the chorus:

Onward Christian soldiers,  
Marching as to war,  
With the cross of Jesus  
Going on before!

Encouraged, they turned back a few pages in their songbooks to “Faith Is the Victory”:

Encamped along the hills of light,  
Ye Christian soldiers rise,  
And press the battle ere the night  
Shall veil the glowing skies...

The Holy Spirit seemed to move among the congregation as they sang, lifting and encouraging them. The impromptu songfest continued for several more minutes. Buoyed by the spirit-filled singing, they all but forgot the bizarre spectacle put on by Dan Logan earlier.

An hour or so later most of the people had to head home and the prayer meeting began to break up. Still, nearly a third of them, including Bill Bartlett, stayed to pray awhile longer. Paul did not turn the key in the front door to lock up until nearly 12:30 am.

“Quite a night, huh, Uncle Brandon,” observed Paul as they headed home.

“I’d have to agree with you. Especially that episode with Dan Logan. He sure had us fooled. Apparently he was a Narsch plant all along.”

“Apparently.”

They drove along in silence for a few minutes.

“Wonder if he’ll keep his job?” mused Paul.

They pulled into the drive behind Brandon’s house and walked tiredly into the house. Karen was the only one up. Ben had gone to bed an hour ago and Alex was curled up on the couch with the cat. Carla Minger and her kids had left about an hour and a half earlier.

They could hear the phone ringing inside as they stepped up onto the back porch. Karen met them in the hallway as they came through the door with the phone in her hand. She looked concerned.

“Paul, it’s Bill Bartlett. He wants to talk to you. He sounds concerned.”

Paul took the phone and stepped into the kitchen. Karen had a kettle of hot water on the stove and motioned to ask Paul if he wanted a cup of tea. He shook his head no while he said hello into the phone.

Paul’s eyes narrowed as he listened. “Slow down, Bill. What’s going on?... Where are you now?... I see.... Uh-huh.... Alone?... Okay.... Alright... Goodbye.”

“What was that about?” asked his wife.

“Apparently Dan Logan wants to apologize for his behavior tonight. He’s feeling kind of ashamed of himself so he called Bill and asked him if he would pick me up and meet him for coffee at the Stage Stop. It’s the only 24-hour place in town. He’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Karen frowned disapprovingly. It had been a long day and she knew her husband needed to get his sleep. Still, she knew the ministry often made demands on him at odd hours. Besides, he had an amazing ability to bounce back with only a few hours of sleep.

“What’s the hurry? Can’t he wait until morning?” she asked looking at her husband reproachfully.

“Well, not really. At least not considering how things went tonight.”

Paul and Brandon filled her in on the evenings events. When they got to Dan’s outburst she shook her head. “You know, I thought there was something about not quite right with that man. I know Janet was concerned that he was having a bad influence on Bill. I’m glad Bill fi-



nally stood up to him.”

A few minutes later Bill Bartlett knocked on the front door. Brandon opened the door while Paul grabbed his coat and pocket Bible on his way to the door. “Be back as soon as I can. Pray for us!”

It was nearly 1:15 in the morning when Paul and Bill walked into the Stage Stop restaurant. Dan was sitting in the back and waved sheepishly as they headed his way. A waitress came up to them as they sat down, offering menus.

“Just coffee, for now,” they said.

“Thanks for coming to see me,” began Bill apologetically, “I really do want to apologize for my behavior. I had no right to say what I did. It's just that I've been under a lot of stress at work lately. I thought if I could convince you to sell the church property to Narsch Industries it would help get my boss to ease up on me.”

Paul let him ramble on for several minutes while he emptied three packets of sugar and three creamers into his cup. He knew he should cut back on the sugar but it was late and the first cup always tasted better when it was a little creamier and sweeter. He also felt guilty ordering the coffee when he was supposed to be fasting. Maybe he would just hold it and stir it instead. Besides, there was something not quite right here and focusing on his coffee helped him concentrate better.

“The least you can do is pay attention to me!” Dan said peevishly, “Instead of sitting there playing with your coffee!”

Paul looked up from his coffee. “I have been paying attention, Dan. To every word. And, the more you have talked, the more I am sure what the problem is.”

“Tell me.”

“I don't think you're saved. I think your boss sent you to undermine our church.”

“What?! You're crazy!”

“Am I? The Narsch family has wanted our property ever since Simon Narsch, the First, arrived here in the 1880's from Prussia. They've been occultists all along and, lately, new age environmentalists as well. That's what that whole Gaia Society of theirs is all about. I think that they want our property because they think they can tap into the soul of this planet and the power of a bunch of demons masquerading as ‘The Masters of Wisdom.’”

Dan stared at him blankly with his mouth partly open. Bill looked extremely uncomfortable, not quite knowing what to say.

“Listen, Dan, I only met you yesterday. Apparently you claim that Pastor Williams introduced you to the Lord a few weeks ago. But the Bible says in Matthew 7:21, 'Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.' If you are really saved then why don't you tell me how it happened.”

“Well, you know how it goes...”

“Humor me. Pretend I don't.”

“Um, well, Pastor Williams got to talking with me one day. Right here, in fact. I was having lunch at the counter when he sat down next to me. He started talking about God, heaven, hell, stuff like that. Told me Jesus died on the cross, was buried, and came back from the dead three days later.”

“And?”

“Made sense to me so I repeated the prayer that he told me to say. Satisfied?”

“Not quite. It's one thing to simply repeat a prayer. I did that myself, three times, before I finally trusted Jesus Christ as my Saviour. That prayer Pastor Williams had you repeat was not a magic formula. You can say it a hundred times with your mouth but if you don't mean it and believe it in your heart it won't do you a bit of good.”

“Hey! I believe in God!”

“Good for you. The devil does too. James 2:19 says, 'Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.' They even recognize that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. There are several instances in the New Testament where unclean spirits recognized His divinity.”

“So what are you saying? Is it possible to believe in Jesus but not be saved?”

“Exactly. It is more than just believing the gospel story. It is believing that Jesus went to the cross willingly to shed His precious Blood and die just for you.”

“What do mean?”

“I mean that you need to accept the fact that it is your sin that nailed Jesus to the cross. You need to admit to God and to yourself that you deserved to hang there instead of Him...”

Paul paused and got out his pocket Bible. Turning to the book of Romans, he continued. “Look here... Romans 6:23, 'For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.' See, there's absolutely nothing you can do to save yourself! Jesus did it all for you. That's why it's called 'the gift of God'.”

“So, let me guess, your telling me that it's just like if you offered me gift. I can believe it all I want to but if I don't reach out and take it then it won't do me any good.”

“Right.” Flipping over to First Peter 3, Paul pointed to verse 18. “See, here's the gift. 'For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:'. God the Father punished Jesus Christ—God the Son—for your sins on the cross. Jesus Christ paid for your sins and until you reach out and accept it by faith you cannot be saved.”

“Just repeating a prayer isn't good enough?”

“No. Look at Romans 10. See here in verses 9 and 10... 'That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.'—”.

“My, my... How touching.” A cold, condescending voice interrupted Paul. “Faithful to the end. How's that passage go? Oh yes, 'But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.' But then, I feel compelled to ask you, Mr. Brown, are you ready to be offered, for the time of your departure is, if I may paraphrase the Sacred Writ, at hand.”

Startled, Paul looked around to see Arnold Narsch standing behind him.

“In the flesh, my dear boy. And yes, I know what you are thinking...there is a lot of it.”

“M-M-Mr. Narsch!” stammered Logan jumping to his feet, “I didn't notice you come in.”

“Yes, well, I am here and now its time to go. Gentlemen,” Arnold waved his hand at Paul and Bill, “If you would be so kind as to accompany my employee and I to my car.”

## Chapter 10

It was hard to say who was more startled, Bill Bartlett or Paul Brown. Dan Logan, however, did not seem surprised to see Arnold Narsch show up at nearly two in the morning at the Stage Stop Restaurant. If anything, he seemed more embarrassed, like a little boy caught in the act of doing something he shouldn't be doing.

"Gentlemen," repeated Arnold, sweeping his hand toward the door, "It is late and we have much to discuss. Here, this should suffice." Reaching into his pocket he withdrew a fifty-dollar bill and dropped it onto the table.

Arnold turned and headed for the door. He didn't bother looking to see if the men would follow or not. Logan, he knew, would follow. That or lose his job. Paul's curiosity would not allow him to stay behind. He was predictable that way. Bill, he was confident, would dutifully follow the other two.

The short walk from the restaurant to his car left him a little short of breath. The cool night air was a welcome relief from the stale warm air inside with its typical truck stop mix of stale cigarette smoke, warmed over coffee, and hot grease. He paused as he reached into his pocket for his keyless entry remote. A brief, unpleasant whiff of diesel caused him to wrinkle his nose as the electronic "chirp-chirp" of the car unlocking itself echoed off the wall behind him.

Fortunately the parking lot was mostly empty. The only other person he could see was a truck driver over at the other end of the building filling his tanks at the diesel pumps. The waitress was too distracted by the surprisingly large tip to pay much attention to the men sliding into Arnold's sleek, new Lexus outside.

"Please," said Arnold as he put the key into the ignition, "Be sure to fasten your seat belts. We wouldn't want to break the law, now would we?"

The engine turned over smoothly. It purred so quietly that those seated inside could barely tell it was running. Arnold put the car into reverse and carefully backed out of the handicapped parking space and headed for the exit. "I hope you don't mind," he said looking at Paul in the rear view mirror. "My Jaguar was stolen the other day. It was totaled in an accident out by Hinckley Lake. I don't like accidents."

"Where are we headed?" asked Paul.

"Why you disappoint me, dear fellow! I thought it would be obvious. We're going across the street to see that mysterious hole you found."

The car's interior was warm enough to chase away the late night chill as Arnold pulled out of the parking lot. Crossing the street he headed up the Center Road drive to the church parking lot. He could barely feel the bumps in the drive as the Lexus crept smoothly up the bumpy gravel drive.

"I've always enjoyed this place at night," commented Arnold as they drove by the Civil War Memorial, "It is so very peaceful – like a tomb. Such a sense of history as well. It's like driving late at night out on Nathaniel where the old orphanage burned." He turned to look at Paul. "I'm sure you've heard the stories. They say you can hear a child crying in the dark of the moon. Have you ever heard it?"

Arnold parked the car in the back of the parking lot, near the deer path that led off into the woods. He unlatched his seat belt and motioned for the men to get out of the car. The gravel crunched softly under his expensive Italian shoes as he swung his feet out of the car and

pulled himself erect. Pursing his lips he sucked in the cool air deeply and noisily as he looked up at the full moon and stars shining brilliantly in the clear night sky. Opening his mouth he expelled the now warm moist air in a long, exaggerated exhalation.

Arnold reached back into the car to retrieve his ornate walking stick while the others got out. Straightening up again he adjusted his coat and closed the car door. The car chirped twice as he triggered the remote door locks. "Come, come, Mr. Brown, the night waits for no man, young or old. Lead the way if you would please."

"Lead the way where?" stalled Paul, not really wanting to go into the woods.

"Why to your mysterious hole in the ground, of course! Mr. Logan, please accompany Mr. Brown. I would not want him to trip or get lost in the dark."

Bill Bartlett, who had been quiet up to now, spoke up, "Wouldn't it be better to wait until morning. It would be a lot safer then. Besides, we don't have any flashlights. From what I understand, that hole's a dangerous place."

"Nonsense, Mr. Bartlett. The night is clear and the moon is bright. We have all the light we need."

"He does have a point," objected Paul. "Why do we have to go out there tonight? For that matter, why do we need to go at all? What is it you want?"

Arnold looked hurt, "I thought it was obvious, I want to see what I am buying." He pointed his cane at Dan Logan. "Assist Mr. Brown."

Logan stepped up behind Paul and grabbed his arm before he could react. Twisting it painfully behind his back he propelled Paul forward to the path. Strangely, Bill, did not react but followed passively as they headed into the woods.

A few minutes later and the group arrived by the downed ginkgo tree. Arnold was somewhat out of breath and leaned heavily on his walking stick as they entered the small clearing. His shoes were stylish but not overly practical for walking in the woods at night. Consequently, his feet hurt more than he expected and his heart beat a bit harder and faster than he cared.

His physical discomfort all but disappeared as his eyes took in an incredible sight. A shimmering, luminescent pool of thick indigo mist filled the pit by the roots of the fallen tree. Strange haunting dark shapes seemed to swirl around as he stared into its depths.

Mesmerized by the sight, Arnold forgot the others for a moment, though it seemed like an eternity to him. Several of the shapes came together to form a vaguely familiar female face, his long dead mother, perhaps? He could almost hear her voice faintly calling, "Arrrrrnoold, Arrrrrnoold," inviting him closer... closer...

A hand tugging on his shoulder interrupted. "Mr. Narsch," said Bill, "Careful you don't get too close. That dirt's awfully soft around the edge. It would be easy to fall in."

Arnold shook his head and blinked his eyes several times. The face and the voice were gone. Regaining his composure he turned back to face Paul. Dan still had a firm hold on him as they stood a few feet back from the pit.

"Ahem, yes." Arnold cleared his throat. "Alright, down to business then. Mr. Brown, my employee here has presented you with a more than generous offer for your little church and the seventeen acres of land that it sits on. Unfortunately you have so far refused it. As the interim pastor I believe that you can, and will, with the help of Mr. Logan and Mr. Bartlett here, convince your people to sell."

"No way!" protested Paul vehemently. "We're not going to sell this property to anybody! Especially not you!"

Arnold ignored his protest as he continued impassively, "If you will agree to my offer right now I will throw in a small bonus."

"I don't care what kind of bonus you offer. This church is not for sale!"

"Why, Mr. Brown, you have not heard what the bonus is yet. The bonus is your life." Arnold gestured toward Bill with his cane. "And the life of Mr. Bartlett here."

Paul was dumbstruck. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Thinking fast, he tried grasp the situation. "Lord," he prayed silently, "I sure need some help here! Surround me with Your protective hand and send your angels as ministering spirits as you promised in Hebrews 1:14."

He looked around as Arnold Narsch continued. "My family has been searching for its exact location and the means to open it for generations. Refusal is no option. We will not be denied."

Paul paused before answering. Worried at first, he began to feel a renewed confidence in the Lord. "Yeah, right. You have no power over us, we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ and we are His servants. You can't do anything to us unless God allows it!"

Arnold's face contorted in a brief spasm of anger before he regained his composure. "Don't be so sure, Mr. Brown. After all, you are here now because I willed it, not your pathetic little god. Besides, you of all people should know that I have already gained control of Mr. Bartlett. Remember the vial of oil that burst on him Sunday morning? The Tunoan oil curse? I set it up and I will not let him out of my control until this property is mine!"

"You may have a temporary influence on him," answered Paul, "But God is ultimately in control!"

Twisting in Dan's grasp he called over to Bill who stood behind Arnold. "Bill! Bill! Remember who you are in Christ! You have been set free in Jesus and the devil has no right to hold you in bondage!"

"Shut up!" shouted Arnold.

Bill looked up, his face an aching sea of pain and confusion. "Pray, Bill, pray!" called Paul.

"SHUT UP!" shouted Arnold, louder and more stridently than before.

"Remember Romans 8:15-16! 'For ye received not the spirit of bondage again unto fear; but ye received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God:'"

"STOP IT!" screamed Arnold, brandishing his walking stick, "Your god is nothing! He's a miserable failure! I order you to shut up NOW or I'll have you thrown into this pit immediately!"

"No, your god is nothing!" countered Paul as he turned back to face Arnold. "Your god is the miserable failure. He is a liar and a murderer. He's a deceiver and a pretender. He is the one who is going into the pit—the bottomless pit!"

"We'll see about that! Let's see your god save you! Logan, throw him in!"

Paul could feel Logan's grip tighten on his arm and shoulder and braced himself. Logan didn't move though and Paul could feel him begin to tremble. Arnold shouted and cursed as Dan began to shake. Between Arnold's bellowing, he could hear Bill crying and repeating over and over, "Abba, Father! Abba, Father!"

Suddenly, Dan let go of Paul and sunk to his knees. "Father! Forgive me!" he cried, "I've been so wrong, so very, very wrong! I've sinned! I'm the one who deserves to die! Thank you for sending your Son Jesus Christ to die for my sins. I believe! I believe He died for me

and rose again the third day like the Bible says. With all my heart I turn from my sin and accept Jesus Christ by faith as my only hope and Savior right now!”

“Aaaaargh!” screamed Arnold, his face twisted with hate and fury. He raised his cane over his head and charged Dan and Paul like an enraged bear. Moving surprisingly fast for a man of his bulk, he lashed out with his cane, striking Dan on the cheek, leaving an angry looking red gash just below his left eye.

Paul ducked as Arnold took a swing at him. Missing, Arnold stumbled and nearly fell into the pit. Paul caught him by the belt just in time and swung him away from the blue mist that seemed to reach up to grab him. The belt ripped through several belt loops as Arnold crashed into a large, disheveled heap alongside the pit.

“Get away from me!” Arnold moaned as he lay crumpled on the ground when Paul tried to help him up. His expensive Italian shoes were soiled and scuffed. Several buttons were missing from his shirt as he tried vainly to tuck it into his muddy pants while his belt hung limply by the few remaining loops.

Slowly he raised himself to all fours, his breath coming in great wheezy gasps. He strove to regain some measure of dignity as he used his walking stick to stand up. He glared malevolently at the others. “You’ll regret this, Mr. Brown,” he said quietly, “You’ll all regret this.”

Limping and leaning heavily on his cane he turned and headed back toward the parking lot. Pausing at the edge of the clearing, he turned and fixed an icy, withering eye on Dan, “Oh, and Mr. Logan, you are fired.”

The men looked at each other as Arnold lumbered off into the darkness, not quite knowing what to say. Bill broke the silence by pointing to the pit. “Look! The mist is disappearing!”

Unlike earlier, the mist was not receding into the hole. Instead, it slowly dissipated into the air. Along with it, the oppressive uneasiness that seemed to surround the pit gave way to a sense of relief, as if an evil presence were departing.

Dropping to his knees, Paul thanked God for His protection and victory in the spiritual battle they had just come through. Dan quickly joined him, rejoicing over his new found faith in Christ. Bill joined in as well, rejoicing over Dan’s salvation and his own deliverance.

After a few minutes of prayer and praise the men stood up. The mist was gone completely now and the night around them seemed somewhat brighter. Heading back to the parking lot, a chorus of croaking frogs and chirping crickets serenaded the men as their hearts swelled with joy and a greater appreciation for the love, mercy and protective hand of God.

Both Dan’s and Bill’s trucks were still parked over at the Stage Stop Restaurant so they headed down the drive to the restaurant from the parking lot. Crossing the street they headed over to Dan’s truck and had a quick word of prayer.

“That’s a nasty cut where Arnold’s cane hit you,” said Paul as Dan got into his truck, “Better get keep an eye on it. Careful going home.”

Walking over to Bill’s truck, Paul waited as Bill unlocked the doors. Climbing in he turned to wave at Dan who tooted his horn as he backed out of his parking space and drove past them. It was sure good to see the change in Dan, and Bill, thought Paul, as the engine coughed to life.

A few minutes later Bill pulled into Brandon’s driveway. “Paul, er, Pastor,” began Bill hesitantly as Paul began to open the door, “I can’t thank you enough for what you did for me.

Back there. At the hole, that is. It was like I was a prisoner in my own body, almost like a puppet on a string. I couldn't seem to break free. But when you reminded me of who I was in Christ, it seemed as if whatever it was that had me in its grip lost its hold on me. I just wanted to thank you."

"Hey, don't thank me. I didn't do anything. Thank God. He's the one that delivered you."

"Yeah, but He used you. I really appreciate that. And thanks for being willing to come out late at night like this."

"Don't mention it." Paul hopped out of the truck. "Take care, Bill. I'll probably talk to you sometime tomorrow, or rather later today. Good night."

Paul stretched tiredly, drinking in the cool night air, before climbing up the steps to the back porch. His uncle's cat, Sicillia, met him as he let himself in, winding her way between his feet. He scooped her up and set her on his shoulder as he headed up the back stairs.

A faint snoring sound came from his Uncle Brandon's room as he walked quietly down the upstairs hallway. He looked in on both Ben and Alex who were fast asleep. Sicillia hopped off his shoulder with a slight thump as he reached his own bedroom as a faint light gleamed out from under the door as he reached to open it.

Karen was sitting up in the bed as he entered the room. The alarm clock beside her glowed "3:11 AM" in a cool indigo blue light. "Paul," she said anxiously he came into the room, "Thank God you're alright! I was going to wait up for you but I fell asleep while reading my Bible. I woke up suddenly a little over an hour ago with a strong impression to pray for you. I haven't been able to go back to sleep since."

"Well, honey, it's been quite a night..." began Paul as he got ready for bed.

It was nearly ten when Paul woke up the next morning. The door was slightly ajar where Sicillia the cat had nosed her way in. She was curled up in a warm fuzzy ball against the small of his back. She meowed reproachfully as he moved to get up and quickly went back to sleep.

Faint snippets of conversation wafted upstairs as Paul groggily swung his feet out of the bed and felt for his slippers. Grabbing his robe, he made his way down the hall to get ready to face the day.

A few minutes later, he headed down the stairs to find Karen on the telephone. "Paul's up now... I'll be sure to tell him... Yes, I'll try to get him to slow down a little. He's been on the go ever since we got back from Tunoa... You take care, too. Bye-bye."

Karen hung up the phone. "Good morning, dear. That was Janet Bartlett. Bill's doing much better today. He's back to his old self and apologizing like crazy. He even promised to take her out for dinner tonight. He told her all about last night, too. She said she could hardly believe it. I'd have trouble myself if it weren't for some of the stuff we saw in Tunoa."

"You and me both! Where's everybody at?"

"Uncle Brandon took the kids to the store with him an hour or so ago. They should be back before noon."

They chatted for a few moments then Paul went to the kitchen to get them each a glass of water. He really wanted a cup of tea but reminded himself that he was fasting. Besides, he still felt a little guilty about ordering the coffee last night, even if he ended up not drinking any of it.

Returning to the living room, Paul set their glasses down on the coffee table before sitting down next to his wife. Sipping their water, they shared a couple of prayer requests and then spent a few moments in prayer together.

When they finished praying, Karen drank the rest of her water and headed down to the basement to start a load of laundry. Paul, meanwhile, grabbed his reading Bible and opened it to the book of Galatians. Glancing at the number of chapters, he said to himself, "Looks like I'll be in Zechariah tomorrow."

Alex burst through the front door just as Paul finished reading Proverbs 7. "Daddy! Daddy!" she cried excitedly as she threw her arms around him.

Ben followed her in carrying a few bags. He paused long enough to say good morning to his dad before taking them to the kitchen.

Brandon came in with another bag behind him and set it down on the counter beside Paul. "It's about time you're up!" he kidded his nephew, "Karen told me what time you came in last night. Keep it up and I'm going to have to set a curfew for you."

Alex giggled.

"Hey, squirt," said Brandon, turning his attention to Alex, "I think I hear your mom downstairs doing laundry. Why don't you go give her a hand."

He watched as Alex scampered off before turning back to Paul with a serious expression on his face. "I ran into one of Wildwood's finest while getting gas at the Stage Stop. Seems there was a bad accident down Center Road at Fire Creek early this morning. The driver was killed. Fortunately no one else was involved."

"That always was a dangerous spot," said Paul. "Anyone we know?"

"Yeah. Dan Logan."

"Dan! What happened?!"

"Sgt. Hunt thought maybe he had fallen asleep at the wheel. He overshot the curve at the bottom of the hill and nose-dived into the creek. Good thing he got saved last night."

"But that's impossible!" protested Paul. "He was wide awake when he left the Stage Stop. It's only a little over a mile from there to Fire Creek. I don't see how he could have fallen asleep in that short time."

"That does seem a little hard to believe," agreed Brandon. "But what else could it be?"

"Beats me! I mean Dan was pretty excited about just getting saved and seeing the Lord defeat Arnold Narsch. He was pretty pumped when he got in his truck. I don't think that whack from Arnold's walking stick wasn't enough to give a guy like him a concussion or anything that might have caused him to black out on the way home."

Paul paused. An unsettling thought was forming in the back of his mind. He looked at his uncle. "You don't suppose..."

"Don't suppose what?"

"You don't suppose Arnold's cane had some of the same stuff in it that killed Pastor Williams. I mean, after all, we are fairly sure that the Narsch's had something to do with his death."

"It's a thought," agreed Brandon, "Maybe I'll give Sgt. Hunt a call. Better yet, I'll give Agent McKay a call. If there's the possibility of a connection, the FBI may be interested in examining Dan's body. Besides, it will give me a chance to find out if they identified the substance in the needle they found in the umbrella recovered from the crash site out by Hinckley Lake."



Paul sat back on the couch while Brandon headed off to his office. “Lord,” he prayed, “If Dan was poisoned like Pastor Williams, then that is twice that you kept me from being killed. But why did those men have to die instead of me? I know they were saved and even now they are in heaven with you. Still, why did they have to die? I don't understand, Lord. Nevertheless, I do know that you are in control. Please help me to understand.”

Opening his eyes, Paul leaned forward. He started to close his Bible when a verse, Genesis 50:20 where Joseph sought to reassure his brothers who had conspired against him, caught his eye: “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.”

His thoughts were interrupted as his uncle returned from his office. “The FBI identified the substance that was in the umbrella needle. Josh McKay said it would have normally taken longer except that the lab tech that identified it had seen it before. He used to work in Seattle where the same substance was used in a string of murders by the Gaia Liberation Front. The FBI came in because the victims were federal workers, U.S. Forest Service and National Park rangers.”

“What is it?”

“It's an organic neurotoxin produced in the skin glands of the rough skinned newt.”

Ben, who had come back in the room while the men were talking, spoke up. “Hey! I've heard of them! They're only found in western Oregon and Washington. I read about them in my biology book. It's the only poisonous amphibian in North America.”

“That's right, Ben,” continued Brandon. “Apparently it causes death by paralyzing the heart and lung muscles. McKay said he would have the lab run a tox-screen on Logan. Said it might dovetail with an investigation they've opened up into those two GLF guys, Chakkal and Chattham and their involvement in Pastor Williams death.”

The phone rang, interrupting their discussion. “I'll get it!” called out Karen who was just coming up from the basement. Alex followed her with a basket of folded clothes.

Paul could hear Karen talking on the phone in the kitchen. It sounded as if she were talking about something at the church. A few moments later she hung up and walked into the living room.

“That was Curtis Krankovich,” she said. “He said you guys might want to come and look at the hole. He's out there with Willie Sykes and Dr. Minger right now. He says that oppressive feeling we felt around the pit is gone. And, you won't believe this, a spring of crystal clear water is bubbling up out of it!”

## **Epilogue**

Paul Brown stepped up to the pulpit. It was a warm Wednesday evening. The auditorium was filled a little more than usual due to the nature of the church business meeting that he was about to call to order. Deacons Brandon Hayes and Chuck Krankovich sat off to one side and the song leader, Mr. Davidson had just returned to his seat alongside his wife in the front row. Several people milled about, making their way to their seats as they returned from a short break following the midweek prayer service.

A lot had happened in the last twelve days since leaving Tunoa, thought Paul. The tragic murder of Pastor Williams. His own unexpected appointment as interim pastor. Arnold Narsch's attempt to force him to sell the church. Dan Logan's spectacular salvation and sudden death. Then there was the mysterious hole that had opened up in the woods behind the church. Surprisingly, it was now the source of a small stream gurgling up out of it. And now, well, now it was time to start the meeting.

"Good evening," began Paul. "If we could have every one seated, I would like to open our May business meeting." The last few stragglers sat down as he continued. "Let's bow our heads and open with a word of prayer."

After prayer, Brandon and Chuck reviewed the old business and presented the church financial report. Offerings had been generally good in April, said Chuck, though the missions fund was lagging behind a bit for the month. The only old business to deal with had to do with re-roofing the church. Most agreed that it needed some work and should be taken care of now that the weather was becoming nicer. Brandon said that he would call around and get some estimates before the final decision was made.

As the meeting moved on to new business, an air of excitement seemed to grip the congregation. Paul looked at Karen who smiled back encouragingly. Ben and Alex fidgeted nervously in their seats. Paul felt a bit nervous himself. "I believe we have some new business to discuss," he announced.

Chuck Krankovich rose from his seat and walked to the pulpit. "As we all know, a great tragedy struck our church just over a week and a half ago. Pastor John Williams was taken from us suddenly, stuck down by the act of evil men. According to our constitution and as the result of a special business meeting ten days ago, Paul Brown was appointed to serve as our interim pastor. He has also served, along with Deacon Brandon Hayes and myself, on the pulpit committee to help locate a new pastor for our church. I would like to announce that the committee has identified the man we believe God has provided to pastor this church." He paused as he stepped to the side. "Deacon Hayes, if you would please."

Brandon rose and walked over to join Chuck. "I realize that it has only been a short time since we constituted the pulpit committee. However, I believe that God has blessed our efforts and has already provided a man who is more than qualified for the job. A man who is well acquainted with our church and well known by most of you. A man that both Deacon Krankovich and I can heartily recommend. A man that, with a little persuasion, even my nephew was willing to endorse." He paused as a few good-natured chuckles rippled over the congregation.

Paul felt a little embarrassed as he listened. He smiled and shifted his weight from foot to foot awkwardly as his uncle continued.

"The pulpit committee would like to recommend and put forward our interim pastor, Paul Brown, for approval as our new pastor. Do we have a motion to that effect?"

A beaming Bill Bartlett jumped to his feet. "I move that we accept Paul Brown as the new pastor of the Wildwood Baptist Church!"

"I second that motion!" called out Willie Sykes.

"We have a motion on the floor," announced Brandon, "All in favor, say, 'Amen'!"

"AMEN!" shouted the congregation as one.

"Any opposed?"

No one spoke.

Paul stood quietly himself as his uncle turned toward him. Karen winked at him from

her seat.

“Paul, on behalf of the deacons and congregation, I’d like to be the first to extend the right hand of fellowship and welcome you as our new pastor.”

Paul reached out and grasped his uncle’s hand. A couple of cameras flashed as they shook hands and then embraced warmly. Chuck Krankovich stepped up alongside of him, congratulating him as well.

Karen rushed up to the platform with Ben and Alex. Paul hugged each of his kids briefly before hugging Karen. “Guess we’re not heading back to Tunoa anytime soon!” he laughed in her ear.

On the other side of town, Arnold Narsch straightened his tie as he paused outside his father’s office. Bracing himself for a verbal onslaught he pushed open the door and walked warily through.

His father, Simon Narsch, looked up at him coolly from behind his desk but did not say anything. Arnold stood uncomfortably while his father returned his attention to the contents of a manila folder that lay open on the desk in front of him. An ornate Black Forest cuckoo clock in the corner ticked loudly, marking off the moments of an uncomfortable silence.

“Father—“ began Arnold.

Simon’s raised his hand abruptly, cutting him off before he could say anything more.

Several more uncomfortable minutes passed in agonizing silence. Even time itself seemed to pause, waiting for the elder Narsch to speak. Arnold felt like he was a child again when his father would force him to stand before him, waiting silently for his verbal assault over the slightest infraction or failure.

Slowly, Simon closed the folder and looked up. His voice was icy and disdainful as he finally addressed his son. “You know, of course, that you have failed me once again.”

Arnold winced as if he had been physically struck. Chastising himself for allowing his father to see him react, he fought to maintain his composure.

“The shamballah opening, thanks to your ineptitude, is now permanently closed. Our family has been searching for the shamballah point for generations. The power it would have allowed us...” His voice trailed off for a moment.

Arnold shifted his bulk uncomfortably, leaning heavily on his walking stick.

The intercom on his father’s desk buzzed suddenly, interrupting them.

Simon stabbed a bony finger down on the intercom. “Yes?” he demanded impatiently.

“Sorry to disturb you, Sir,” came a slightly tinny voice, “But there are two gentleman here to see you. Sgt. Hunt from the Wildwood Police Department and Special Agent Josh McKay from the FBI.”

“That’s odd,” thought Arnold as he father said to send them in. “What would they be doing here?”

The door opened as Sgt. Hunt and Agent McKay entered the office. Simon stood up as Agent McKay walked to the desk. Arnold noted curiously that Sgt. Hunt remained near the door, behind him.

“Mr. Narsch,” said Agent McKay, holding up several folded papers, “I have an arrest warrant for your son, Arnold Narsch, and a search warrant for his offices.”

Startled, Arnold’s eyes widened abruptly at the news. “What! You can’t be serious! What do you mean, an arrest warrant? On what charges?”

McKay turned to face Arnold. “Arnold Narsch, you are under arrest for the murder of

Mr. Daniel Logan, conspiracy to commit murder in the case of the Reverend John Williams, and the attempted murder of Reverend Paul Brown.”

Arnold’s face flushed as Sgt. Hunt stepped up with a pair of handcuffs. He stumbled backward, dropping his cane, as Sgt. Hunt grabbed his arm. “This can’t be happening!” he told himself.

Agent McKay picked up the walking stick and examined its bronze tip.

“No!” denied Arnold, panicking. “I had nothing to do with those deaths!”

McKay twisted the end of the walking stick and a hidden needle sprung out. A clear, yellowish liquid glistened at its tip. “Wanna bet the lab guys identify this as the same poison that killed Williams...and Logan?”

Arnold couldn’t believe what he was hearing and seeing. “I’ve never seen that!” he cried. “That can’t be mine! Somebody must have switched it!”

“Looks like one of kind to me,” observed Agent McKay, running his fingers over the highly polished mahogany shaft. Turning it over he traced the ivory inlay and examined the ornate, ebony raven’s head at the top. Tapping a finger on one of the bronze opal eyes he continued, “Nope, don’t see too many of these around.”

The cold metallic click as Sgt. Hunt snapped the handcuffs in place was like a stake in Arnold’s heart. His knees buckled under him and he slumped to the floor. His sudden dead-weight nearly pulled Sgt. Hunt down as well. It all seemed like a nightmarish hallucination.

Looking up weakly, he cried out, “Father! Father! Help me!”

His father’s hollow reply gave him no comfort. “O my son Arnold, my son, my son Arnold! How could you besmirch our family like this?”

His head spinning, he allowed Sgt. Hunt to pull him to his feet and toward the door. Before they got there it opened and a strangely familiar figure walked through accompanied by a much younger man who looked to be his son.

Puzzled, Arnold looked at the two men intently as they walked by. He shook his head in disbelief. “It’s not possible!” he told himself as he watched his father walk around his desk to greet the two. “He can’t be here. He died in Haiti 25 years ago!”

The man turned and smiled malevolently at Arnold. The newcomer almost seemed to relish Arnold’s confusion and despair. It was as if he knew more about recent events than would have been expected.

A sudden realization penetrated the swirling madness of disbelief engulfing Arnold, bringing focus to his thoughts. Could he have been set up? If so, how? Why?

“Arnold,” called his father with a mocking tone, “Have you no words of greeting or congratulations for your long lost brother, Simon, and his son, Colin? Simon will be replacing you as CEO here at Narsch Industries.”

Marshalling the last vestiges of strength and dignity he had left, Arnold slowly pulled himself together. Raising himself up to his full height, he looked his brother coldly in the eye. “Father always did like you best—even if he did leave you for dead in Haiti.”

The End.

**Thank you for reading WILDWOOD.**

**I hope you enjoyed it.**

**If you have questions about your relationship with God or have trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior as a result of reading this book, please contact me at:**

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