

End of the Age: Final Deception

Copyright 2012 by Angela Kay

finaldeception@hotmail.com

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

Chapter 1

Jesse placed the finished report into the briefcase and closed the lid. Hearing the faint sound in the distance, she paused as the siren grew louder before receding into the night. She hated the noise, the shrieking reminder of a growing crime rate. The apartment was too quiet without Amber. She missed her roommate and the conversation that would have kept her mind off the commotion in the streets.

Picking up a magazine from the coffee table, Jesse studied dark eyes staring back at her from the cover before flipping through pages. The picture of a model wearing a floor-length wedding gown caught her attention before her eyes moved across the room to the desk in the corner. She had placed Tom's letter in the desk weeks ago. The words ending their engagement should have brought anger, maybe feelings of betrayal, but not the sad sense of relief in knowing her fiancé had summonsed the courage she lacked.

On the sofa, Jesse stared at the envelope with her name scrawled across the front in blue ink. This would be the last time she would read Tom's letter.

Jesse –

After many agonizing days, I find myself stricken with a forming conscience, or perhaps some other force moves my hand, compelling the truth from such an unlikely vessel. I've come to realize the truth, much like the past, cannot be changed by whim or regret. When told, it is best told simply. The truth is, I have misled you, Jesse, pretending to be a man of integrity, a man worthy of your love. I am not that man. In fact, I am a fraud, an expert at deception who can role-play, design a charming character long enough to seduce a woman.

Casual relationships, a mindless fling with no strings attached, that's all I've ever wanted from any woman. That's all I was looking for the evening we met. I remember how you caught my eye the moment you walked into the restaurant, how I watched you across the room with

scandalous thoughts dancing through my head.

I must confess, I thought your innocence was an act, a play at being coy and I waited with typical skepticism for the facade to collapse. How surprising, refreshing, to discover you are just who you seem, a woman without pretense, the woman I became obsessed with having even through marriage based on deceit. That was my plan until my reckless scheme began to unravel. Our talks, the time we spent together, everything about you influenced me in a way I never expected. You became more than a game, more than a conquest. I came to care about you, perhaps, even love you.

I do love you, Jesse, but sadly, I do not know how to be in love. How could I go through with marriage knowing that eventually the mask would slip and you would see the impostor that I am? You would see me, the real me. You wouldn't hate me. Much worse, you would feel sorry for me. I wish I were the man I pretend to be, a man who could face you instead of running away. Perhaps one day you will forgive me.

With Love,

Tom

She dropped the torn letter onto the coffee table. The question was inevitable. Who had been the bigger fraud? Tom said he loved her but had not been in love with her. Wasn't she guilty of the same? Tom had done them both a favor by ending the charade.

Jesse thought about Tom, wondering where he was. So unpredictable, he might be anywhere, sweeping a woman off her feet in Paris, chanting with a mystic guru in India. Like a Chameleon, Tom could blend in anywhere. Certainly, a trait she lacked. Tom was fun and exciting, but he could also be reckless, and, as she had recently discovered, deceptive. She didn't blame Tom. He had learned to survive, even excel, in the cold, manipulative world he grew up in. Tom came from a place where wealth equaled self-worth and he had plenty of both. He was right. She did feel sorry for him.

Memories of her first date with Tom brought a distracted smile as Jesse recalled the fidgety mess she had been. Just when

she thought she couldn't have been more nervous, the luxury car rolled to a stop to prove her wrong. The door attendant had stood like a sentry by the large ornate plaque engraved with the private club's address. Taking Tom's hand, she crossed the threshold into a foreign world, cringing inwardly with each step across a magnificently detailed Persian rug. The antique floor covering had been too beautiful to walk on, too expensive to be underfoot.

The lavish room with vaulted ceilings, velvet drapery and a towering fireplace had been the perfect backdrop for the city's most beautiful people. Men in expensive suits and women wearing the latest fashions lounged on Victorian sofas sipping cognac and fine wines. Tom's remark praising the club's old-world charm had gone unfinished when he turned to see her expression. Looking down at her plain sheath dress, she had said, "When you said dinner, I imagined someplace less—less exclusive."

When Tom called for the car, she had been more than a little relieved. Her mind raced for an excuse to cut the evening short, but before she could come up with anything, Tom suggested they go somewhere more relaxed. Her disappointment turned to surprise when he picked up chilidogs on their way to the beach where they strolled barefoot across the sand.

Tom kept the conversation going with talk about cultures and people he had met abroad. She never quite understood Tom's role in his father's chain of retail stores but she knew he often traveled. As the evening progressed, Tom talked about his childhood, growing up as an only child with a mother preoccupied with Tiffany's and a workaholic father. By the end of their first date, she suspected Tom had needed a friend, someone who didn't care about private clubs.

Her dates with Tom were simple after that, dinner, walks along the beach and the occasional museum or art gallery. They fell into a comfortable routine, and over time, Tom began to open up about painful childhood memories. Jesse often found herself

slipping into the therapist role but she never complained. The tradeoff had seemed fair. Tom needed someone to talk to and she needed the appearance of normalcy that dating offered.

When people at the office heard Tom had broken off their engagement, Jesse knew her co-workers were secretly waiting for the emotional meltdown that never came. With no details coming from her, colleagues gathered in whispering circles to draw their own conclusions. The looks of sympathy and abrupt silences when she walked into a room were endured with an appearance of calm. Eventually her breakup would be relegated to the back pages of office news. Until then, she would smile and assure those asking that she was doing fine.

Even if she wanted to, Jesse couldn't explain feelings she was still sorting out. After all, she had been dumped. She shouldn't feel relieved. Was she relieved? Some days she felt sad and lonely, other days regret, or was it self-reproach? She had agreed to settle, after all, to marry a man she wasn't in love with. Would she have settled? As the wedding day neared, she had felt trapped.

At least Amber didn't ask questions about the break up, but then again, why would she? She had let Amber read Tom's letter. Maybe she should have told her friend the truth, admitted she had never been in love with Tom. She should have, but she didn't. Instead, she brushed Amber's concern aside with the offhanded remark that she was stronger and more resilient than her friend realized.

Had her confident talk provoked fate? Jesse would wonder a few days later when she received a disturbing phone call. If Amber had been there, she would have known just how unprepared Jesse was to deal with a real tragedy. Awakened just before dawn, Jesse fumbled for the telephone receiver. The male voice on the other end sounded vaguely familiar. "Is this Jesse Hart?"

"Yes—yes it is," Jesse, confirmed.

“Jesse, this is Gabriel James. I’m sorry to wake you at such an early hour but your grandmother asked me to call. Florence is in the hospital.” Silence hung in the air. “Jesse, are you there?”

“Yes,” she choked the word through a tightening throat.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she stared blankly at the receiver in her hand. Her grandmother was in the hospital and tests were being done. What else had been said before she promised to catch the first flight out? She wasn’t sure.

Ignoring items falling to the floor, Jesse tugged the suitcase from the closet top. Her grandmother was the only family she had left. How ill was she? Why hadn’t her grandmother made the call herself? Was she too weak to talk, unconscious? The thought shook Jesse to her core. She turned slowly in the bedroom, mind in a fog. If only Amber weren’t away visiting her parents. Practical and in control, Amber would know what to do. Mentally stepping back from the edge of panic, Jesse pulled herself together. Call the airline, pack—her mind began to list the steps that would take her to her grandmother.

Although she had never been fully convinced God exists, Jesse said a silent prayer as she stood in her apartment window looking down into the busy street. The taxi should have been there already. As if summonsed by the thought, a horn blast had her hurrying downstairs. After giving instructions to the driver, she looked up at the balcony of the apartment she and Amber had shared the last four years. The twelve-story concrete building seemed heavy, even formidable, in the stark morning sun. As the taxi pulled into traffic, her eyes fell to the gum wrapper next to her feet. The white slip of paper became a blur as images of her grandmother, scared and alone in a depressing hospital room, began to fill her mind.

The weight of the world pressed down on Jesse’s shoulders as she boarded the plane. Forcing a halfhearted smile in response to the flight attendant’s greeting, she moved down the

aisle to stuff her carry-on into the overhead compartment before slumping into a seat. Her grandmother, the person she loved most in the world, was in the hospital. Was she dying? A hand came up to silence a sob at the mental picture of her grandmother's open arms waiting to 'hug her to pieces' as a child.

Stuffing the shredded tissue into her pocket, Jesse forced herself to focus on positive memories. Childhood scenes from summers spent in the mountains began to play out like clips from a cherished movie—lines of untended fishing poles dripping into still water, her grandmother's bubbling laughter, walking trails and picnics. The image of her grandmother smiling over an open book came easily to mind. Her grandmother loved to read. Books and children—that's why she had become a teacher.

Her grandparents' playful, easy affection had shaped Jesse's romantic notions about love and marriage. She smiled, recalling the story of how her grandparent's had first met. Two people falling in love at work would sound ordinary, even boring, to some, but not to Jesse. She loved to hear the tale of her grandmother, a young woman just out of college, walking into the teachers' lounge to find a handsome gym teacher pouring coffee. As their eyes met across the room, coffee overflowed the cup's rim. Each time her grandmother told the story, Jesse would sigh, "Love at first sight."

"Clumsiness," her grandfather once whispered in Jesse's ear before dodging the end of the dishtowel her grandmother snapped. *Yes*, Jesse thought, *her grandparents had been in love, able to communicate with just a glance.*

Folded arms tightened across Jesse's chest in an unconscious effort to ward off the unbidden question. What would she do if her grandmother died? Although her mother died when she was just a toddler, she had not understood the real tragedy of death until her grandfather suffered a massive heart attack. Her grandmother had knelt in front of her chair to say, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."

Not understanding, Jesse had asked the question any nine year old might have. “When is Grampy coming home? Is Grampy coming home?”

Jesse had never seen a person smile and cry at the same time before that day. “Grampy isn’t coming back, Jesse. He was called home to be with Jesus, but he’s okay. He’s okay now.”

Confused, Jesse had stared at her grandmother without responding. Wasn't Jesus her grandmother's best friend? Why would Jesus take her grandfather from them? Years later, Jesse would look back and marvel at the strength and grace her grandmother had shown in the face of absolute heartbreak. She stared out the airplane window. “Please, don’t take Grammy,” she whispered to the azure sky.

Walking down the quiet, sterile hallway was almost more than Jesse could manage on shaking legs. The flight had given her too much time to think. The smell of antiseptic, at first faint, became smothering as she eyed the wood-grained door standing between her and her deepest fear. She pushed the metal handle to stand frozen in the doorway. Nothing she imagined had prepared her for what she was seeing. Although only five, the room seemed to be bulging with visitors standing around the bed where her grandmother sat up laughing. All eyes turned to Jesse when her grandmother exclaimed her name with outstretched arms.

“Grammy,” Jesse whispered. With her first step forward, she became a child again, rushing into her grandmother’s embrace.

The voice next to her ear was comforting. “Jesse, I’m fine, sweetie.”

Weeping, Jesse clung to her grandmother, relief washing over her. Minutes passed before she pulled back to reach for the box of tissue on the nightstand. Quickly wiping tears, she turned to apologize to her grandmother’s visitors. “I’m—I’m sorry...”

Her voice trailed off in the empty room before looking back at her grandmother. “I’m sorry for such an outburst, Grammy, but, I—I,” she began to stammer as fresh tears filled her eyes, “I guess I imagined the worst.”

Her grandmother squeezed her hand. “I’m fine, child, just a fainting spell. I don’t even remember fainting but Gabriel said I did. I just remember feeling dizzy when I stood up to go to bed.”

Jesse’s eyes widened with worry. “People don’t just pass out, Grammy.”

“Now, don’t make a fuss. I’ve had all kinds of tests and everything came back normal. Dr. Haynes said I probably just stood up too fast. He said that happens to people sometimes—may never happen again.”

“The doctor said you’re okay?” Jesse asked, anxious for reassurance.

“Healthy as a horse,” she said, patting Jesse’s hand.

A river of stress flowed out in a slowly released breath. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am, Grammy. I was just frantic—” She stopped, her head tilting questioningly. “Did you say Gabriel was at your house?”

“Yes, dear. He drove me to the hospital.”

Puzzled, Jesse waited for her grandmother to say more, to explain why Gabriel had been at her house so late in the evening. Did he visit often? Just as Jesse would have asked, the telephone rang. Handing over the receiver, she watched her grandmother’s face light up before telling the caller she was well and would be going home soon.

Replacing the receiver a few moments later, Jesse sat down on the edge of the bed. During the flight, she had thought of all the missed opportunities to tell her grandmother how much she loves her. Wrapping her grandmother in her arms, she inhaled the

sweet vanilla fragrance that had always been such a part of her. “I love you, Grammy,” she said before pulling back to study clear brown eyes and rosy cheeks. “You look good.”

“I feel good,” she said, smiling. “I feel even better now that you’re here.” Her eyes sharpened on Jesse’s face. “You’ve been away too long, child.”

“You’re right,” Jesse said. “I have stayed away too long. I should have visited sooner.”

Her grandmother’s face softened. “But you’re home now. That’s what matters.”

Hearing a knock at the door, Jesse turned to see Gabriel standing in the doorway. “Come in, Gabriel,” her grandmother called.

Seeing Gabriel coming toward the bed, Jesse moved to a nearby chair. “Jesse,” he said, acknowledging her as he passed before his focus moved to her grandmother. “Your visitors asked me to say good-bye, Florence. I don’t want to intrude but I’d like to come back later if you don’t mind.”

”Mind? Why, of course I don’t mind,” her grandmother scolded lightly.

When Gabriel asked her grandmother if he could bring anything when he returns, she looked at Jesse fondly. “No, thank you, dear. I have everything I need right here.”

“I understand,” he said, kissing her cheek. If you change your mind, give me a call. The doctor said there are no restrictions.”

Remembering the sweet coffee she’d had that morning, she said, “Come to think of it, the coffee you brought earlier was good. What was that?”

He smiled. “One French vanilla cappuccino. Anything else?”

With his focus on her grandmother, Jesse had the chance to study Gabriel's profile. The teenager she'd last seen ten years ago had matured into a tall, powerfully built man. His dark, curly hair was shorter than she remembered but long enough to fall loosely across his forehead just as it did when he was a boy.

Seeing Gabriel turn, Jesse quickly looked away. "It's good to see you again, Jesse," he said.

She looked back at him. "Hmm? Oh, um, it's good to see you, too." Remembering he had taken the time to call, a twinge of guilt made her add, "Thank you for calling me, Gabriel."

On his way to the door, he stopped in front of Jesse's chair. "One decision can sometimes change a person's life," he said before walking out the door.

She stared after him, confused by the remark. Before she could ponder the odd comment, her grandmother patted the bed at her side. "Jesse, come over here and sit with me." Her grandmother studied her face with keen eyes before saying, "I haven't talked to you in weeks. Tell me how you've been doing."

The words, since the breakup, weren't said but Jesse heard them all the same. She thought back to the last call placed to her grandmother to say the wedding had been canceled. To her relief, her grandmother had not asked too many questions. Instead, she had spent the time insisting Jesse come home for a visit. Convincing her grandmother that she couldn't possibly get away from work had taken the better part of an hour.

Shrugging, Jesse said, "I don't know, Grammy. I guess I'm okay. You know, after the breakup, I was a little confused. I felt sad, but maybe a little relieved. It's complicated, but I think it all worked out for the best. I think marrying would have been a mistake for both of us."

"I'm sorry, dear. I know it's been hard on you," she said, sighing.

Jesse shook her head. "No, Grammy. Don't feel sorry for me. When Gabriel called to say you were in the hospital, I was scared, really scared. I realized then what's important. I can get over a breakup," she said, holding back tears stinging the backs of her eyes. "I can survive almost anything, Grammy, but not losing you. I could never get over that."

"Now, Jesse," she said, patting Jesse's hand, "there's no need to worry about things like that. I think God still has plenty for me to do here. I'm sorry you were upset, sweetie, but I thank God for bringing you home."

"I'm glad I came home, Grammy. I needed to see for myself that you're okay." Her face brightened to say, "Well, enough talk about me and sad things. Let's talk about you. Tell me what you've been doing."

They were still chatting when Jesse saw her grandmother cover a yawn. Getting up from the bed, she said, "Grammy, I'm sorry. I should have realized you were up all night. You must be exhausted. You should rest, take a nap and we'll talk more when you wake up."

"But I'm not sleepy," her grandmother protested even as she tried to smother another yawn.

Jesse switched on a small lamp and turned off the overhead light. "I'm going to stretch my legs, maybe get a soda. You can take a nap or stay awake. Either way, I'll be back in a little while."

With a hint of a smile, her grandmother said, "Well, I guess if you're going out anyway, I may as well rest my eyes a bit."

Jesse pulled the blanket up around her grandmother's shoulders and kissed her cheek. "You do that, Grammy. Rest your eyes for a while."

Watching Jesse, she breathed a contented sigh. "God

answered my prayers and brought my Jesse home.”

Roaming the hospital in search of a vending machine, Jesse thought about her grandmother’s words. Her grandmother thought God often intervened on her behalf. Her philosophy on life was simple. When things went wrong, she turned to God. When things went right, she thanked God, and when bad things happened, she accepted it as God’s will.

Although she had gone to church with her grandmother when she was young, Jesse had never been able to adopt her religious beliefs. She had always struggled with doubt. College, particularly graduate school, had reinforced those doubts and eventually turned her off the topic of religion altogether. While professors masked their negative opinion of Christians in clever subtlety, students had been less inventive.

When the topic of religion came up, as it often did in humanities, Jesse would hear classmates criticize and label Christians as closed minded and brainwashed. The few brave enough to defend the faith had been ridiculed and quickly silenced by the more outspoken freethinkers in the class. From her perch on the fence of neutrality, Jesse had silently noted the hypocrisy of one side calling the other critical and closed-minded.

Later that evening, Jesse awoke to a dull pain in her neck. She sat up with a soft moan in the chair where she had fallen asleep. Rubbing her stiff shoulder, she looked across the room at her grandmother's sleeping form before her eyes fell to the white hospital blanket across her lap. Curious, she lifted a corner of the blanket.

“I was here earlier,” Gabriel said, coming through the door.

Turning quickly in her chair, Jesse gasped at the sharp pain slicing through her neck. Her hand went to the ache as she watched Gabriel coming toward her carrying two cups and a

small bag. “You covered me with a blanket?”

“The room was cool and I didn’t want to wake you.” Offering her one of the cups, he said, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. I would have knocked but my hands are full.”

Taking the coffee, she said, “Thank you,” without looking up. The thought of him in the room while she slept was somehow unsettling. How long had he watched her? She imagined herself snoring, or worse, drooling.

“Cream and sugar are in the bag,” he said, setting the other cup he carried on the nightstand before taking the chair next to hers. His tone was casual when he said, “You don’t snore. In fact, you look like a little girl when you sleep.”

The comment surprised her but before she could respond, a snort of laughter erupted from the bed. Still laughing, her grandmother held down a button on the controller to bring her bed into a sitting position. “Tell me, Gabriel. Do I snore?”

Seeming amused by her grandmother’s question, Gabriel smiled. “You are a portrait of loveliness when you sleep, Florence, but not nearly as quiet as your granddaughter.”

Flustered by the accuracy of Gabriel’s guess, Jesse stirred sugar into her coffee, pretending to ignore their banter. How had he known what she was thinking? Her expression must have given it away. That was the only plausible explanation. Pushing the thought aside, she turned her attention to her grandmother who was still teasing Gabriel, asking him to describe her snore. *What a silly conversation*, Jesse thought, giving in to the smile tugging the corners of her mouth.

They were still chuckling when her grandmother’s expression sobered and she turned to Gabriel to ask, “What time am I being released tomorrow?”

“Dr. Haynes said he’ll sign off on the discharge forms by nine but I’ll be here earlier to pack your things,” he answered.

Surprised at her grandmother's reliance on Gabriel, Jesse spoke up. "Gabriel doesn't need to inconvenience himself, Grammy. I can take you home in the rental."

Her grandmother eyed the blanket she was busily adjusting before dropping the bombshell that rocked Jesse back in her seat. "Gabriel is staying at the house." She cast a hopeful look at Jesse before saying, "You two could drive out together in the morning."

Jesse began to stammer before knowing what she would say. "But—but Gabriel—"

"Will be here early," Gabriel cut in smoothly.

Jesse looked from Gabriel to her grandmother, dumbfounded, caught like a leaf in a strong current headed for a waterfall.

Setting her cappuccino on the nightstand, her grandmother said, "It's settled then." Her smile turned to a look of concern when she noticed the pallor of Jesse's face. "You've had a long trip, Jesse, and it's getting late. Why don't you and Gabriel go home and get some rest."

"You know, Grammy," Jesse said quickly. "I was just thinking. We have so much to talk about. I should spend the night here with you."

Her grandmother's expression softened at the suggestion. "That would be nice, but, no, we can talk tomorrow. You'll be much more comfortable at the house."

Not ready to give in, Jesse patted the arms of the chair she sat in. "I'll be comfortable right here. I was thinking earlier that this chair is—well, unbelievable."

Shaking her head, her grandmother said, "No, sweetie. I'll feel better knowing you're tucked in bed at home. Besides, I'd like to read a while."

Gabriel got to his feet. “We’ll leave you alone to read, Florence.”

Jesse’s eyes narrowed on Gabriel’s back as he stepped forward to kiss her grandmother goodnight. *He has some nerve*, she thought, *speaking for people that way*. Maybe she wasn’t ready to leave. Just who does he think he is, anyway? She leaned forward, prepared to ask him that very question, but as he stepped back she stopped. She couldn’t miss the look of relief on her grandmother’s face.

As Gabriel turned, Jesse looked away, avoiding eye contact as he passed her chair on his way to the door. She hoped he would leave but she was disappointed. Hearing, “I’ll walk you to your car, Jesse,” she turned to see him leaning casually against the doorframe with his arms crossed, waiting.

She stared at him with tightening lips before glancing back to see her grandmother watching. Forcing a quick smile, she went to kiss her goodnight. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning, Grammy.”

Jesse turned off the car engine and looked around at the lit porch with a feeling of coming home. She had always loved the large rustic house. Her grandfather had built the house with hand-hewn logs salvaged from an inn slated to be torn down in a neighboring county. Her eyes traveled up the stone walk leading to the covered porch that testified to her grandmother’s love of plants. The thickly padded benches and rocking chairs brought a nostalgic smile as she remembered long summer days relaxing on the porch reading mystery novels.

Gabriel tapped the car window before opening the door. “I’ll carry your bags,” he said, offering a hand to help her from the car.

Standing, her eyes were just level with his chest. Her gaze paused at his open collar before fumbling for the trunk release

button. “My—my bags are in the trunk.”

She took her time to look over plants and flowers overflowing hanging baskets as she crossed the porch before following Gabriel through the front door. Stopping just inside the living room, she inhaled deeply, enjoying the light smell of cedar. Her eyes traveled up the rock fireplace to wide ceiling beams. The warm, country feel of the room was just as she remembered. Hearing her name, she went to the door to see Gabriel starting up the stairs. He called to her over his shoulder, “Are you staying in your old room?”

“Yes,” she answered, going to the lacquered banister she had sailed down countless times as a child. She ran a hand over the smooth surface as she started up the stairs. No matter how much she practiced, Gabriel had always beaten her distance down the smooth slope.

In her room, Gabriel placed her suitcase on the bed and turned to say, “If you don’t need anything else, I’ll let you get settled.”

She meant to thank him, let him leave the room, but as their eyes met, she found herself searching a man’s face for the boy she had once known. Something was different, she noted thoughtfully. Brown eyes that had once been laughing and carefree seemed darker, more intense.

The corners of his mouth tilted up a fraction. “Are you okay, Jesse?”

She blinked, puzzled by the remark. Why had he asked that? Then she knew. Not only was she staring but also blocking his path to the door. “Yes—yes, I’m fine,” she said, quickly stepping aside to let him pass. Thank you for carrying my bags.” When he didn’t move to leave, she looked up to see his amused expression. Did he find her discomfort entertaining? A ripple of anger bristled up her back to sharpen the edge in her voice. “I’ve taken up too much of your time already, Gabriel. I’m familiar

with the house and more than capable of managing on my own the rest of the evening.”

His eyes crinkled at the sides with restrained laughter. “Your concern is duly noted, but as it happens, I have no pressing business to attend to this evening.”

In no mood to provide him further amusement, she turned and walked to the window. “I won’t intrude on your free time then.” Trying for a dismissive tone, she added, “Thank you, Gabriel.”

She didn’t have to turn around to know he was smiling. She could hear it in his voice when he said, “You are more than welcome.”

Hearing him call to her from the doorway, her teeth snapped together before turning slowly to see his sober expression. “You are not an intrusion, Jesse,” he said quietly. “I have been expecting you for some time.” Before she could begin to form a response, he walked out of the room.

She stared at the closing door. Why would he be expecting her? Before yesterday, she had no reason to come home. Placing the heavy suitcase on the floor, she sat down on the end of the bed. Expecting her—what was that supposed to mean? Her eyes closed before falling back onto the bed with a groan. Oh no, he knows. That’s why he made the comment, he knows about the breakup. Don’t all heartbroken, rejected people go home to lick their wounds? Her grandmother must have told him. “Well, thank you small town, USA—the place where a mere acquaintance knows your business,” she grumbled in the empty room.”

Staring at the ceiling, Jesse grudgingly admitted the truth. Gabriel was certainly more than an acquaintance. They had grown up together. She had known him since—since when? She tried to remember, but couldn’t. Like siblings, she couldn’t say when they first met. Sibling, that’s how he had always thought of her, as a sister.

Pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes, Jesse tried to ward off memories bursting through new cracks in an old, weather-beaten dam. Gabriel had been one of several children to come to her grandparents' frequent cookouts. They had been friends, best friends, sharing toys as children and secrets as teenagers. Gabriel had known her better than anyone had. He often seemed to know what she was thinking.

Falling in love with Gabriel had been easy. She had been charmed by his shyness, fascinated by his intelligent, thoughtful views. At the age of fifteen, she had been hanging on his every word. The romantic fairy tale she created had been a masterpiece of self-deception. She deluded herself into thinking his kindness and smiles were born of love rather than protective affection. She had been an idiot.

Memories that should have been forgotten bubbled to the surface with a clarity reserved for yesterday. After years of pining and months of wavering, at the age of sixteen, she had decided to tell Gabriel how she felt. With butterflies in her stomach, she watched the station wagon pull into the drive only to be disappointed. Guessing at the reason behind Jesse's downcast face, Gabriel's mother paused to say her son would be driving himself up later. Then, she whispered the words that had sent Jesse's spirits soaring. "My son mentioned plans to ask a very special young lady out for a drive today."

When the older model Jeep pulled up forty-five minutes later, Jesse had been waiting. Gabriel returned her wave before walking around to the passenger side. The girl that latched onto his arm had been pretty, more than pretty. The love struck smile melted from Jesse's face as she stared blankly, stupidly, from the porch railing. She had stood that way until one of the younger boys called out, "Gabriel's got a girlfriend." The words, the teasing singsong voice, had etched itself into Jesse's mind with laser precision.

She never told anyone how she felt about Gabriel but her

grandmother had known. Sitting on the large rock overlooking the upper pond, Jesse turned a tear-stained face away when her grandmother sat down next to her. Maybe the long silence had given her grandmother time to sift through well-meaning platitudes others might have offered. When she finally spoke, her words were simple, words to let Jesse know she cared. "I'm sorry, Jesse."

The pain of Gabriel's rejection had gone deep. She would later watch girls in high school and then women in college flit from one romance to another while she continued to be haunted by one face. How often had she reminded herself that she and Gabriel had not dated? They had never even kissed, for heavens sake. In spite of everything, her heart had stubbornly refused to obey her head and forget. Psychology books she pored over had not given her the answers she searched for. In the end, she had come to one conclusion. Matters of the heart defy reason.

Buttoning the pencil skirt, Jesse murmured, "We were just kids then." She looked down to see the skirt droop just below her waistline. "Great," she grumbled. *I'm sure Grammy will notice I've lost weight. She already thinks I'm too thin.* She looked up to study sad green eyes staring back at her from an average, oval face. At five foot four, she was average height with long, straight, average brown hair. There was nothing striking or beautiful about her. The question had plagued her for years. If she were prettier, would things have turned out differently? Her shoulders fell a fraction. She had resigned herself to the truth long ago. "I am what I am, average." Sighing, she whispered, "And I can live with average."

Jesse blew out a long breath and started down the stairs, preparing to face Gabriel. In her room, she had convinced herself that she could be calm, casual and courteous, nothing less and nothing more. Calm, casual, courteous, she mentally chanted the mantra. She stopped inside the kitchen. Gabriel was setting plates on the large oak table. Trying to sound pleasant, she said, "You didn't have to fix dinner."

He pulled out a chair with a smile she might have described as charming if she weren't on guard. "Long flight, long day, I thought you might be tired and hungry."

"Yes, I am," she admitted, taking the seat he held, "thank you." The food looked delicious and the tempting smell was beginning to make her mouth water. News about her grandmother had pushed everything from her mind and she had not eaten since yesterday. She waited for him to be seated before picking up a roll to take a bite. "Very good," she said, taking a second bite.

Lacing his fingers together, he said, "Thank you," before bowing his head. Her expression froze. When he started to pray, the half-eaten roll dropped to her plate. The quickly swallowed bread lodged at the back of her throat, triggering a gag reflex. Eyes watering, she fought to stay quiet and wait for the prayer to end. The word, amen, was met with hacking coughs. Taking a drink of tea, she croaked, "Sorry," before clearing her throat several times.

When she finally quieted, he asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said, clearing her scratchy throat again. *Fine*, she thought—*oh, sure, fine, just fine*. Other than performing a spontaneous rendition of a cat coughing up a fur ball, she was great. When her throat began to relax, she took another drink before saying, "Something just went down the wrong way." Thinking about the remark, she smiled and shook her head.

He looked at her curiously. "Choking amuses you?"

"No. The comment I made amuses me," she said, starting to laugh softly. "I said something went down the wrong way but I'm wondering if that's even possible. I mean, really, if something goes down our throat at all, chances are it's headed in the right direction."

"You have a point," he said, smiling. "I'm glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humor."

With the mood lightened, Gabriel began to chat about people she remembered from summers spent in the mountains. Listening to anecdotes about his work as a youth minister, she began to relax. Remembering him as kind and generous, his choice of profession didn't surprise her. Even as a boy, he often talked about Bible verses he was studying.

Watching Gabriel cut a piece of meat, Jesse hid a smile. She wouldn't ask if he had ever recovered from the fourth grade trauma of being teased for having girly eyelashes. Boys, they could be so cruel, but in all fairness, his dark eyes and soot black eyelashes would draw attention. She cast a quick glance at his left hand, noting the absence of a wedding band. She found it curious that he wasn't married after all these years. With a mental gasp, she reined in her wayward thoughts. What was she doing? Calm, casual and courteous, she reminded herself.

After talking a while longer, Gabriel leaned back in his chair to say, "Psychology, interesting career choice. How did you come to select that field of study?"

Distractedly brushing a strand of hair behind her ear, she propped her chin on her hand. Like him, she cared about people. Curiosity, interest in the human mind and hopes of touching lives in some positive way were among the reasons for choosing psychology. She explained this to Gabriel before admitting that she had grown somewhat disillusioned during the course of her career. At his questioning look, she explained that insurance companies rather than individual need often dictate the level services a client receives. One shoulder lifted and fell lightly before saying, "So, I recently stopped seeing clients for therapy. I do assessments and referrals instead."

He looked at her with a puzzled expression. "A therapist who doesn't provide therapy."

She smiled at him across the table. "I'm afraid I didn't explain very well. You might expect a therapist to communicate more effectively. Let me try again. You see, I used to provide

therapy but I stopped, temporarily. I'm not comfortable ending treatment when people can't pay. Technically, I'm not abandoning clients, but it feels that way to me. As the recession deepened, several in the area lost their jobs and insurance. The situation was difficult for everyone."

"I think I understand," he said, nodding. "You sacrifice what you want in order to do what's right."

She considered his comment. "Maybe...maybe not. Some might think my motivations are rather selfish, an attempt to avoid uncomfortable situations. I mean, really, I may not like the firm's policies but I do understand their position."

He studied her downcast face. "The fact that the situation made you uncomfortable is telling in itself. Whatever the motive, Jesse, your reasoning seems justified."

Lifting one shoulder, she said, "No big deal, really." She watched him over the rim of the glass she lifted. *He's a good listener*, she thought. Glancing up at the wall clock, she said, "Can you believe we've been talking an hour?"

"Doesn't seem that long," he said, placing his napkin on the table. "I guess time has a way of slipping by in good company."

"Yes," she said, nodding, "I guess it does. Thank you, Gabriel. Dinner was very good."

Jesse was clearing the table when she heard a soft chuckle. She walked over to the sink where Gabriel was rinsing dishes. Handing him the plates she carried, she asked, "What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking about some of the disasters I created in your grandmother's kitchen. When Florence insisted I learn to cook, I don't think she knew what she was getting into. She has proven to be a woman of great patience."

Imagining Gabriel in her grandmother's apron, Jesse smiled. A few seconds later, the smile faded. She had been more than a little surprised to hear Gabriel was staying at the house. Why was he staying with her grandmother? She wanted to ask but was afraid she might embarrass him. Was he having financial problems? Maybe he needed a place to stay. She wasn't sure what the salary for a youth minister in a small town might be.

With the last glass in the dishwasher, she said, "I don't guess you've been staying here too long since Grammy didn't mention it before today."

"Hmm," he murmured, continuing to wipe the counter without looking her way.

She watched him, waiting. When he stayed quiet, she asked, "How long have you been here?"

"Not very long," he said, not looking at her.

His elusive answer only served to further pique her interest. She crossed her arms, waiting, knowing he realized she was watching him. Finally, he stopped what he was doing to look back at her. "Florence and I are working on a project. Since we work here, she suggested it might be more convenient if I stay at her house."

"Project," she said under her breath, trying to imagine possibilities. Drawing a blank, she asked, "What kind of project?"

He didn't respond for several seconds. When he did, he sounded apologetic. "I hope this doesn't offend you, Jesse, but I would prefer Florence tell you about the project she's involved with. Do you mind?"

"Well—no, I guess not," she said, a little embarrassed.

She focused on putting dishes away before looking back to see him watching her with a thoughtful expression. Just as he started to speak, his cell phone rang. Looking at the number, he

said, “Excuse me, I need to take this,” before walking from the room.

In her bedroom, Jesse finished unpacking before running a bath. Soaking in the tub, her mind drifted to Gabriel, thinking about how he had changed. He was taller and the soft edges of youth had given way to a more mature face with sharper, strong lines. What had been doing the last ten years? No wedding ring—she didn’t think he was married. Was he divorced? Did he have children, a girlfriend? The call he received so late made her wonder.

The worry and strain of the day had taken its toll and Jesse snuggled into the soft bed expecting sleep to come quickly. An hour later, she was still awake. Resisting the urge to ponder on Gabriel’s private life, she forced her mind in a different direction. What project were her grandmother and Gabriel working on? Why hadn’t her grandmother mentioned her houseguest? Her open palm came up to her forehead. *I’m such an idiot*, she thought, remembering the time her grandmother had innocently mentioned that she and Gabriel attend the same church. Hadn’t she asked her grandmother never to mention Gabriel’s name again? She had regretted the impulsive comment then but she regretted it even more now.

She picked up the remote from the bedside table, hoping television might take her mind off the nagging questions. Turning to the news, she followed the headlines running along the bottom of the screen—economic crisis, protests, violence. Shaking her head, she pressed the off button. “Skewed,” she murmured. The news is completely skewed toward the negative. Surely, one positive newsworthy event has happened in the world.

Tossing and turning, Jesse sat up to fluff her pillow before snapping her head back into the soft mass. Something felt wrong. Lying perfectly still, she listened until the answer came. The sounds were different—no sirens, horns or squeaking brakes.

Rolling onto her side, she studied the yellow light of the moon through the window until her eyes began to grow heavy. She blinked sleepily at the glowing disk. The quiet is better, she decided. [Chapter list](#) *or scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 2

The noise of high-pitched beeps pulled Jesse from sleep. She fumbled for the button to silence the noisy clock before lifting her head to squint at red numbers. She rolled onto her back with a soft moan—seven o'clock. Each blink felt like sand being dragged across her eyes. Fighting the temptation to turn her face into the pillow, she swung her legs over the side of the bed to pad barefoot to the window seat. Shielding her eyes against the bright sun, she watched birds scamper across the front lawn in search of their morning meal. At the sound of squawking, she noticed a blue jay flapping its wings at competition before claiming a place at the bird feeder. As the larger bird's weight tilted the feeder, a sparrow darted across the yard to pick at the seed trickling down. She smiled at the smaller bird's cunning.

Yawning, Jesse stood up to stretch, thinking she should get dressed. What time were they supposed to be at the hospital? She couldn't remember. Had Gabriel said nine? No, that's when the doctor would sign off on release forms. He told her grandmother they would be at the hospital earlier. At the sound of a knock, she pulled on her robe and went to open the door. Gabriel stood on the other side holding out a mug. "I thought you could use this."

"Just what I need," she said, taking the offered cup. "Thank you."

He glanced at his watch. "I was hoping to leave before eight if you don't mind."

She nodded. "Sure, twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes," he repeated, looking doubtful.

"Less than twenty," she said, smiling before closing the door. Taking a sip of coffee, she closed her eyes, savoring the rich taste. He remembered she took sugar.

Gabriel walked into the kitchen just as Jesse was finishing

the last bite of pancake. “The maple syrup is really good,” she said, coming around the table with her plate.

“Thank you. It’s an old family recipe.” He smiled, to say, “At least that’s what the label says.” As she neared the sink, he took the plate from her hands. “We’ll leave these until we get back. It’s getting late.”

Surprised, she stared at her empty hands before her eyes shot up. “I don’t appreciate being treated like a child,” she snapped.

His back went rigid before turning slowly to look down at her. They were standing so close that she could detect the clean, woodsy quality of his cologne. When he crossed his arms over his chest, she fought the impulse to step back. Instead, she crossed her own arms and lifted one brow to match the arch of his. After a few seconds, he broke the silence. “I’ve been courteous since your arrival, Jesse, nothing less. Perhaps, courtesy has become obsolete in Long Beach. Have manners become so uncommon as to be misconstrued as odd, maybe even offensive, by some? Whatever the case, I refuse to discard civility to pacify you or anyone else.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief. Manners—misconstrued, he was mistaken and she was in the mood to tell him so. “No,” she said crossly, “not good manners, it’s more like, what you do is, you—you—” She stopped without finishing the sentence. Putting his crime into words was proving more difficult than anticipated. Seeing her expression go blank, he stepped around her to leave the room.

She turned slowly in the empty kitchen, confused. Why was she angry? With a hand at her forehead, she searched for an answer. She had overreacted, but to what?

Pulling the front door shut behind her, Jesse looked out to see Gabriel leaning on the passenger side of the Jeep waiting for her. Guessing at his thoughts, heat crept up her neck and she

avoided eye contact. She didn't speak as she got into the Jeep to stare straight ahead. Miles of road passed in silence before her eyes fixed on the stereo controls. Music would be nice. Anything to fill the silence.

Just when she might have risked turning the radio on herself, she began to see people. Relieved to have something to divert her attention, she sat up straighter in her seat to study faces they were passing. *Odd*, she thought. A sidewalk congested with people hurrying to some unknown destination was a familiar sight, but these people weren't going anywhere. Some milled aimlessly while others sat along sidewalks. She risked a sideways glimpse at Gabriel but his taut face kept her from asking questions.

At the hospital, Jesse was surprised to find her grandmother packed and ready to leave. "I'll pull around front," Gabriel said, lifting her grandmother's case.

Nodding agreeably as the nurse issued final instructions, her grandmother inched closer to the door. "Ms. Ray," the nurse called her grandmother's name.

"Yes, dear," came the cheerful reply before quickly assuring she had heard all the instructions.

The nurse smiled politely. "Ms. Ray, a wheelchair will be here in a few minutes. It won't be long."

Jesse watched the smile slide from her grandmother's face. "Wheelchair? Oh, no, dear. Thank you, but I don't need a wheelchair."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Ray, but you do need a wheelchair," the nurse said before starting to recite hospital guidelines. "Our policy requires transport of all patients by wheelchair, and it will be here shortly."

Looking from the nurse to her grandmother, Jesse stepped back. "Uh-oh," she murmured too softly to be heard as the two

women faced each other in silence. Not missing the slight shake of her grandmother's head, the nurse crossed her arms, prepared for the familiar battle.

The silence that lasted seconds seemed much longer. Jesse's eyes darted around the room searching for any distraction. She wished she hadn't left her cell phone at the apartment. Although useless in the area, at least she would have something to focus on. Looking up from the thumbnail she was carefully inspecting, Jesse saw her grandmother's face begin to relax before saying, "I'm just being stubborn. Of course I'll follow the rules."

Fifteen minutes later, Jesse sat tapping a forefinger on the chair arm, waiting for the promised wheelchair. The nurse paused in her pacing to check her wristwatch for the third time. Her face tightened to reflect the five minutes that had passed since her last check.

"They're probably on their way," Jesse said.

"Mm-hmm," her grandmother agreed, "I'm sure it will be here shortly."

Jesse nodded absently before realizing her grandmother had repeated the same phrase the nurse had used earlier. "You know," Jesse, said, getting the nurse's attention, "I can push Grammy out if you have other patients to see."

The nurse bit her lower lip, thinking, before looking at her watch again. "I am running behind," she said. "If you're sure you don't mind, I would appreciate it."

When the wheelchair finally arrived ten minutes later, Jesse looked over to see her grandmother eyeing her rolling carriage with a frown. "Hospital rules, Grammy," she said, coaxing her grandmother into the chair.

Inside the elevator, her grandmother waited for the doors to shut before twisting around with an indignant look. "Humph! Rolled around like an invalid. Well I'd ride a gurney down Main

Street in a hospital gown to get out of here,” she said, turning back in a huff to cross her arms.

Biting her lip, Jesse fought the impulse to laugh. “Really, Grammy? A gurney down Main Street in a hospital gown?”

She could see her grandmother’s shoulders begin to shake with laughter before saying, “Too dramatic? How about a gurney minus the hospital gown?”

Jesse laughed aloud. “I think that might be even more dramatic, and illegal.”

“Oh, you know what I mean,” she said, chuckling.

Outside the front entrance, Gabriel helped her grandmother into the Jeep before covering her legs with a light wrap. He was rewarded with a warm smile and pat on his hand. Standing at the passenger side door, Jesse looked from her grandmother to Gabriel. When had they grown so close?

As they made their way through town, Gabriel adjusted the rear view mirror so he could see her grandmother in the backseat as he talked. “People are worried, Florence. Strangers are flooding into town with nowhere to stay. Two area schools have already closed.”

“The drought is getting worse in a lot of places,” her grandmother said. “Last night, I heard on the news that whole regions from northern Minnesota to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan are without water.”

“Yes,” Gabriel said, “I saw that, too. Several regions in the west are having the same problem. Drought, storms along the coast, crime in the cities—people are starting to move to less populated areas.”

Jesse glanced back to see her grandmother shaking her head before issuing a dismal prediction. “It’s going to get worse.”

“I think you’re right, Florence,” Gabriel said.

As they neared the house, Jesse felt her grandmother's hand on her shoulder. "You haven't said much, Jesse. Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm fine, Grammy, maybe a little tired from the trip."

"You should rest when we get home," she suggested.

When the Jeep came to a stop in front of the house, Jesse looked over to see Gabriel studying her. Switching off the ignition, he said, "You do look tired. Different time zone, probably jet lag. Florence is right, you look like you could use some rest."

In the living room, her grandmother refused the wrap Gabriel offered. "It's warm in the house, Gabriel. I don't need to be coddled."

The note of concern in Gabriel's voice was unmistakable. "The doctor said you should relax a few days, Florence."

"And I'll do just that but there's no need to make a fuss," she said.

When Gabriel left the room, Jesse sat down on the sofa next to her grandmother. "Would you like something to drink, Grammy? Maybe some tea?"

"A cup of tea would be nice. If it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all, if I can remember where everything is," Jesse said, starting for the kitchen."

Just as the kettle emitted a high-pitched whistle, Gabriel came into the room wearing jeans, work boots and a tee shirt. "Did you find everything okay?"

"Yes, I did," she said without meeting his eyes. "Would you care for some tea?"

Watching her, he dropped the work gloves he carried on the kitchen island. "No, thank you. I have some work to do."

Guessing he was still angry over her earlier remarks, she kept her eyes lowered and concentrated on pouring water into teacups.

“I’m not angry, Jesse,” he said, watching her. “You’ve had a long trip, a lot on your mind.”

Sighing, she set the kettle aside and met his gaze. “You’re right. The trip was long and I was worried about Grammy, but that’s no excuse. I was out of line and I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” he said, picking up his gloves. “Let’s just put it behind us and start over.”

“Okay,” she said, feeling relieved, “we’ll do that.”

Before leaving out the back door, he said, “Florence has my number if you need anything.”

With a stab of guilt, Jesse realized she had been too preoccupied with her own curiosity to think about the benefits of having Gabriel around. She had often worried about her grandmother living alone in such a large house with no neighbors. Obviously, her grandmother was fond of him and he seemed to dote on her. Instead of questioning why he was there, she should be thankful he would be with her grandmother when she returned to Long Beach.

Feeling better than she had all morning, Jesse set the tray on the coffee table and settled in next to her grandmother.

Stirring sugar into her tea, her grandmother said, “I’m so happy you’re home, Jesse.”

“Thanks, Grammy. It’s good to be home, but more importantly, I’m glad you’re all right.”

“Yes, I’m all right,” she replied, sounding distracted.

Noticing her grandmother’s troubled expression, Jesse asked, “What’s wrong, Grammy?”

Not answering right away, she took a sip of tea with a thoughtful expression. Setting her cup on the tray, she said, “I was going to wait and talk to you later but there is something weighing on my mind, so we might as well talk about it now.”

Slipping her shoes off, Jesse moved to rest her back against the arm of the sofa. “What is it, Grammy? It sounds serious.”

“Oh, it is serious, very serious. I need you to do something for me, Jesse.”

Leaning forward slightly, Jesse said, “What is it, Grammy? You know I would do anything for you.”

Her face brightened. “Anything? Would you really do anything for me?”

Jesse wondered if she had spoken too soon. “Well, almost anything,” she said, backing away from her previous statement.

Holding Jesse’s gaze, her grandmother said, “Jesse, I need you to move home.”

They watched each other in silence before Jesse’s head tilted in question. “Move home? Do you mean leave Long Beach and live here permanently?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean. I need you here with me.”

“But—but, you have Gabriel.”

“No, Jesse. You don’t understand. I don’t need you here to help me. I need you here so I’ll know you’re safe.”

Stunned, confused, Jesse stared back at her grandmother. Did she realize what she was asking her to do? Give up her job, her apartment, friends, Amber—no, she couldn’t possibly leave Amber alone in California. She and Amber had agreed to stay in the city where they had gone to college together. Forcing a smile, she said, “Grammy, you’re such a worrier. I know we’re in an

economic slump and crime is up because of unemployment, but it's no worse in California than anywhere else. Things will get better soon.”

Her attempt to lighten the mood failed miserably. Her grandmother’s eyes looked as if they were set in granite when she said, “No, Jesse, things will not get better. We have moved into a time prophesied long ago, a critical time like no other in history.”

Prophesied? Religion, Jesse should have known. Her strained smile didn’t relay the confidence she hoped for when she said, “You know, Grammy, just the other day economists said the market is showing signs of improvement. They expect the unemployment rate to stabilize soon.”

Her grandmother shook her head. “No, it won't. Do you think sticking our heads in the sand will stop the tide wave? The economy is crashing. You saw those people in town. They’re here looking for a safe place for their families.”

By her expression, Jesse knew her grandmother couldn’t be swayed. She had no choice but tell her straight out that she would not move home. “I’m sorry, Grammy—”

“Jesse,” her grandmother interrupted, “the Earth is being shaken to its very core and it will get worse, much worse.”

Closing her eyes, Jesse’s fingers came up to pinch the bridge of her nose. She could feel pressure at her temples signaling the start of a headache. After a few seconds, she dropped her hand to look at her grandmother. “How do you know that, Grammy? Seriously, how could you possibly know things will get worse?”

Her grandmother’s voice was eerily quiet when she said, “For nation shall rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom and there will be famines, pestilences and earthquakes. All these are the beginning of sorrows, the beginning of birth pains. She shook her head sadly. “When God raptures the church, the dam holding back utter evil will be removed. The Earth will

be filled with unspeakable horror.”

The bleak forecast was beginning to get under Jesse’s skin. Her grandmother seemed so certain. Utter evil, unspeakable horror, the words painted a picture that left Jesse swallowing nervously. “I can’t leave Amber,” she said, admitting the truth.

Her grandmother’s face lit up. “You don’t have to leave Amber. She can come here and stay with us. We have plenty of room and Amber will love it here.”

Jesse shook her head slowly, doubtful. “I don’t know, Grammy.” She didn’t know if Amber would consider moving. She wouldn’t admit to her grandmother that she and Amber had recently talked about how bad things were getting in Long Beach. Would Amber move? Could her grandmother be right?

“Take a break,” her grandmother urged. “If things do get better, you can go back out with a fresh start, a new job. Amber works at home and you were thinking about a job change anyway,” she said, reminding Jesse of her own words.

Jesse considered her grandmother’s somber face. She had called her a worrier but that was far from the truth. Her grandmother was a sensible woman who didn’t worry without good reason. Meeting her grandmother’s expectant eyes, Jesse sighed. She couldn’t say no. Her grandmother had always been there for her without asking for anything. “Okay, Grammy. I can’t promise anything, but I’ll talk to Amber.” She reached over to squeeze her grandmother’s hand. “You know I love you.”

“Oh, I love you, too, Jesse. You don’t know how much this means to me.” Leaning closer, she examined Jesse’s face before saying, “You have circles under your eyes, sweetie. Go upstairs and rest for a spell.”

“Maybe later, Grammy. I don’t want to leave you alone.”

Her grandmother’s eyes dimmed with a faraway look before saying, “Oh, I’m never alone, child. You go on upstairs

and I'll be right here watching the news.”

The news—Jesse had seen too much news lately. Her fingers came up to the light throbbing in her temple. “If you’re sure you don’t mind, I think I will go upstairs.”

In her room, Jesse curled into the window seat to gaze out over the mountains. A large hawk circling in the distance drew her attention. What would it be like to fly, to live in the moment with no worries for the future? Was that what her father had loved about flying, the freedom? Like the hawk, he had soared the skies on silver wings. She never knew where he was coming from or going.

Sighing, Jesse thought about her father. He had been a quiet man; his brief visits home spent mostly behind the closed door of his study. Had she been a burden to her father? Her stepmother said she had. Maybe her father had avoided her for other reasons. She never had the nerve to ask, but she wondered if she had reminded her father of a lost love, the mother she never knew. That's what she wanted to believe. She liked to imagine her mother and father together, smiling, happy in some idyllic afterlife.

At her father's funeral, she had looked into the eyes of those offering condolences, hoping to see an expression of grief in the face of a best friend, a close confidante, maybe even an illicit lover. She wanted to know that her father had connected with someone. She had been disappointed. Like her, she suspected that no one in the room had really known her father. No one seemed overly affected by his death—certainly not his wife. Her stepmother might have been at any social event.

Jesse may not have known if her father loved her, but she was positive her stepmother didn't. At the age of thirteen, that truth had been made painfully clear. Jolted awake by a loud crash, Jesse had ran down the hall thinking Claire might have fallen. From the doorway of the den, she watched the small lamp sail across the room to join its demolished mate. She had seen her

stepmother angry many times but the cloud of fury on her face that morning had been frightening.

The rage shaking Claire's body had vibrated in her voice. "Your father popped in long enough to ruin my life. We're moving to Washington D.C." The brittle laugh had cut the air like a shard of glass before her eyes narrowed on Jesse's face. "Are you surprised, Jesse? Did you expect your father to talk to you while he was here? Why should he? He doesn't care about you. You're nothing to him, dry cleaning dropped off for someone else to deal with." Whipping a crystal vase from a nearby table, Claire's hands had twisted the delicate neck while staring at Jesse to say, "I've suffered with you all these years and this is how he repays me." Jesse's suspicions had been confirmed that day. Her stepmother hated her.

While her father jetted across the world and her stepmother shopped for the next big event, Jesse had quietly waited for spring. That had been her life, waiting, putting one foot in front of the other to wade through the cold, quiet drudgery of winter. Each carefully drawn X on the calendar had marked a day closer to summer, a day closer to her grandmother. Winters, she had been an unwanted guest in her father's house but each summer she had gone home to her grandmother.

The ringing telephone jarred Jesse back to the present. Two rings, her grandmother had taken the call downstairs. She looked for the hawk above the mountains but it was nowhere in sight. Had the predator found prey? With a slight shudder, she imagined steel talons snapping around an unwary victim. Her grandmother was right; the world was becoming a dangerous place. Long Beach was becoming a dangerous place. Would Amber agree to move? Leaving the window seat, Jesse paced the floor debating the possibility. They had lived in Long Beach since their junior year of college but Amber had no real ties to the city. As long as she had her computer and equipment, Amber could work anywhere.

Jesse laughed softly to herself, remembering the day she and Amber met. At the beginning of her junior year, Jesse had been reading in her dorm room when startled by a loud banging noise. Hurrying to open the door being kicked from the outside, she had stared wide-eyed at the large box on legs staggering through the door. A freckled face with glasses askew had jugged out from the side to ask, “Where’s the computer desk?” As the box turned to follow the pointed direction, Jesse had immediately noticed the tuft of red hair standing straight out from the slight woman’s pixie haircut. With each step, the red plume had waved gaily in friendly introduction. Pushing the dashed hope of not getting a roommate aside, Jesse had welcomed the transfer student from Nevada.

Dismissed by some as a computer geek, Jesse had seen Amber differently. She was witty, intelligent and fiercely independent. She and Amber were poles apart in some respects but they also had much in common. Like her, Amber had shied away from the frenzied dorm life. They were both private people, but at the same time, idealists. They shared a fundamental belief in the goodness of humanity and they each dreamed of making the world a better place. While Jesse focused on helping individuals, Amber’s appreciation for technology, systems and organization had led her into computer science. As a computer security specialist, Amber battled corruption in cyberspace.

Jesse dialed Amber’s number to hear her answer on the second ring. “Hey, girl, what’s going on? How’s your grandmother?”

After assuring Amber that her grandmother was well, Jesse said, “You know, Amber, I’ve been thinking. Just a few weeks ago, we were talking about Long Beach and how it’s changed—burglaries, muggings and sirens keeping us up all night. We never go out anymore. Anyway—you know, I was thinking that maybe we should move somewhere safer for a while, some place out of the city. My grandmother would really like for us to move here.”

Amber's laugh was unexpected. "Jesse, you don't know how relieved I am to hear you say that. My mom has been bugging me nonstop to move home. I didn't want to say anything, you know, with Tom and the breakup."

"You didn't want to upset me," Jesse said quietly.

"Well, yeah, that, and I didn't know if you'd come to Nevada. You wouldn't believe how crazy my mom's been acting. I know," she said quickly, "you hate the word crazy, but really, it fits here. My mom has just been crazy. She even has your room ready and wanted to call you herself."

Jesse felt terrible. "Amber, I'm so sorry. You wanted to move home but didn't say anything. I wish you had told me. Of course, you should move home with your family. That's what we'll both do, move home and wait for things to get better."

Eager to make a list for any occasion, Amber began devising plans that included several tasks being assigned to her unwitting older brother, Matt. Brushing Jesse's protests aside, Amber insisted on taking care of the move so Jesse could stay with her grandmother. "I'm already here and almost everything can be taken care of by phone. Trust me, Matt will be happy to help." Jesse knew Amber was writing when she said, "Contact movers—ship personal items—storage."

She had to ask. "Flow chart or list?"

Amber laughed. "You know me too well."

Thinking about how much she would miss her friend, Jesse smiled sadly. "Yes, I do, and I'm going to miss you terribly. Are you sure you'll be okay in Nevada?"

"Of course. I have the luxury of taking my job with me and I've been working on some new ideas." Jesse could hear the excitement in Amber's voice as she talked about marketing strategies and plans to put her computer skills to use in different environments. Suddenly, the phone went silent.

“Amber, are you there?”

“I’m here. I just thought of something. You and your grandmother will be alone in the mountains. Is that safe?” The question caught Jesse off guard. When she didn’t answer right away, Amber said, “I know I’ve never been there, but your description makes me think the place is way out in the boonies—you know, secluded.”

Amber was the only person Jesse had ever told about her teenage heartbreak. She tried not to imagine the look of shock certain to be on Amber’s face when she told her Gabriel was staying with them. Amber’s gasp was followed by a stretch of silence before saying, “The Gabriel James?”

Jesse closed her eyes with an inward groan before admitting, “Yes, the Gabriel James.”

Amber drew out the word, “Wow,” before saying, “I’d almost take your grandmother up on her offer to see how that plays out.”

Admitting her own surprise at the strange turn of events, Jesse explained that Gabriel was there at her grandmother’s request. “They’re working on a project and it was more convenient for him to stay here.”

Ending the call, Jesse fell across the bed to prop her chin in her hands. Life was certainly unpredictable. She would be living in the same house with Gabriel. She, too, wondered how that might play out. [Chapter list](#) or *scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 3

Over the next few weeks, Jesse spent much of her time with her grandmother. They chatted while working around the house, weeding flowerbeds and cooking. She spent her spare time reading psychology books she collected over the years but never thought she'd have time to read. Gabriel was away most days but came home evenings. He occasionally invited her to relax on the front porch after supper. Their conversations were comfortable. They talked about everything, anything—childhood memories, likes, dislikes, poetry, history and world affairs. The only topic neither mentioned was past romances. She enjoyed Gabriel's company and as the days passed, she found herself checking the time more often, impatient for his return.

One evening Jesse stepped onto the front porch to see Gabriel in the drive waiting for her. Although tempted, she managed to control the smile as she neared the jeep. "Thanks for asking me along, Gabriel."

Opening the passenger side door, he said, "How could I refuse such a polite ultimatum?"

She waited for him to get into the vehicle before saying, "Maybe I was bluffing."

"Maybe I had planned to invite you along before you threatened to drive yourself into town," he said.

"Well, then, I guess it worked out for both of us." Giving in to the impulse, she laughed softly. "I'm sorry, Gabriel, but I'm bored. I haven't been away from the house in days, not since returning the rental. I'm going stir crazy."

"I understand," he said, starting the Jeep. "I know you want to go out on your own, but it's not safe. Things have changed."

She thought about recent news reports. Yes, things had

changed. The nation was still trying to recover from an economic crisis and the price of food and gasoline had skyrocketed. The United States wasn't the only country suffering. The global economy was coming apart even while natural disasters continued to shock the world.

She turned to Gabriel to ask, "Do you think global warming has anything to do with recent natural disasters? Just over the last few months, there's been a hurricane along the east coast, a small-scale earthquake rippled along the west coast and while most of the country is in a drought, the Mississippi River has overflowed its banks."

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "Some people say climate change is caused by increased solar activity. Others say carbon dioxide emissions are to blame. I recently read an article saying the temperature on all planets in our solar system is rising. The Sun, human influence, who really knows? I do know that what we're seeing is predicted in the Bible."

As they turned onto Oak Street, Jesse noticed an elderly man and two teenage boys standing in front of a small house on the corner. The man's fists were balled as he leaned forward to shout at the two boys standing some feet away on the sidewalk. "That's Mr. Drake," Gabriel said, pulling along the curb in front of the house. Getting out of the Jeep, he said, "I'll be right back."

As Gabriel approach, the balding man pointed at a broken window before jabbing a bent finger in the boys' direction. After listening to the man, Gabriel walked over to talk to the boys. Watching the teenagers disappear up the street, the man sputtered in disbelief before turning an angry face to Gabriel. As Gabriel talked, the man began to visibly relax and his crossed arms fell to his side. He looked down sheepishly to scuff a foot across the grass before shaking Gabriel's offered hand.

"Let me guess," Jesse said as they pulled away from the curb, "those boys broke the window."

“No, I don’t think so. Mr. Drake didn’t see who broke his window and John and Adam said they didn’t do it. I believe them.”

“John and Adam—you know them?”

“Yes, from church. They’re good kids.”

She was about to ask another question when a group of older boys standing near the intersection caught her attention. Whether it was suspicion or hostility in their faces, she wasn’t sure but their menacing stares made her uneasy. She turned and was about to ask Gabriel if he recognized them when the sound of shattering glass filled her ears. Before the Jeep braked to a stop, she was pulled against Gabriel’s side. She lifted her face from his shoulder, confused and trembling. “They’re gone,” he said, looking back to where the teenagers had been standing.

As they turned onto a side road, she looked around to see broken glass everywhere. “What happened?”

“I think someone threw something,” he said, cutting off the engine. He cupped her chin to turn her face to the side. “Jesse, you’re bleeding. You have a cut just below your ear.”

After helping her from the Jeep, he took the first aid kit from the back. His lips were set tightly together as he applied antiseptic to a cotton swab. As the liquid touched her face, she jerked back. Catching the hand she lifted, he said, “Don’t touch it.

She pulled her hand from his. “That stings,” she said, blinking watery eyes.

His expression softened. “I hurt you, I know.”

Seeing his concern, she started to shrug, to say it was okay, but she didn’t. Something stopped her—maybe the look in his eyes or her own imagination that his words went beyond the present. Whatever the reason, she couldn’t deny the truth. “Yes, Gabriel, you hurt me.” She knew the moment was important

without fully understanding why. He didn't look away and she couldn't.

Silently, his eyes searched hers. "I never meant to hurt you, Jesse. I'm sorry."

She looked down, studying her feet before nodding. "Okay," she said, lifting her face for him to continue.

With the bandage applied, Gabriel stepped back to examine his work. "You have glass in your hair," he said, moving closer to slide his hands along either side of her temples. As his fingers moved through her hair, she could feel her heartbeat beginning to quicken. Her eyes closed before releasing a pent up breath.

Hearing her name, she opened her eyes. With the heat of his hand resting in the curve of her neck, her eyes moved to his lips—full, smooth, perfect. What would his lips feel like on hers? She had never wanted to be kissed so badly. Her face tilted up, waiting, hoping, but the invitation went unanswered. "I need to get you home," he said before going around the Jeep to open the passenger side door.

Staring blindly out the window, Jesse thought about her reaction to Gabriel's touch. The sensations had all been new to her. She had been too wrapped up in her own response to consider Gabriel's feelings. Moving her head just enough to steal a look at his profile, she noted the rigid set of his jaw. What was he thinking? Her eyes slammed shut as the answer came. Undoubtedly, he was thinking about her shameless behavior just months after breaking up with the man she was engaged to marry. She had silently begged him to kiss her but he hadn't been tempted. Her body sagged against the seat with shame as they continued home in silence.

Her grandmother's eyes widened when Jesse walked in. The book she was reading fell to her side before hurrying across the room to inspect the large bandage covering the side of Jesse's

face. Leading Jesse to the sofa, she looked over her shoulder at Gabriel to ask, “What happened?”

Jesse could hear the undertone of anger in Gabriel’s voice when he said, “Someone threw a rock through the passenger side window.”

Her grandmother’s eyes flew to the bandage. “How bad is it, Gabriel?”

“The cut isn’t very deep. I’m not sure if the rock hit her or she was cut by flying glass.” He looked from Jesse to her grandmother before saying, “I’m sorry, Florence. I should have known it was too dangerous to take Jesse along.”

Hearing herself talked about like a child brought Jesse to her feet. “I’m fine,” she said in a voice that sounded stronger than she felt. “Really, I’m fine. I’m going upstairs to take a shower and change.”

Back in the kitchen an hour later, her grandmother was pouring tea. She eyed the small band-aid under Jesse’s ear. “Does it hurt?”

“No, it’s just a small cut. I’m okay.” Looking around the room, she asked, “Where’s Gabriel?”

“He went to have the window replaced.”

Jesse stopped cold. “He went back to town after what happened?”

Her grandmother’s eyes sparked with curiosity before saying, “He’ll be all right.”

Jesse knew her grandmother thought she was overreacting. She shrugged and tried to sound casual when she said, “You’re probably right, Grammy. He’ll be fine.” Sitting down at the table across from her grandmother, Jesse sipped her tea, pretending she didn’t notice her grandmother staring at her. When she couldn’t stand it any longer, she looked back to ask, “What, Grammy?”

What are you thinking?”

Her grandmother chuckled softly. “Well, now, maybe I’m thinking about things that are none of my business.” Looking up at the wall clock, she said, “My favorite news show is coming on. Let’s go watch.”

Jesse trailed reluctantly behind her grandmother to the living room. Her voice bordered on whining. “The news is always depressing, Grammy. I have an idea. Let’s watch an old movie instead. You like those.”

Remote in hand, her grandmother sat down on the sofa. “It’s important to keep up with what’s going on in the world. Of course, that’s hard to do nowadays. Some news agencies are more interested in influencing opinion than reporting facts. People who control the media also control public opinion, and I think we know who controls the liberal news media.”

Taking a seat, Jesse considered her grandmother’s comment. She had never thought about the media, who decides what’s newsworthy and how it’s presented. Obviously, her grandmother knew who made the decisions but she had no idea. Hearing her grandmother chuckle, Jesse turned to ask, “What’s so funny, Grammy?”

Her grandmother studied the remote control she held. “I just realized that I always hold onto the remote. I’ve seen a whole lot of new technology in my life, remarkable things I would have never dreamed of. Still, I think the remote control is my favorite.”

Jesse thought about her grandmother's life. She had lived many years and seen countless changes in the world. She curled up against her grandmother’s side, thankful to be in a safe place with family. Nestled in the mountains on hundreds of acres that butted up against the Cherokee National Forest on two sides, her grandmother’s house was as safe as any. She could still remember when half the town would come to her grandmother’s house for cookouts. Parents walked trails to take in stunning views of

mountains and valleys while children fished trout streams and splashed in freshwater ponds.

Feeling her grandmother stiffen at her side, Jesse followed her gaze to words scrolling across the bottom of the television to read the caption, Christians under attack.

Sitting up, Jesse heard the newscaster say, “Today, officials for the United Nations denounced intolerance and violence aimed at Christians around the world while here in the U.S., hostility toward Christians is a growing concern. With reports of attacks targeting specific groups on the rise, authorities fear violence may spread. Statements made by Christian fundamentalists suggesting natural calamities and economic problems afflicting the world are God’s judgment have sparked much controversy. The comments have reportedly resulted in a backlash against the Christian community.”

The scene flashed to an angry crowd demonstrating outside a large Christian church. Throughout the unruly mob, several could be seen throwing rocks and making obscene gestures toward heaven. A young man with several facial piercings pushed his way toward the filming crew to stab a finger at the camera. His face twisted with rage before a string of censoring beeps ensued. The word Christian could be heard throughout the broken tirade. Jesse stared in horror at the man’s engorged veins and snarling, reddened face. He was still shouting into the camera when the picture switched back to the newscaster.

Snapping her mouth shut, the newswoman shuffled a stack of papers before continuing the report. “Negative sentiment toward Christians continues to mount around the world and even here in the United States. With understaffed law enforcement agencies already overwhelmed with an increasing crime rate, some have voiced concerns about protection for Christians. One well-known Christian leader recently made national headlines by condemning the government’s lack of response to reports of violence against Christians in the Southwest. ”

The reporter's voice grew distant as Jesse began to grasp the impact of what she was hearing. This couldn't be happening in the United States. Her mind began to race. What would they do? "Grammy," she said in a frightened voice. Her grandmother looked back at her calmly. "Grammy, didn't you hear what's happening to Christians?"

In a quiet voice her grandmother began to quote, what Jesse assumed was the Bible. "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress. My God, in Him I will trust."

Bewildered, Jesse stared at her grandmother. Didn't she understand what was happening? Didn't she understand the danger she and Gabriel were facing? "Gabriel," Jesse said, getting up and going to the front window. "Gabriel hasn't come home yet."

"Gabriel will be fine," her grandmother said from the sofa.

Worry whipped Jesse around. "A stranger tried to take my head off today for no apparent reason. Anything could happen to him." She regretted her tone immediately. "I'm sorry, Grammy. I'm just worried, I guess. You know—Gabriel and I, well, we grew up together and..." her voice trailed off as her eyes fixed on the telephone across the room. What would Gabriel think if she called? Crossing the room, she mentally rationalized the call she was about to make. Under the circumstances, wouldn't she check on any friend? She tried to strike a casual tone when she said, "I think I'll call to see if Gabriel is on his way home."

Keeping her eyes on the television, her grandmother nodded.

Jesse replaced the handset. "He's not answering."

"He'll be—" her grandmother said before stopping when she saw Jesse's expression. Turning back to the television, she said, "He'll be fine."

Jesse paced the floor for hours, stopping only to stare out the front window occasionally. By the time she saw headlights pulling into the drive, she was literally sick with worry. Seeing Gabriel get out of the Jeep, she raced down the steps into his arms. “I thought something happened to you,” she said, bursting into tears.

From the porch, her grandmother called, “It’s started,” before going back inside the house.

Gabriel led Jesse, still crying, up the front steps to sit with her cradled in his arms on the porch swing. “Shhh, Jesse. It’s all right.”

Her wet face moved against his shoulder. “No,” she said miserably, “it isn’t. That man—his face, and you were...” The fabric of his shirt knotted in her closing hand as she dissolved into tears again.

“I wasn’t here and you were frightened,” he said, his arm tightening around her. “With everything that happened earlier, I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t realize I had left my cell phone until I was already in town.” His hand moved soothingly across her back. “Jesse, you don’t have to worry about me. God is my protector.”

She pulled back to wipe away tears, trying to pull herself together. “I told Grammy,” she said, sniffing, “you know, we—we grew up together and, well, we did grow up together.”

“That’s true,” he said, smiling. “We did grow up together.”

She nodded before her forehead drifted back into the curve of his neck. The world was falling apart around her but she felt safe in Gabriel’s arms. His quiet strength comforted her. They rocked in silence for some time before he asked, “Are you cold?”

“No,” she said, distracted, wondering what he must think of her, blubbering like a baby. Wanting to explain her strange behavior, she said, “I’m not usually so, I don’t know, emotional. I

think everything that's happened today just pushed me over the edge."

She felt his chest move with soft laughter. "So you weren't just overwrought with concern for my safety? We did grow up together, you know."

Holding back a smile, she tapped his chest with her open hand. "Something could still happen to you if you keep making fun of me."

"Come on," he said, setting her onto her feet, "let's go inside."

In the living room, Jesse looked around. "I wonder where Grammy is."

"Praying," Gabriel, said. He gave Jesse's shoulder a reassuring squeeze before leaving the room. Jesse knew where he was going. He would join her grandmother in the glory room. That's what her grandmother called her prayer room. As a child, Jesse had occasionally crept into the room when her grandmother wasn't around. She had always been fascinated by the handwritten Bible verses covering the walls and the large wooden cross. Sighing, she started for the stairs. A prayer couldn't hurt.

The shimmering purple fabric hanging from the cross caught Jesse's eye as she entered the room. Purple represents kingship and Jesus is King of kings her grandmother once said. Walking forward, she knelt in front of the cross between Gabriel and her grandmother. She tried to push fear aside and focus on a higher power. If there was a God, she wanted to talk to Him about the dismal state of human affairs. The world was going mad and they needed help.

Jesse spent twenty minutes in front of the cross with no results. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't wrap her mind around the idea of God. The concept was just too vague. At the door, she looked back at her grandmother and Gabriel. They were still praying to the God she couldn't envision.

Waking from a fitful sleep, Jesse breathed in the faint scent of sweet cinnamon. The aroma was familiar. Recognizing the smell, she sighed—homemade cinnamon buns. Pushing her hair away from her face, her fingers grazed the band-aid under her ear. The smooth material reminded her of shattered glass and an enraged face, images that had kept her awake much of the night.

In the kitchen, her grandmother tapped a foot lightly in time with the merry tune she hummed while icing cinnamon rolls. Seeing Jesse in the doorway, she smiled. “Nothing like waking up to the smell of fresh cinnamon in the morning, huh, Jesse?”

“Mm-hm,” Jesse murmured, eyeing her grandmother as she crossed the room to the coffeepot. Her grandmother’s hair was caught up in a neat French twist and her face looked as energetic as the colorful dress she wore. She looked relaxed, happy, as if she didn’t have a care in the world. Taking a sip of coffee, Jesse watched her grandmother curiously. Wasn’t she worried? She didn’t look worried. Pushing the question aside, she said, “Coffee, Grammy?”

“I’m sorry, dear. What’d you say?”

Jesse held up her cup. “Coffee, can I pour you a cup?”

“Yes, thank you. My cup is on the counter,” she said before carrying a plate of cinnamon rolls to the table.

Setting the cup in front of her grandmother, Jesse seated herself at the table to pick distractedly at a cinnamon roll. She couldn’t stop thinking about last night’s news. The man’s face screaming into the camera had been a disturbing sight. People were hurting, dying and she couldn’t understand any of it. Why would Christians say such horrible things are happening because God is angry? Would they really say that to parents who lost a child? Weren’t Christians suffering and dying along with everyone else? Putting her fork down, she picked up her cup to see her grandmother watching her from across the table.

Considering the band-aid under Jesse's ear, she said, "No sign of bruising or swelling. I tell you, child, I almost fell over when you walked in yesterday. I didn't know what was under that bandage. And the look on Gabriel's face—I just didn't know what to think."

"It's nothing, Grammy."

Head tilting slightly, she said, "You look like something's bothering you, Jesse. Didn't you sleep well?"

"No, Grammy. Actually, I didn't. Nothing makes sense anymore. The man on the news last night was so angry. People are saying tragedies are happening in the world because God is angry. That seems insensitive, like saying people deserve what they get. Still, I can't believe Christians are being attacked."

Watching Jesse over the rim of her cup, she nodded. "Yes, that is disturbing, but not surprising."

Nearly choking on her coffee, Jesse sputtered, "Not surprising?" She stared at her grandmother in astonishment. "Well, it certainly surprised me. No—no," she said, setting her cup down, "I wasn't just surprised, I was shocked. People are being physically attacked because of words and what they believe in the United States." Leaning forward, she repeated slowly, "In the United States of America, Grammy. You know, land of the free, home of the brave, the place where freedom of religion and speech are celebrated."

"I'm sure a lot of people are just as shocked and upset as you are, Jesse. I'm just saying that some Christians are not surprised at things happening in the world today. We've been warned through Scripture and even modern day prophets but few paid attention."

"Prophets," Jesse said under her breath. She wouldn't start down that path but she did wonder what her grandmother meant by modern day prophets. She knew what her own reaction might be if someone claimed to hear the voice of God revealing the

future. Under diagnostic impression, she would write psychotic.

Setting her cup down, her grandmother said, “God’s remedy for sin isn’t earthquakes, tornadoes and other natural disasters. God’s remedy for sin is Jesus. The world may seem out of control, Jesse, but you can rest assured that it’s not. God allows things to happen but He is still in control.” Falling silent, she shook her head with a wistful sigh. “No one knows the day or hour of our Lord’s return, but we know it’s getting close.”

The discussion was beginning to make Jesse uncomfortable. She had always tried to be a good person, help others while being sensitive to every person’s culture and religion. Living with her grandmother and Gabriel was making it impossible to ignore the question she had managed to evade all her life. Does God exist? Her grandmother and Gabriel were certain that He did. Jesse wouldn’t offend them by asking but she would really like to know what they based their belief on. What made them so sure they were right? They had no concrete proof. No one did. Did they base everything they believed, their whole life, on one book? Looking up, she met her grandmother’s stare across the table. She forced a quick smile. “Want to watch the news?”

Her grandmother looked at her questioningly. “You want to watch the news?”

“Sure, why not?” Jesse said, rising from the table.

About to sit down on the sofa, Jesse stopped. “Did you hear that? I thought I heard a car door.”

“Probably Gabriel coming back from town,” her grandmother said.

From the front porch, Jesse looked out to see an unfamiliar car with three people inside and Gabriel’s Jeep in the drive. She watched Gabriel move around to the passenger side of the Jeep before long legs swung from the open door. The woman that emerged stood almost eye level with Gabriel in unbelievably

high heels. When she turned, Jesse blinked in surprise at her fully exposed back. The material of the backless, yellow halter dress fell in a sway just below the woman's hips.

With her eyes riveted on Gabriel and his guest, Jesse didn't notice the woman nearing the porch. "Well now, I know who you are," said the ample woman puffing up the front steps. Before Jesse could form a reply, soft arms pulled her forward to be thoroughly patted on the back. Happy blue eyes looked Jesse over at arm length. "I'd say you're as pretty as a picture, but you're even prettier than a picture." At Jesse's blank expression, she announced, "I'm Emma Rose."

Quickly searching her memory, Jesse smiled, relieved to recognize the name. "Emma, yes, of course, Grammy's friend. Grammy talks about you all the time. She says you're a wonderful cook."

Emma's face brightened at the compliment. "We all know Florence is the real cook in these parts, but I don't guess I need to tell you that."

While Emma talked, Jesse nodded. "Uh-huh," she said, distracted by the four people at the end of the walk within the scope of her side vision. The leggy blonde was tall enough to drape an arm across Gabriel's shoulder while he talked to an older couple. The woman was clearly more than a casual acquaintance.

"Florence told me all about you," Emma chatted gaily, taking Jesse's arm to pull her toward the front door where her grandmother waited. "I've seen all your pictures. That's why I said prettier than a picture."

When Emma freed her arm to hug her grandmother, Jesse stole a quick look over her shoulder to see Gabriel escorting the willowy woman up the walk.

Jesse plastered a smile on her face during the greetings before excusing herself to get coffee for their guests. Within minutes, her grandmother came through the kitchen door.

“Grammy,” Jesse said in a hushed voice, “why didn’t you tell me we were having company? I would have changed,” she said, gesturing down at her college tee shirt and worn jeans.

Shrugging innocently, her grandmother said, “I didn’t know, but you can run upstairs and change now if you like.”

Jesse’s head tilted slightly as she looked back at her grandmother. “They’ve already seen me, Grammy. I can’t change now. They’ll think I changed to make a better impression.”

“Well, isn’t that why you want to change?”

“Well, sure, but I don’t want them to—oh, never mind,” Jesse said before filling the last cup with coffee.

Jesse had just restarted the coffee maker when Emma’s head popped around the doorway. “Need a hand?”

“We can always use your help, Emma,” her grandmother said.

Emma bustled across the floor with an eager smile. “What can I do?”

Her grandmother looked around the room before noticing the tray of cups Jesse filled. “It looks like the coffee’s ready.”

“Oh, no, Grammy,” Jesse said. “That may be too heavy for Emma. I’ll take those in.”

Emma was at the counter before Jesse could move. “Why, it’s as light as horse feathers,” she said, easily picking up the tray to prove her point.

After Emma left the room, Jesse moved to the kitchen island where her grandmother stirred icing. “She seems really nice,” Jesse said.

“Oh, Emma, she’s a dear,” her grandmother agreed. “She came here a little over six years ago to take care of her sister. Do you remember Martha Tidwell?”

“Martha Tidwell...Martha Tidwell,” Jesse repeated the name, thinking. “No. I don’t think so.”

“Martha was a lovely woman, but sickly, bless her heart. We lost Martha three years ago but Emma stayed on.” With a sad sigh, she said, “Poor Emma, she really loved her sister.”

“That is sad,” Jesse said. “Does Emma have other family?”

“Oh, Emma has a large family, the church, but no blood relatives.” Holding the dripping spatula over the bowl, she paused before saying, “I guess if you think about it, Emma does have blood relatives. The whole church is related by blood.”

“I’m glad,” Jesse said quickly, hoping to steer the conversation away from church and religion. “People need friends and support when they’re grieving.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about Emma. She has plenty of friends,” her grandmother said, picking up the plate of iced buns. “If you’ll take these, I’ll be right in after I wash my hands.”

Gabriel met Jesse just inside the living room door. He reached out to take the tray but stopped. “May I help you with that, Jesse?”

Seeing his look of amusement, she returned his smile. “Yes, you may, and thank you for asking.” After placing the tray on the coffee table, he came back to her side. “Jesse, let me introduce you to everyone.” He turned to the couple to their right. “You may remember Charles and Victoria Swinney. They own Swinney’s Market on Oakdale and have been with the church several years.”

Mr. Swinney stood as Jesse stepped forward to shake their hands. “Yes,” Jesse said, “I do remember. You visited my grandmother when I was here for summer breaks. It’s good to see you again.”

Stepping back to Gabriel's side, she followed his gaze to Emma. "I believe Emma introduced herself already," Gabriel said, smiling fondly at the woman.

Emma smiled from her chair across the room. "Yes," Jesse answered, returning Emma's wave. "We met earlier."

Turning to the woman on the small sofa to their left, Jesse made a conscious effort to keep the smile on her face as Gabriel introduced Rachel Swinney, Charles and Victoria's daughter. The aloof face watching her from across the room looked vaguely familiar but Jesse couldn't quite place her. Stepping forward to shake hands, Jesse said, "You look familiar, Rachel, but I'm not sure we've met."

"I don't remember meeting you, either, but I know I've been here before," Rachel said, lips pursing in thought. "Oh, now I remember. Gabriel brought me here once, years ago." With a throaty laugh, she said, "A girl doesn't easily forget the first time they—um—" she paused with a hint of a smile before saying, "ride alone in a car with a boy."

Jesse could feel her face paling as the words, Gabriel's got a girlfriend, came to mind. She looked back at Gabriel to see him watching them. Fighting to keep her composure, she forced a stiff smile. "That—that was such a long time ago," she said, holding out a hand. "If we didn't meet then, it's good to meet you now, Rachel."

"Yeah, you too," Rachel said, looking bored.

Making the stiff walk back to Gabriel's side, Jesse mentally rummaged for any pretext to leave the room. She was about to excuse herself to check on her grandmother when she felt Gabriel's arm slip around her waist. "You already know Jesse is Florence's granddaughter but you may not know that she is a psychotherapist. She has written several articles published by some respected journals. I personally found her articles on abnormal psychology particularly thought provoking."

Surprised, Jesse looked up to see Gabriel smile. “That’s very impressive, Jesse,” Mrs. Swinney said, moving forward to place her cup on the coffee table. “Abnormal psychology sounds fascinating.”

Before Jesse could respond, Rachel spoke up. “Oh, I bet it is fascinating. People tell shrinks everything, dirty little secrets, wild fantasies—it’s like a paid confessional.”

Mr. Swinney shot his daughter a stern look. “Rachel!” he warned, getting her attention.

With a hand splayed against her chest, Rachel looked around with an expression of surprised innocence. “Well, that’s what therapists do. They help people.”

“Yes,” Gabriel said. “Therapists do help people. They are highly educated, trained professionals who offer people support in dealing with personal problems.” Turning to Jesse, he gestured at the empty seat next to Rachel. “Please, join us, Jesse.”

Seeing Rachel’s face tighten, Jesse stepped back. “I should check on Grammy and bring more coffee.”

Passing her grandmother at the living room door, Jesse said, “I’ll bring more coffee.” Inside the kitchen, she seethed, “You have got to be kidding me. Shrink,” she muttered the offensive word. In the process of insulting her, Rachel had made counseling sound sordid. Yanking the carafe from its base, she watched coffee slosh onto the floor. “Gabriel, he brought her here,” she fumed. Gabriel’s got a girlfriend—the words sprang to mind before her foot slammed against the garbage lever. She froze at the loud clanking sound, hoping no one heard the noise. Dropping the soggy paper towels into the receptacle, she forced herself to relax.

Returning to the living room a few minutes later, Jesse felt calmer. Her grandmother had taken the seat next to Rachel and Gabriel stood leaning an elbow on the fireplace mantel. Moving around the room to refill coffee cups, Jesse took the opportunity

to examine each person more closely.

Charles Swinney was a distinguished looking man with neatly cut salt and pepper hair. His long, slender face matched his tall, thin frame. Every expression and movement was as deliberate and controlled as the heavily starched shirt buttoned at the collar.

The smile Mrs. Swinney offered as her cup was being refilled showed off a soft dimple at the side of her mouth. Her honey-blonde hair was cut stylishly short to encourage soft tendrils framing her face. Still toned and attractive, Jesse guessed the woman had once been as striking as her daughter was now.

“Coffee, Emma?” Jesse asked.

“Oh, no, thank you, dear. Too much coffee gives me the jitters.”

Turning, Jesse watched Rachel’s lips curl into a haughty smile as she lifted her cup, waiting to be served. Over her earlier shock, Jesse took a closer look at the woman as she approached. Her makeup was perfect, almost doll-like, with strategic highlights in long blonde hair that complimented softly tanned skin. Rachel was obviously a woman who took great pains with her appearance and it showed.

With the cup refilled, Jesse looked up to see Rachel smiling past her. Looking over her shoulder, Jesse saw the smile was for Gabriel. Obviously, he couldn’t keep his eyes off the woman. Was he comparing them? Next to Rachel, she must look terribly plain with her hair pulled back in a ponytail and no makeup. She and Rachel couldn’t be more different. She tensed, thinking of the caption Gabriel might use for a picture of them together—Raggedy Ann meets Barbie. Moving quickly, she refilled her grandmother’s cup before taking the armchair next to Emma.

Charles Swinney was talking about a church in the area that had recently been destroyed by arson. “Faith Tabernacle is in

shambles,” he said, darting a worried look around the room. “The fire gutted the structure.”

Victoria nodded. “Windows were broken out of another church and someone spray painted words on the outside of the building.” Swallowing nervously, her voice lowered to say, “They wrote, send Christians to their hell.”

Sighing, Mr. Swinney shook his head as the room fell silent. Jesse noticed everyone seemed to be waiting for her grandmother to speak. After a few seconds, her grandmother said, “I think it’s time to bring people in.” Looking to Gabriel, she asked, “What do you say, Gabriel?”

He stared off across the room absently. “Yes, it’s time. I’m afraid violence may spread quickly.”

What were they talking about, Jesse wondered—bring people in. Standing, Mr. Swinney said, “I spoke with the Pastor earlier. He’s still at the hospital with Olivia but he thinks we should move now if at all possible.”

Getting up from the sofa, Mrs. Swinney touched her husband’s arm. “Should Rachel come with us?”

“Yes,” Mr. Swinney answered. “She’ll need to pack her own things.”

Jesse’s mind churned with questions. Bring people in, pack. Where were they going? Seeing her grandmother get to her feet, Jesse set her coffee aside. She wanted to talk to her grandmother in private. Before she could start across the room, her grandmother began to speak. “Christians in other countries have been beaten, thrown into prison and killed while we took our freedom for granted in this country. But, here we are, well past all the nonsense of political correctness and laws meant to silence the gospel. We were wrong to think Christians would never be persecuted in this country. God help us in these last days.”

Last days? Was that what her grandmother said, last days?

Over the years, Jesse had occasionally heard the words, end times, apocalypse, last days, but she had brushed them aside as some eccentric fringe thinking without ever considering the implication. Did her grandmother and Gabriel really think the world would end soon? Were they all thinking that? Surely, rational adults weren't thinking the world would just end.

When everyone started to leave, Rachel took Gabriel's hand to lead him across the room away from the others. From the front door where she chatted with Emma, Jesse cast a glance in their direction. Gabriel's back was to her but she could see Rachel's coaxing expression shift into a pout before the sound of angry stilettos came snapping across the hardwood floor. Jesse looked away as the clatter drew near before chrome yellow heels stood in front of her. Looking up to see Rachel's sullen face, Jesse's voice fell flat. "Good bye, Rachel."

Smirking, Rachel looked down at Jesse's clothes. "Cute outfit," she said before walking out.

Jesse closed the door and turned to see her grandmother and Gabriel watching her. She asked the question they were expecting. "What's going on?"

Her grandmother turned to Gabriel. "Maybe you and Jesse should go for a walk.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "That might be best."

Their odd response only added to Jesse's frustration. "I don't want to go for a walk," she said, not realizing her hands had gone to her hips. "I want someone to tell me what's going on."

"Then we need to go for a walk," Gabriel said.

Jesse watched Gabriel leave the room before turning to her grandmother. Her palms came up in question. "Why can't you just tell me, Grammy? What's the big secret?"

"Showing is better than telling. Go with Gabriel."

Waiting by the back door, Gabriel looked down at Jesse's feet as she approached. "Are those comfortable shoes?"

"Yes," she said, becoming impatient, "they're fine. Can we just go? I'd like to see what all the mystery is about."

[Chapter list](#) *or scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 4

Jesse didn't understand how a walk would explain what was going on better than words, but she kept silent and followed Gabriel toward the path leading into the woods. She could hear water splashing over stones in the nearby creek and birds singing in the distance. She watched a butterfly flutter over a tuft of daisies before landing to flex its wings. What she was seeing now was in stark contrast to news clips of destruction and long lines of people waiting for food and water. Which world was real—brooks and butterflies or death and devastation?

“We need to go this way,” Gabriel said, turning onto an unfamiliar trail. Jesse's eyes traveled up the footpath covered with a thick layer of finely ground mulch that disappeared into the trees.

They had walked along a slope for some distance before she stopped to look around. She called to Gabriel, “How much further?”

“We're almost there,” he called back.

At the top of the ridge, she stopped to look down into the hollow to see more of the same, woods descending into a valley. She cast a curious glance at Gabriel. “Well?”

Without answering, he started down the trail. Before long, the ground began to level and trees became less dense as they crossed an open grassy area scattered with trees, shrubs and bushes. To her right, Jesse could see a gravel road winding its way between two hills in the distance to stop at the steep rise they were nearing. *Curious*, she thought, *a road to nowhere*. At the bluff, Gabriel disappeared behind a group of Hydrangea shrubs. She quickened her pace to follow.

On the other side of the bushes, Gabriel stood in front of a large door built into the hill itself. The door was different shades

of green and brown that blended seamlessly into its surroundings. Taking a small device from his pocket, he pushed buttons before the heavy door began to move silently to the right as if on rollers. Cautiously, she followed him through the doorway to hear a soft click that lit up a wide entryway. The wall was smooth, cold, and felt like metal. She looked over to see Gabriel punching numbers into a keypad mounted on the wall.

”Be careful,” he said, pulling the heavy door toward them. She followed him inside to stand transfixed. Her attempt to form words resulted in stammered monosyllables before her mouth snapped shut to fall open again. When she recovered enough to move, she turned around slowly. “What is this?”

At her side, he said, “This is the project Florence and I have been working on.”

Dazed, she walked to the nearest sofa and sat down slowly. Her stunned expression did little to relay the depth of shock and confusion she felt. The vast room, lit by hourglass shaped columns, was divided into sections. In the area where she sat, bookcases lined walls with several seating areas with sofas, chairs, tables and the occasional plant. One section appeared to be an eating area with long dining tables while another was a play area with bookshelves, walls of toys, dolls, games and stuffed animals. Unable to wrap her mind around what she was seeing, she looked around dumbly.

Gabriel sat down next to her. “I know this is a lot for you to take in but you’ll soon understand why this shelter is necessary.”

Confused, she said, “Shelter—shelter for who?” When he didn’t answer, she turned to him to ask again, “Shelter for who?”

“For people who need a shelter, Jesse. For Christians who are already suffering and being victimized in our own country, our own region, even our own neighborhoods.”

“But how—who? Who built this?”

He didn't respond right away. When he did, he didn't answer her question. Instead, he said, "Florence is a prophet."

She shook her head in disbelief. "Grammy? My Grammy, a prophet. No."

"Yes, Jesse. Florence received revelations from God."

When he fell silent, she could tell he was weighing his words, deciding how much he should tell her. "Don't filter, Gabriel. Just tell me," she said.

Nodding, he said, "A year and a half ago, Florence received revelations about the end of the age and she felt led by God to build a shelter."

She stared at him. "Led by God? God told her to build a shelter?"

"Yes," he answered. A few seconds passed before she realized he was describing the building and construction. She sat numbly, his words bouncing right past her. The few words registering—design, engineering, water supply and filtration, meant nothing.

She lifted a hand to say, "Please, Gabriel...stop. Just stop." She needed time to make sense of what she was hearing. She sat staring, thinking, before turning to him to ask, "Who paid for all this?"

By his expression, she knew the question made him uncomfortable. Seconds passed before he answered, "Florence combined resources with another church member."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "That can't be true. Grammy can't afford this."

He was on his feet in an instant. "I'll show you the rest of the shelter," he said, starting across the floor.

She hurried to catch up and step squarely in his path. "Can

Grammy afford this, Gabriel?”

His hands went into his pockets and he lifted his head to avoid eye contact. “I’m sorry, Jesse, but I don’t think it’s my place to discuss Florence’s finances.”

“Gabriel,” she said, waiting for him to look at her, “are you really going to treat me like an outsider?”

He shifted his weight, looking uneasy. “Jesse, Florence is a wealthy woman.”

She knew he was telling the truth. Why hadn’t her grandmother told her? The one person she thought she knew, she didn’t know at all. Nothing made sense anymore. She wasn’t sure what to believe. “This is too much,” she said, turning to look for the exit.

Outside, she walked to the nearest tree. The trunk she clung to was solid, real, but she couldn’t take in enough air. Her heart pounded and she felt light-headed. She focused on breathing in through her nose and exhaling through her mouth but the shallow breaths weren’t enough to fill her lungs. She knew she was hyperventilating. Bending over, she breathed into cupped hands to increase the carbon dioxide she was taking in.

“Are you okay, Jesse?” Gabriel asked, touching her shoulder. She nodded without looking up. After a few minutes, her lungs began to relax. Lowering herself to the ground, she rocked gently and stared ahead. Anxiety attack, she hadn’t had one in years. She had almost forgotten how horrible they were.

Gabriel sat down next to her with his arms resting on bent knees. Neither spoke for several minutes while each mulled over their own thoughts. Finally, he said, “This is a lot for you to deal with right now.”

She turned his comment over in her mind. A lot to deal with—he had given the perfect example of a gross understatement. The fist in her stomach began to open, releasing

the most primitive emotion first. Anger seeped through her veins like molten lava before blazing into a fury that spurred a response dripping with sarcasm. “Oh, I don’t know, Gabriel. A lot to deal with, you say. Let’s just make sure I know what it is I’m supposed to be dealing with. War and natural disasters are ripping the planet apart, Christians are being terrorized and I know nothing about my own grandmother. Last, but certainly by no morbid stretch of the imagination, least, the end of the world is just around the corner.” She tilted her head sideways to look at him. “Did I leave anything out, Gabriel? Seriously, did I cover the major points? Is there anything else I’m supposed to be dealing with right now?”

His jaw tightened and she could see a vein pulsing at his temple. “You’re upset,” he said without looking her way.

“Upset,” she repeated the word. “You know what, Gabriel, I think you’re right. I’m just a little upset, but don’t let that stop you from telling me about any other top-secret projects you and my grandmother are working on. Maybe you’ve built an asylum for those of us not ready to face the end of the world.” She shook her head, repeating the word, “Asylum—that’s it. Maybe I’m psychotic, delusional, and none of this is real. Or maybe, I’m trapped in a nightmare and I’ll wake up soon.”

Gabriel’s voice was quiet. “Unfortunately, Jesse, this is reality for all of us and we have no choice but to deal with it.”

Her laugh was brittle, like shattering ice. Gabriel—always rational, sensible. She could count on him to tell the truth. She didn’t much care for his integrity right then. The words she wanted to hear would be a lie. She wanted him to say that everything would be all right. Unshed tears glimmered in her eyes when she looked at him. “I remember when we were kids, you made everything better. You would never lie. If you said it was going to snow in the middle of August, I would have put on a coat and snow boots. I know we’re not kids anymore, but I really need to hear you say everything will be okay. Tell me that your God will take care of us, Gabriel.”

Sighing, he shook his head. “Jesse, don’t.”

She stared at him. “Don’t? Don’t what? Don’t ask you to say what you believe? I’ve heard you say it before. I’m just asking you to say it now.” His profile became a blur through tears as she waited. When he didn’t speak, anger welled inside of her. She felt as if she might explode or implode and she didn’t care which as long as something happened to relieve the pressure. Scrambling to her feet, she began to pace. “You say it when I don’t want to hear it, but when I ask you to say it, you won’t.” She ran back to stand in front of him, nails cutting into her palms. “Well, say something!” When he refused to respond, she kept from screaming by spinning angrily on her heel and walking away.

The adrenaline coursing through her body pushed her into a run. With no thought of direction, she ran as fast as she could. When she thought her lungs would explode, she kept going until her legs gave way and she collapsed to the ground on her hands and knees. Fingers curled into the earth to close into fists. With an angry cry, she scampered to her feet to hurl the handfuls of dirt. Suddenly, she stopped. Everything she’d been running from caught up with her in an instant. Hatred, violence, death—that was the real world. Covering her face, she sank to the ground. Sobs rent the air as she cried for the devastated, the dying, for a world trapped in misery. She cried for reasons she didn’t understand, but most of all, she cried for lost hope.

Rolling onto her back, Jesse looked up at the speckling of sky through the treetops. How long had she been there? She didn’t know. She didn’t care. Nothing mattered anymore. Her tears had washed away all emotion, leaving her empty. Pushing up to her knees, she pulled the bottom of her shirt up to wipe her face before sitting back on her heels. At the sound of a twig snapping, she turned swollen eyes to her right to see Gabriel getting up from a fallen log. How long had he been there? Her chin fell forward to her chest. He’d seen her at her worst and she didn’t care. She didn’t have enough energy to be embarrassed.

Without a word, Gabriel crouched in front of her. She stared at his outstretched hand. Would he go away if she refused? Minutes passed but he didn't move. He didn't say anything, just waited. She wanted him to go away but she knew he wouldn't. He wouldn't leave her in the woods alone. Too tired to argue, she reached out and put her hand in his.

Jesse kept her eyes lowered as Gabriel led her along the path home. Every step was like lifting a foot encased in cement. She didn't question his silence. She didn't think about anything except putting one foot in front of the other.

At the backstairs, she held up a hand when he would have helped her further. "No," she whispered before starting slowly up the steps. In her room, she reached out to pull back the cover before noticing her grimy hand. Using her last bit of energy, she showered before crawling into bed with damp hair.

Hours later, she was still in the same position staring despondently at the moon when there was a knock on the door. "Jesse," Gabriel called from the hallway. When she didn't answer, he knocked again before opening the door. She felt a slight movement as he placed something on the foot of the bed before coming around to block her view of the moon.

"You didn't come down for supper. I thought you might be hungry." When she didn't reply, he knelt by the bed. "Jesse, look at me." When she didn't move, he said more firmly, "Jesse, look at me."

Tears trickled across the bridge of her nose to fall onto the pillow. Her voice was dull, vacant. "I'm not as strong as you and Grammy. I can't deal with everything going on in the world."

She felt the warmth of his hand on her arm. "Jesse," he said softly, "I knew you were confused and frightened today. I wanted to comfort you, to say God will take care of us, but I couldn't. God gives peace to those who trust in Him. He doesn't impose Himself on those who don't know Him."

Her tears began to flow faster. “Did you come to say your God doesn’t care about me, Gabriel?”

His hand moved to her cheek. “No, Jesse. I came to tell you that the creator of the universe loves you so much that He came to Earth and died for you.”

Even in her state of despair, she could hear the emotion in his voice when he said, “God loves you, Jesse, and regardless of what happens in this life, in the end, everything will be all right if you’re a child of God.”

Child of God—how could she be a child of God when she wasn’t even sure God exists. She wished she knew, but she didn’t. Weariness encased her like a tomb. “I’m too tired to talk, Gabriel.”

“Will you listen then? Just open your mind and listen.” He took her silence for agreement before moving to sit on the edge of the bed. Bending forward, he rested his arms on his knees to look out at the moon before saying, “At some point, every thinking person will ask the question, does God exist? I know you’ve asked yourself that question, Jesse.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he said, “I know you have. The question carries profound significance, basic accountability. Once the question is asked, it must be dealt with. Whether the response is deferral, denial, indifference or acceptance, once we respond to that question, there is a response to our creator on record. The question is the most important question any human will ever ask, certainly the most important question we will ever answer. Our response defines our relationship with God and determines our place in eternity.”

She had mentally debated the question for weeks but she was too exhausted to think about it now. “Gabriel, I don’t want to ___”

His voice held gentle urgency when he said, “Think, Jesse. Just think of the perfection and complexity of the universe. Does order come from disorder? Even scientists say the universe is finite, created at one point in time. Is it reasonable to believe the universe exploded into existence by chance from nothing?”

She’d never given it much thought. How had the universe been created? “Big bang,” she said.

“What do you suppose caused the big bang? If there’s nothing outside the universe, what created the matter the explosion came from? Is it logical to believe a chaotic random explosion designed perfection? Does an exploding bomb create order? Think of galaxies, stars, planets, Earth, all plant and animal life, even the miracle of the human body. I would have to agree with Voltaire, if the watch proves the existence of a watchmaker but the universe does not prove the existence of a great Architect then I consent to be called a fool.”

Voltaire? Was he a philosopher? She had no idea who Voltaire was. Her eyes moved to the shadows of Gabriel’s face during the silence that followed. When he spoke, she could hear a sense of awe for the God he serves when he said, “The complexity, the organization of creation is incredible. Think about the Earth, perfectly sized, perfect distance from the Sun, rotating on its axis at nearly one thousand miles an hour to be heated and cooled daily. Just imagine living on a planet traveling around the Sun at nearly sixty-seven thousand miles an hour.”

The thought of the Earth hurling through space was startling. “Sixty-seven thousand,” she said softly.

“Yes,” he said, “but the most amazing creation of all is the human God created in His own image. Man will never create a computer like the human brain that can process more than a million messages per second or a camera like the human eye. Just think about DNA, a digital code in every single cell. Every human has trillions of cells and in each tiny cell is a three-billion-letter program telling it how to act. That’s not chance, Jesse. That’s not

evolution. That's the work and design of Almighty God."

She had wondered what he based his belief on, and now she knew. "Jesse," he said, interrupting her thoughts, "I know you've asked yourself if God exists. I also know you're the type of person who appreciates reason. I've mentioned a few things, but if you take time to review the evidence, I think you'll come to the same conclusion I have. God exists. He loves you, Jesse."

What he said about creation made sense, but she wasn't sure. She couldn't organize her thoughts. His voice broke through her confusion. "Creation testifies of God's existence and there is more than enough evidence to prove the Bible is the infallible Word of God, but it's up to us to make a choice. We make the choice to believe, to make a commitment. I have followed the evidence to its rational conclusion and I am more convinced of who Jesus is than I am of my own identity. And I know who I am, Jesse."

Her hand came up to her forehead. "That's a lot to think about," she said in a tired voice.

He moved to kneel by the bed. "Earlier, you said you would have believed me if I told you it was going to snow in August. Well, I'm older, I like to think a little wiser, but I'm still the same person who would never lie to you. Maybe I haven't always told you things I should have, but I've never lied."

Falling silent, he looked down before saying, "You wonder how I know God exists. To some, believing in God seems foolish, like having an imaginary friend, but I know God exists, Jesse. I know because I know God personally. I talk to Him every day. God strengthens me, gives me hope for the future when there seems to be none. He is my courage, my patience and peace. I can't imagine living one day without Jesus."

He reached out to gently squeeze her hand before standing. "You said it's a lot to think about and I guess it is. If you ever want to talk, I'll be here."

Jesse thought about his words. He said she should consider the evidence, but she didn't need to. He already had. The reasoning, the logic was persuasive, but that wasn't what convinced her. What made her push the blanket back was hearing him talk about his personal relationship. She wanted what he had. She wanted to believe in something beyond herself, to hope again. Gabriel said he knows God and he wouldn't lie to her. She wanted to know God, too. "Gabriel," she called, "don't leave." Her white nightgown floated to the floor as she rose from the bed to kneel. "I need to know how to accept Jesus."

He came back around and knelt by her side to say, "God is holy, sinless. The only way we can approach a holy God is to accept the gift He gave to cleanse us, to wash away our sins. Jesus paid for our sins, died in our place. Confess your need for God's mercy as a sinner, repent and believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead."

She bowed her head to pray. "Dear God, I am a sinner who could never be good enough to be with You, but You made a way. I believe Jesus died for me and I believe You raised Him from the dead." The lump forming in her throat was becoming painful. "Please forgive me. I accept Jesus. Amen."

As Gabriel helped her to her feet, she looked up at him. "Did I do it right?"

His eyes glistened in the soft light of the moon. Was it tears? She couldn't tell. His arm came around her shoulder to pull her lightly against his side. "You did it just right."

She breathed in deeply and exhaled. The smothering heaviness was gone. "I can breathe again."

"Another captive set free," he said.

Going around the bed to pull on her robe, she said, "That's it. I feel free. I also feel hungry. Let's go downstairs and have a sandwich."

In the kitchen, her grandmother sat at the table with a look of sadness that tugged at Jesse's heart. "We've come to raid the frig, Grammy," Jesse said.

Following her grandmother's eyes, Jesse looked back to see Gabriel nod. "Praise God on high," her grandmother said, coming around the table. "Welcome to the body of Christ, child."

"Thank you, Grammy," Jesse said, returning her grandmother's hug.

Jesse made sandwiches while Gabriel poured milk. "Look what I've got, Jesse," her grandmother said, holding up a plate she lifted from the counter.

Turning around, Jesse smiled. "You made chocolate chip cookies. My favorite."

The mood was light around the table as they chatted about everything and nothing in particular. Gabriel looked relaxed, her grandmother's face glowed with happiness and Jesse thought she'd never tasted a better chicken sandwich.

Gabriel wiped mayonnaise from the corner of Jesse's mouth before handing her the napkin. "I know, I'm a pig," she said, laughing.

"Evidence is mounting to make the case," Gabriel teased.

Jesse looked across the table to see her grandmother smile at them before rising with her plate. "I think I'm about ready to turn in."

"Me, too," Jesse said, collecting the few dishes left on the table. At the sink, she kissed her grandmother's cheek. "Goodnight, Grammy."

Jesse turned around to see Gabriel leaning against the doorframe watching her. Approaching him, she suddenly felt shy. "Thank you, Gabriel, for everything."

Smiling, he opened his arms to give her a hug. “I guess someone has to look out for you. After all, we did grow up together.”

“We did,” she said, smiling against his chest. He could have said, after all, you’re just like my kid sister, but he didn’t. She was glad he didn’t say that.

Before going to bed that night, Jesse prayed. The God she hadn’t been able to imagine was real to her now. The image that settled in her mind was brilliant, profound light, all-powerful, terrifying—and yet, wonderful in His majesty, sitting on a radiant throne. At the same time, she saw the same light in Jesus, the visible image of an invisible God—a man with gentle eyes that sparkled like dew in the first rays of the morning sun. Jesus, the Savior she could know. She settled in bed to look out at the night sky. The words Gabriel couldn’t say earlier whispered through her mind. Everything will be all right.

Jesse was in the kitchen early the next morning when Gabriel came through the door. He stopped, surprised. “Good morning. You’re up early.”

Freshly shaven, his hair still damp from the shower, Jesse thought he was more handsome than any man had a right to be. The sight of him inspired a spontaneous smile and cheerful reply. “I woke up early. Sit down and I’ll bring your coffee.” Placing the cup on the table in front of him, she breathed in the fresh scent of soap.

His eyes followed her back to the kitchen island. “Did you sleep well?”

From the kitchen door, her grandmother answered the question she thought was for her. “I slept great.”

Jesse cast a quick smile at Gabriel. “I’m glad to hear it, Grammy. I slept great, too,” she said, handing her grandmother a

cup of coffee. “I’m making breakfast. How do cheese omelets, toast and jam sound?”

“Sounds good to me,” her grandmother said.

Over breakfast, Jesse thought about the question she would like to ask but she was afraid of sounding critical. She absently pushed a piece of egg across her plate before Gabriel asked, “What’s on your mind, Jesse?”

She looked from Gabriel to her grandmother. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just confused about something.”

Her grandmother put her fork down, waiting. “What is it, dear?”

“Well...I’ve heard you both say God protects and God provides. I guess I just don’t understand. If God protects and provides, why would you need to build a shelter?”

Lifting her napkin to her mouth, her grandmother nodded. “That’s a good question.”

“Yes,” Gabriel said. “That is a good question. I think Florence would agree with me when I say, we don’t have all the answers but you can ask us about anything you don’t understand, Jesse.”

“That’s right,” her grandmother said before her expression turned thoughtful. “We know Christians have problems like everyone else. We can see Christians are being persecuted across the world right now.”

“But I thought God protects Christians,” Jesse said.

Sighing, her grandmother pushed her plate forward. “I won’t pretend I completely understand suffering. I do believe Christians who walk in obedience and faith can rely on God’s promises, but sometimes I wonder if some Christians don’t suffer for reasons we don’t understand.”

“You know, Florence,” Gabriel said, “Proverbs and Psalms tell us how to secure God’s protection, but then I think of Job.”

“Job,” Jesse said. “Wasn’t he the man terrible things happened to?”

“Yes,” Gabriel said, “he was. The Bible says Job was blameless and upright, and yet he suffered.”

Surprised, Jesse said, “He was blameless and God didn’t protect him?”

Getting up from the table, her grandmother went to the coffeepot to refill her cup. Sitting back down, she said, “When I think of Job, I’m reminded that we should never assume a person’s problems, suffering or death is punishment for sin.”

Jesse thought about recent news reports, Christians being tortured and stoned to death in other countries. Without thinking, she spoke the thought aloud. “Why doesn’t God protect Christians?” Her eyes darted to her grandmother. “Sorry, Grammy, I don’t mean to sound...” She didn’t mean to sound what, questioning? She was questioning. She wanted to know why God, who can do anything, didn’t protect Christians or babies or...the list was endless.

“I understand what you’re asking,” her grandmother said. “It’s the same question people have asked throughout history. If God is all powerful and all loving, why does He permit evil and suffering in the world?”

Leaning forward, Jesse waited. “Do you know the answer, Grammy?”

“No, Jesse, I don’t, but I do know God gives us free will. If there was no evil, could we have free will? There’d be no evil deeds, no evil thoughts, not even one thought opposing God’s will. Without freewill, there’d be no evil. Without evil, there’d be no freewill.”

Jesse's fingers drummed against the table, thinking. "Maybe we should be asking a different question. Why did God give us free will?"

By his expression, Jesse could tell Gabriel was uncomfortable. His clipped answer confirmed her suspicion. He didn't like questioning God. "Perhaps," he said, looking mildly agitated, "God doesn't want to fellowship with robots. We're made in the image of God and I think God values freedom and emotion. Could we feel love without free will? Could we have the capacity to love without the capacity to hate?" He paused, checking his tone before saying, "God reveals Himself through His Word but some things remain a mystery. Job asked God the same question people ask today. Why do godly people suffer?"

Jesse looked from Gabriel to her grandmother. "Did God answer Job?"

"Not in the way you might think," her grandmother said. "Job wanted to face God, to know what he had done wrong and why he was suffering. The phrase, be careful what you ask for, might have been coined by Job."

"God answered Job, then," Jesse guessed.

"Yes," her grandmother said, nodding. "God showed up to speak with Job."

Jesse watched her grandmother take a sip of coffee. "And," Jesse said, encouraging her to continue.

"And," her grandmother said, setting her cup down, "God asked Job questions no man could answer, questions to remind Job that he was the created and God the creator."

"What did God ask?" Jesse wanted to know.

Her grandmother smiled. "God gave Job a science quiz. He asked Job where he was when the foundations of the Earth were laid. Who stretched out the measuring line and who laid the

cornerstone? He asked Job if he could bring forth the constellations or command an eagle to soar.”

“I think,” Gabriel, said, “Job’s story teaches us a few lessons. Sometimes people suffer for reasons we can’t understand. We also learn that God will not be put on trial by man.”

Jesse slumped in her chair. “All of this sounds confusing.”

“Are you worried that you won’t be able to learn everything?” Gabriel asked.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I’ve heard the Bible is complicated, a book of symbolism.”

“No,” Gabriel said, shaking his head. “The Bible is complex but not too complicated for believers to understand. There are many forms of writing in the Bible. Yes, there’s some symbolism, but also poetry, allegory, parables and many more writing styles. Textual signals embedded in Scripture tell us what we’re reading. I’ve been asked if I take the Bible literally and my answer is, yes, when it’s meant to be taken literally. I believe God says what He means and means what He says. The Bible isn’t like any other book. It’s profound, a message system from God that reveals Jesus.

Jesse wilted in her chair. “It still sounds complicated.”

Her grandmother stopped collecting dishes to step behind Jesse’s chair. She leaned over to say, “If you want to understand the Bible, go to the author in prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you.”

Gabriel nodded his agreement. “I’d say that’s good advice.” His fingers moved under his chin with a thoughtful expression before saying, “I’m as guilty as anyone, trying to intellectualize God. We try to put God under a microscope, but I don’t think any human could fully comprehend the power and mystery of God, the creator of life, the creator of all space, matter and time.”

“Time?” Jesse said. “Time—I never thought about time being created. I just thought time was, well, time.”

“God created time like everything else,” Gabriel said. “We think of God as having a lot of time but God resides outside of time. He inhabits eternity. God can’t be changed, but time can.”

“No!” Jesse gasped. “Time can be changed? How? How can that be?”

Gabriel smiled at her surprised expression. “Time can be changed by mass, acceleration and gravity. It’s complicated, but you can read up on Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity.” He glanced at his watch before saying, “I need to get going but we can talk about it later.”

Jesse sat up straighter in her chair. “Are you going to town, Gabriel?”

“No—yes, but it’s not safe for you.”

Crossing her arms, Jesse watched him. “If it’s not safe for me, then it seems it would be too dangerous for you, too.”

Gabriel noted the stubborn tilt of Jesse’s chin before looking to her grandmother for help. He was disappointed to see her turn without responding to his silent plea. Jesse hid a smile as she waited for his response.

“It’s different for me,” he said under his breath.

Jesse’s eyes widened. “Why? Because you’re a man?”

Her grandmother turned with barely concealed amusement to watch Gabriel squirm. His pleading look was met with an innocent shrug. He stared down at shuffling feet. “I just think... it’s just that—” He stopped and his head came up to say, “It’s just that I have a job to do in town.”

Jesse’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Really? A job?”

“Yes, a job. I believe you remember Mr. Drake and the

broken window. I'm replacing Mr. Drake's window today."

Jesse's face brightened. "I can help with that." Going to the door, she called over her shoulder, "I'll be right back."

Returning to the kitchen a few moments later, Jesse stopped when she heard her name. "I'd rather Jesse go with you than stay here and pace the floor."

A flash of heat filled Jesse's face as her grandmother and Gabriel turned to see her standing in the doorway. She dropped her gaze, wishing she could disappear.

Her grandmother was quick to say, "I was just telling Gabriel that you two were close as children. It's only natural that you care about each other."

Jesse looked up to see Gabriel coming toward her with a smile. "Of course we do. After all, we did grow up together. Right, Jesse?" Ruffling the top of Jesse's hair, he said, "Let's go, helper. Mr. Drake's window won't put itself in." [Chapter list](#) *or scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 5

Sitting in the passenger seat of the Jeep, Jesse stared out the window. How embarrassing to walk in and hear herself being talked about. What else had been said while she was upstairs? She had to admit, her grandmother was right. She did worry about Gabriel when he was away.

As Gabriel leaned forward to adjust the temperature setting, Jesse noticed his hair was getting longer. Brown curls were starting to flip up at his collar. The word adorable came to mind before she closed her eyes. Adorable—did I really just think that? Good grief, I’m turning into a thirteen year old. Still, she couldn’t help but think it odd that he was still single and not dating after all these years. Or was he? Were he and Rachel dating? Rachel certainly didn’t try to hide her attraction but Gabriel’s feelings weren’t as obvious. Was Gabriel attracted to Rachel? No one could deny Rachel’s beauty. Rachel and Gabriel would make a striking couple.

Gabriel’s voice broke through Jesse’s musings. Turning to him, she said, “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“I asked if you miss Long Beach, but now I’m wondering what you were thinking about so intently.”

What would he say if she told him? Quickly dismissing the idea, she looked out over the countryside “This area is beautiful,” she said, scanning the distant skyline. “The mountains are regal, mysterious, even dangerous, but at the same time, nurturing and peaceful.”

He smiled at her romantic portrayal. “I believe you have fallen in love, Miss Hart.”

“In love? What—what makes you say that?”

“Because people who come to the mountains often fall in love and stay.”

“Oh,” she said, relaxing, “I guess so. Remembering he sometimes seemed to read her thoughts, she said quickly, “I think the ocean is beautiful, too.”

“Yes,” he said, “the ocean is beautiful. All of God’s creations are unique and beautiful, but I find there are some places, even people, that I’m more drawn to than others.” Her body tensed as she waited for him to continue. When he did, his tone was casual. “For instance, I appreciate the beauty of the ocean, but for me, personally, I prefer the mountains. They feel more like home.”

“I can understand that. You grew up here,” she said.

After a short silence, he said, “I imagine Freud has a lot to say about unconscious motivation and attraction. People are often drawn to places without really knowing why. Some prefer the mountains, others the ocean, while some choose city life. I think we’re drawn to people in much the same way. Sometimes we feel a strong attraction to another person, a connection, maybe even a bond that we can’t easily explain. I’m sure psychologists are interested in such matters. From personal experience, what’s your opinion, Jesse?”

Her mind began to race. Could he be talking about them? “I—I think, well, yes,” she stammered before pausing to mentally calm herself. “Research has been conducted on attraction, cognitive constructs and interpersonal complexities.” She fell silent, thinking about theories that made no sense to her right then.

Was she really going to launch into a discussion on the theories of attraction? No, she decided, she would answer from her heart not her head. “You asked my opinion from personal experience, so I’ll tell you that I have felt deeply connected to someone. I thought about him, cared about him, even when I didn’t want to. I couldn’t control how I felt.” She couldn’t resist looking at him when she said, “Unfortunately, attraction isn’t always mutual. Sometimes a person connects with someone who

doesn't feel the same about them. Life doesn't always turn out the way we hope.”

Their eyes met briefly before Gabriel turned his attention back to the road. “I guess you’re talking about the connection you felt with your fiancé. Florence mentioned you were engaged.”

Jesse stared out the window without responding. She had never felt connected with Tom. How could she? She had never known Tom, only the masks he wore. She wanted Gabriel to know she wasn’t emotionally involved with another man but she didn’t know how to tell him. The dilemma presented no easy way out. If she said she felt deeply for Tom, she would be lying. If she said she wasn’t in love with the man she had agreed to marry, she would sound shallow. Wasn’t that the truth? Her relationship with Tom had been shallow.

She decided to be honest and let Gabriel draw his own conclusions. “No,” she said quietly, “you’re mistaken. I never felt the kind of connection we’re talking about with Tom. I wish I were clever enough to explain this in a way that wouldn’t expose me as naive, or worse, but the truth is, I was rejected, hurt, when I was very young and after that, I avoided dating. I focused on my studies and volunteer work during college and then my career. Tom was—” she paused, dreading the admission she was about to make before saying, “the first man I ever dated.”

Thinking about how that must sound, a woman her age going on a first date, she fell silent to hear Gabriel say, “Tom was the first man you ever dated?”

“Yes. Pretty pathetic, huh?” Wanting to get the confession over with, her words tumbled out. “I wanted to feel normal, to go on dates like everyone else. And Tom, he seemed like a great person at first, exciting and charming.” Sighing, she shrugged. “He was exciting. He’s all those things, but he’s also a person who uses people, women, for his own amusement.”

His voice was quiet when he said, “Tom admitted this?”

She nodded, thinking about her own inadequacies. “I was naive, but still, I knew. Tom and I were never in love. Tom was fascinated by the novelty of being with someone so unlike himself and I was in love with the idea of being in a relationship. Looking back, I see our dates for what they were, therapy sessions. We both used the relationship, better defined as a platonic friendship, to work through personal issues. Fear of losing what he never had led Tom to propose and the same fear led me to accept.”

“You and Tom met somewhere you wouldn’t normally be,” Gabriel said.

“Yes, a restaurant that was way too expensive. It was Amber’s birthday and I wanted to surprise her, go somewhere special.”

“Tom,” he said the name with a hint of distaste, “a man who occupies himself spending daddy’s money had a bottle of expensive champagne delivered to your table. Before the waiter said compliments of, Tom introduced himself.”

Unblinking, she stared ahead. Was he guessing? How could he possibly know that? Was she that transparent? Without moving her head, her eyes shifted to the left to see a muscle twitching in Gabriel’s jaw. In a quiet voice, she admitted her own guilt. “I was just as bad as Tom, maybe worse. We both had ulterior motives. I wanted to fit in and move on with my life. I was flattered that someone like Tom seemed interested in me. He made me feel—” She blinked and swallowed back tears to whisper, “pretty.”

Gabriel reached over and covered her hand with his. “Jesse...Jesse,” he said, sighing softly.

She looked over to see his sad expression before jerking her hand away. “I don’t need your pity, Gabriel.”

“What?” He looked surprised.

Crossing her arms, she stared ahead. “You feel sorry for

me. Poor, stupid, Jesse, duped by the first man she goes out with,” she mimicked his imagined thoughts crossly.

At the sound of his soft laughter, her head snapped around to hear him say, “That’s what I was thinking, huh? Poor, stupid, Jesse—duped. I was feeling sorry for you and didn’t realize it. Thanks for clearing that up. Perhaps, you could provide me with a list of acceptable emotions and responses for future reference.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief before sitting back in a huff. “I am certain, Mr. James, that you do not think I find this conversation nearly as entertaining as you do. In fact, I’m rather shocked at your unbecoming sense of humor.”

Then she heard it, his outright laughter, a deep, pleasing sound that melted her. She shook her head, trying to remain unaffected before giving in and punching him lightly in the side. “I cannot believe you, Gabriel.” Struggling not to laugh, she moved to punch him again but he caught her hand. She tried to keep her face in an angry pose but her lips refused to cooperate. “You’re awful,” she said, pulling her hand from his.

As they neared the business district, Jesse turned her attention to people on the sidewalks. “Why are all these people in town? Where did they come from?”

Gabriel swung the Jeep into a parallel parking space across the street from the glass shop. “Many have moved to the area in search of water,” he said, switching off the ignition. Others have left larger cities because of crime, violence and food shortages.” The touch of his hand on her arm pulled her attention from the street. “Stay close to me, Jesse,” he said in a serious tone.

Crossing the street, Jesse spotted two men leaning casually against the storefront near the door of the glass shop. The men looked out of place in their trendy suits. She couldn’t imagine a local man wearing a flaming red scarf or leaving his dress shirt open to the coat button to show off pricey chains. Dark

sunglasses made eye contact impossible but as Gabriel opened the door, she smiled and said hello. Neither man offered a response. At the feel of Gabriel's hand against the small of her back, she looked up to see the warning in his eyes.

Seeing no one around when they entered the shop, she whispered, "That was strange."

Before Gabriel could respond, a short, thickset man wearing overalls called, "Gabriel, good to see you," as he weaved his way around random panes of glass propped against shelves throughout the store. "Been a while," the man said in a heavy southern accent as he held out a hand to Gabriel.

"It has been a while," Gabriel said, shaking the man's hand. "It's good to see you again, Sam."

Pushing thick-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his pudgy nose, Sam turned to Jesse. "Who's this you got with you, Gabriel?"

"Sam, this is Jesse Hart, Florence's granddaughter."

"Florence's granddaughter, eh? Well, now, it's good to meet you, Jesse," he said, shaking Jesse's hand before pulling a handkerchief from the front of his overalls to wipe his sweaty brow. Stepping behind the counter, he bent over with a soft grunt. "I reckon you come for the window," he said, placing a small pane of glass on the counter. When Gabriel took out his wallet, Sam held up a hand. "Now, you know better than that, Gabriel. After all you done for me and my family, why, it's the least I can do."

Gabriel hesitated before putting his wallet away. "Thanks, Sam."

"Sure," Sam said, leaning forward to rest his arms on the countertop. "I'm glad you came by today, Gabriel. I wanted to let you know I'm closing up shop for a while. I thought you might worry if you came by and I wasn't here."

“Is your family okay?” Gabriel asked.

“Oh, family’s fine. Just worries me, that’s all, leaving Mandy and Cindy home alone with the way things are right now.” Turning his weight to lean on one elbow, he looked out the front window. “I didn’t worry too much during the day, but I made sure I was home before dark. God help a body caught out alone after dark.” Sighing, he shook his head. “Just don’t know what to think anymore. After what happened to Mr. Drake, I reckon nobody could blame a man for staying home to protect his own.”

Recognizing the name, Jesse looked up to see Gabriel’s face darken before he asked, “What happened to Mr. Drake, Sam?”

Sam straightened and looked back at Gabriel with widening eyes. “You mean you don’t know? Mr. Drake was found tied up and beat unconscious right in his own house.” He looked around as if worried he might be overheard before saying, “Hoodlums done it in broad daylight. Two neighborhood boys taking a shortcut home seen Mr. Drake’s back door standing wide open. They knew something wasn’t right so they went for help. Last I heard, Mr. Drake was in the hospital in bad shape.”

Gabriel picked up the pane of glass. “I think you’re right to stay home with your family, Sam. You know you’re welcome at the shelter anytime.” He took Jesse’s hand to guide her toward the door before looking over his shoulder to say, “Don’t hesitate to call if you need anything.”

Inside the Jeep, Jesse fastened her seatbelt before looking out to see the two men who had been in front of the store earlier moving briskly along the sidewalk in their direction. The man wearing the scarf pulled his unbuttoned jacket back with his left hand to reach across his body with his right. Suddenly, both men stopped and their faces lifted as if watching something over the Jeep. “Gabriel,” Jesse said in a frightened voice. When he didn’t respond, she looked over to see him staring straight ahead with his left hand on the door handle. She looked back out to see the

men take a few steps back before turning to walk quickly away.

When Gabriel started the Jeep, Jesse's head fell back against the seat to release a long breath. "I thought they were going to..." Her voice trailed off. What did she think they were going to do? She had felt threatened, but why? Had she overreacted? She had no real evidence to support the fear she felt. After all, what had the men done but ignore her when she said hello and walk toward them on the sidewalk? Still, their body language had been intimidating and the way they stopped so abruptly was strange. She turned to Gabriel to ask, "Do you think they were watching us?" Before he could answer, she said, "No. Why would they?"

Driving through town, Gabriel kept an eye on the rear view mirror. "They were watching us. I know who they are."

"You know them? Why didn't you say something?"

"I don't know them personally," he said. "I guess I should say, I know what they are, devil worshippers. I sensed a strong presence of evil while we were in town."

"Evil? How can you sense evil?"

Pulling along the curb in front of Mr. Drake's house, he turned to her. "Spiritual discernment, that's how I know they're devil worshippers. I can sense their spirit."

Really? Could he do that, she wondered. Leaving the Jeep, she followed him up the walk before stopping, thinking of crime scenes she'd seen on television roped off with yellow tape. "Gabriel, should we be here?"

"There's no sign police have restricted the area. I want to make sure the house is locked," he said.

After checking the front door, he walked around to the side. When he stopped to look in a window at the back, she eased up next to him. With her fingers on the ledge, she was about to

push up onto her toes when she felt an arm around her waist hauling her back. “No, Jesse,” Gabriel said sternly.

Swinging around to face him, her anger quickly turned to concern when she saw his expression. “Gabriel, what’s wrong? What did you see?”

Without responding, he took her hand and started for the vehicle. Inside the Jeep, he was silent a few minutes before asking, “Do you remember the horror movie we watched when we were teenagers?”

Remember? How could she forget? The movie had been her idea, one that she regretted. Ghastly scenes had stuck in her mind for weeks. “Of course I remember. I had nightmares and didn’t sleep for days.”

“I remember that, too,” he said quietly.

Noting his strained expression, she didn’t question him further. She touched his arm. “Are you okay, Gabriel?”

His hand covered hers briefly. “Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

On the other side of town, Jesse read the sign, Mountain Valley Hospital. She looked at Gabriel curiously before he answered her unspoken question. “I want to see Mr. Drake.”

The wind whipped Jesse’s hair across her face as they crossed the parking lot. She looked up at dark clouds gathering in the sky before quickening her pace. “Looks like a storm is headed this way,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, looking out from the door he held.

Passing the information desk, Gabriel led her down a corridor toward the intensive care unit where a woman wearing white scrubs sitting at the nurses’ station watched them approach. “Hey, Gabriel. I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Hello, Linda,” Gabriel said, before asking for the name of Mr. Drake’s doctor.

Nimble fingers flew over a keyboard. “Thought so,” she said. “Dr. Haynes is Mr. Drake’s attending physician.”

“Do you know if Dr. Haynes is on the grounds?”

Her eyes rolled up in thought. “Hmm—don’t think so.” She looked back at Gabriel to say, “He made his rounds earlier this morning. I’m almost certain he’s left already but I can give him a message.”

“No, thank you,” Gabriel said, turning to leave.

Jesse wondered at the conversation. Gabriel seemed almost guarded when talking to the nurse. When they didn’t go back the way they’d come in, she asked, “Where are we going?”

“It’s nearly lunchtime. I want to see if Dr. Haynes is in the cafeteria.”

“But, the nurse said he’s away from the hospital.”

“Yes, she did, but I’d like to see for myself.

In the cafeteria, Gabriel scanned the handful of people sitting at tables dotted throughout the room. “Over there,” he said, nodding before starting across the room toward two men sitting in a far corner.

As they neared, Jesse identified Dr. Haynes by the name, Jerry Haynes, M.D., stitched on his white lab coat. The doctor looked to be in his late fifties with wavy, white hair. Seeing them approach, his face brightened before standing to shake Gabriel’s hand. “Gabriel, what a pleasant surprise,” Dr. Haynes said before turning his attention to Jesse.

Hearing Jesse introduced as Florence’s granddaughter, Dr. Haynes inspected her face more closely. “Yes, I can see the resemblance,” he said with a deepening smile. “You are

genetically blessed, indeed, to take after Florence. She is a lovely woman.”

The man sitting at the table with Dr. Haynes stood, waiting to be introduced. On casual inspection, the expensive suit seemed to be the most interesting thing about the man introduced as Mark Banner, until meeting his gaze. Reaching out to shake hands, Jesse’s smile froze as she stared into the palest eyes she had ever seen, chiseled ice with the faintest hint of blue.

After introductions, Gabriel turned to Dr. Haynes. “I’m sorry to interrupt your lunch, Jerry, but I was hoping you could spare a few minutes.”

As Mr. Banner took his seat, Dr. Haynes gestured at the two empty chairs. “Mark and I finished lunch already. Please, sit down.”

Darting a look at Mr. Banner, Gabriel said, “Maybe we can talk in private later today.”

The older man’s brows rose slightly before turning to his lunch companion. “Mark, would you mind excusing us, please?”

Without taking his eyes off Gabriel, the corners of Mr. Banner’s mouth tilted upward slightly. “Of course, you want to talk in private.” Rising from his chair, his hand slid leisurely down the front of his red silk tie before looking back at Gabriel to say, “Gabriel, the one who stands in the presence of God.”

Jesse and Gabriel both heard the softly spoken comment. “Excuse me?” Gabriel said.

Blinking like a lazy cat, Mr. Banner eyed Gabriel a few seconds. “I believe that is how the archangel, Gabriel, refers to himself in the Bible.” The name rolled off his tongue with slow pronunciation, “Gabriel—interesting Biblical name.” Mr. Banner held Gabriel’s gaze, waiting for a response. When there was none, he said, “I’ll leave you to your discussion then. Pleasure meeting you both.”

Taking a seat, Jesse watched Mr. Banner walk away. She found the man disturbing—his strange expressionless face, the way he stared at Gabriel. She had never used the word to describe anyone before meeting Mark Banner. The man was creepy.

Leaning back in his chair, Dr. Haynes said, “Mark is a curious fellow. He notices anything associated with the Bible. Your name, for instance.”

“Yes,” Gabriel said. “There is something different about him. You say he’s familiar with the Bible?”

“Oh, very much so. I’d say Mark could quote Scripture as well as any preacher I know. Poor fellow, he must have been desperate for company to invite me to lunch. I really didn’t have the time but I felt sorry for him.”

“Sorry for him?” Gabriel said.

Dr. Haynes smiled. “Mark is here doing a special audit of the hospital’s financial records. As you might imagine, he’s not exactly swamped with lunch invitations.”

“No,” Gabriel said, “I guess he wouldn’t be.”

With a sobering expression, Dr. Haynes asked, “So, what brings you by today, Gabriel?”

“We were hoping to visit Mr. Drake,” Gabriel said.

“I see. You heard what happened then?”

“Yes. Sam Huskins said Mr. Drake was attacked in his home.”

“Poor man,” Dr. Haynes said, sighing. “I doubt he’d be alive today if not found so quickly. Adam Russell was one of the lads that went for help.” He drummed his fingers lightly on the table before saying, “I can’t remember the other boy’s name.”

“John,” Gabriel said. “Adam and John.”

Dr. Haynes smiled in recollection. “Yes, indeed. That’s it, John.” He looked around to make sure he wouldn’t be overheard before leaning forward to say, “To be quite frank, Gabriel, Mr. Drake’s condition is critical. He hasn’t gained consciousness since admission. If he had family, I would have called them in already.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Gabriel said. “Would it be possible to visit Mr. Drake?” In response to the doctor’s quizzical expression, Gabriel explained that they wanted to pray for the man.

Dr. Haynes got up from the table. “Come with me,” he said, starting for the door.

They followed the doctor’s quick pace to the intensive care unit where the same nurse they had talked to earlier sat. As they neared, Jesse thought she saw the woman’s lips tighten slightly.

Leaning an elbow on the nurses’ station, Dr. Haynes nodded at Gabriel. “Nurse, please note in Mr. Drake’s chart that I have given Gabriel James and Jesse...” He looked at Jesse questioningly.

“Hart, Jesse Hart,” she said.

He nodded. “Jesse Hart, permission to visit.”

Color fused the nurse’s cheeks. “Dr. Haynes, that—that’s against hospital policy. Only family is allowed to visit patients in the ICU.”

Dr. Haynes’ surprised expression shifted to one that might be used with a defiant ten-year-old. “Are you refusing to follow doctor’s order, nurse?”

Visibly wilting under Dr. Haynes’s scrutiny, the nurse’s eyes fell to the computer keyboard. “No. Of course not, doctor. Whatever you say.”

Turning back to Gabriel, Doctor Haynes said, "I'll write an order giving you and Ms. Hart permission to visit Mr. Drake anytime during regular visiting hours. You may want to visit when I'm not here."

Gabriel shook the doctor's hand. "Thank you, Jerry. This means a great deal to us."

"No, Gabriel, thank you for coming by. Medically, we've done all we can for Mr. Drake. He's in God's hands now."

The spirited man Jesse remembered fussing about a broken window lay pale and unmoving under the white hospital blanket. His chest rose rhythmically with each breath forced into his body. Bandages around his head didn't completely cover the deep purple bruising along his temple that fanned out to encircle his right eye. Careful of wires and tubes, she moved to his bedside. Who could do such a thing? She bent close to his ear. "Mr. Drake, your friends are here," she said, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. She hoped he knew they were there, that someone cared.

Kneeling on the opposite side of the bed, Gabriel looked up before bowing his head with a sigh. "Father in heaven. Holy, Sovereign God, I come before You, requesting an audience with the King of kings. Your Word tells us that Jesus bore our sins in His own body on a cross, by whose stripes we are healed. You are the restorer of health and the healer of wounds."

The conviction in Gabriel's voice gave Jesse confidence. She felt certain God would listen to him. "Please," she whispered, "heal Mr. Drake."

She looked across the bed at Gabriel's bowed face. His voice softened as if God were standing right next to him. "In the name of Jesus, the one given all authority in heaven and on Earth and by the power of the Word of truth, I ask for this man's life."

Taking a Bible from the nightstand, Gabriel read passages while Jesse continued to hold Mr. Drake's lifeless hand. She

watched his face, waiting for him to open his eyes. When minutes passed with no apparent change, she moved to look at the monitors. She tried to keep the discouragement she felt out of her voice when she said, “Gabriel, maybe you should pray again.”

He came around the bed to her side. “You’re disappointed because Mr. Drake didn’t wake up.”

Her head dropped. “Yes.”

“Come on,” he said, touching her shoulder. “It’s time to go.”

She leaned over to whisper in Mr. Drake’s ear. “I love you.”

In the hospital cafeteria, Jesse pulled a piece of crust from her sandwich before pushing the plate forward and looking up to see Gabriel staring off across the room at nothing. After a few minutes, he spoke. “You don’t understand why Mr. Drake didn’t seem to get better after we prayed.”

“No, not really. I wanted him to be healed and I thought he would be healed.” Dropping her head, she said, “But he wasn’t.

“Yes, you wanted him to be healed very badly,” Gabriel said. “You have a great compassion for people, Jesse. That’s one of the reasons I—I admire you.”

She watched him across the table. “That’s nice of you to say but I think most people are compassionate. I don’t think I’m unique in that regard.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Maybe I should give people more credit. In any event, I know you’re disappointed. I think you may have been expecting a miracle.”

“Of course,” she said quickly. “Isn’t that what we prayed for? We prayed for Mr. Drake to be healed.”

“That is what we prayed for, but there’s a difference

between healing and a miracle. A miracle is often an immediate supernatural occurrence that goes against known scientific laws.”

“I guess that’s what I was expecting then, a miracle,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, nodding, “I believe you were. God has absolute power to perform miracles if it's within His purpose, but God also heals. Healing is not always instant and God often uses doctors to heal.”

She sat quietly before looking back at him to ask, “So why not pray for a miracle every time?”

He smiled, apparently amused by her question. “I pray and believe God will answer my prayer. God always answers, but the answer isn’t always yes. If my prayer is within God’s plan, God will give me what I ask for. But it's up to God to decide the timing, means and method.”

She looked beyond Gabriel, thinking. “Are you saying Mr. Drake will be healed but not right away?”

When he answered, she could hear sadness in his voice. “Sometimes, Jesse, God does not perform a miracle or heal. Sometimes, a person dies.”

Her eyes widened. “Do you think Mr. Drake will die?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head, “I don’t believe Mr. Drake will die soon, but one day, eventually, he will die. Everyone dies. Unless called up at the rapture, we must all die. Abraham died, Moses died and all the apostles died. Even Jesus died, but He came to die for us. God’s ways and thoughts are much higher than ours. According to the book of Isaiah, sometimes, even the righteous die to protect them from evil to come.”

She lifted one shoulder in a questioning shrug. “Someone might ask why we should pray at all if God’s mind is made up.”

“Yes,” he said, smiling, “someone might ask that. The Bible says God is unchangeable, but I think that speaks of God’s character and nature. God is righteous, full of love and mercy. I believe requests made in accord with the Father’s nature and plans are granted. The Bible records an instance of God changing His mind to add fifteen years to King Hezekiah’s life. We may not always understand, but we can trust God to always do whatever serves the greater good.”

She propped her chin on her hands. “So, you’re saying we should pray but no matter who prays it won’t be done if it conflicts with God’s plan.”

“Right. If we are in tune with God, we can sincerely pray for His will to be done.”

“I guess that makes sense,” she said.

Walking out of the hospital, Jesse looked up to see black, menacing clouds hanging low in the sky. Was God angry with her? Faced with disappointment, her faith had plummeted. Nearing the Jeep, she turned to Gabriel. “How do I increase my faith?”

“The Bible says faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. We increase our faith through study, prayer and hearing God’s Word,” he said.

Inside the Jeep, Jesse glanced his way. “I ask a lot of questions, don’t I?”

She watched his cheeks round with the hint of a smile. “Yes, you do, but that’s part of learning.”

As Gabriel reached for the gearshift, she touched his arm. “Look,” she said, keeping her eyes on the man and woman standing by a silver Jaguar across the parking lot. “Isn’t that the nurse from ICU and...”

“Mark Banner,” he said, filling in the name. “Yes, it is,

and they seem to be having a disagreement.”

Jesse noted their stiff posture and angry facial expressions. “I think you may be right.”

“That might be an interesting conversation to hear,” Gabriel said.

“Yes, I think so,” she agreed, watching the woman turn on her heel to walk quickly toward the hospital’s side entrance.

As they pulled onto the main road, a few fat raindrops splashed against the windshield before a clap of thunder rumbled in the distance. Within minutes, they were driving through a downpour with windshield wipers swishing at their highest speed. Jesse flinched at the sound of lightning striking nearby. Turning on the stereo, Gabriel said, “I think it’s starting to move past us now.” Reassured by his calm, she settled back in her seat and tried to relax.

The worst of the storm was over by the time they arrived home but it was still raining. Seeing a car in the drive, Gabriel said, “We have visitors.” He pulled a lever to recline his seat. “I don’t have an umbrella. I guess you want to wait it out.”

Rivulets of rain coursed down the windshield but there was no lightning and only the occasional rumble of distant thunder. Watching him get comfortable, she was struck by the urge to contradict his assumption. “A little rain never hurt anyone,” she said.

He sat up with a surprised look. “A woman willing to get her hair wet, I’m impressed,” he said, opening the door and dashing out into the rain. She didn’t wait for him to come around but met him at the back of the Jeep. She could feel her blouse starting to cling to her body as she ran up the slight incline of the front yard. At her grandmother’s freshly tilled flowerbed, her left foot slid back on the wet grass causing her upper body to pitch forward. Unable to regain her balance, she fell to the ground. Her hands sank into the soft earth as she lifted her face from the mud.

Rolling over, she sat up sputtering, raking the dripping muck from her eyes and mouth.

“Are you hurt, Jesse?” Gabriel asked. She looked down at her mud-covered clothes before looking up to see his eyes widen.

She sat there thinking about Gabriel’s reaction. His surprised look told her what she must look like. The way his eyebrows shot up had been almost comical. Starting to giggle softly, she looked up to see Gabriel’s lips press together in an effort not to smile. Adopting a serious tone, she said, “In light of recent developments, I’m big enough to admit that I may have made the wrong decision in not waiting.”

They were both laughing when he held out a hand to help her from the ground. The temptation was too much for her to resist. As he leaned forward to help her, she called, “Wait!” Catching him off guard, she pulled him into the mud.

Sitting at her side, he wiped his hands slowly down the front of his jeans. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“Really?” she asked, smiling through her facial mudpack. “Somehow, I think you can.” Easing her hand into the dirt, she closed her fingers around a handful of mud before swaying sideways to bump his shoulder. When he turned to look at her, she pulled her hand across his cheek, laughing at the smeared result.

He nodded slowly, a gradual smile curling his lips. She didn’t miss the glint of mischievous vengeance in his eyes before his hand came up to show off a mound of dripping mud. She stared at him as her hands closed on ammunition for the coming skirmish.

They were still battling in the mud when the sound of someone coughing and clearing their throat caught their attention. On their knees, they faced the porch to see her grandmother watching them.

“Uh-oh,” Jesse said, looking over at Gabriel. She lowered

her face to hide a grin. “You look like a three year old who wallowed in a mud hole,” she said, just loud enough for him to hear.

He leaned sideways, close to her ear. “You look like the mud hole the three year old wallowed in.”

Jesse managed to control herself until her grandmother walked into the house. When the front door closed, she fell to the ground in a fit of uncontrolled laughter.

Gabriel stood over her, waiting. “Are you done?”

She looked up to see his mud-spattered face before dissolving into laughter again. She held up a hand to ward him back. “Don’t look at me. I can’t take it.” After a few minutes, she sat up. “Okay, I think I’m—no, wait,” she said, starting to giggle. Blowing out a long breath, she felt more in control. “Okay, I think I’m done now.”

On her feet, Jesse stood still, listening. Watching her, Gabriel asked, “What is it?”

She looked up at the sky. “It’s stopped raining,” she said, following him to the porch where two robes and towels hung across the banister.

He pulled the towels from the porch rail. “This is Florence’s way of warning us not to track mud into the house. We’d better hose off.”

She crossed her arms, shivering. “Brr—that’ll be cold.”

He turned to look at her. “Florence’s wrath will be colder.”

“Um, good point,” she said, starting around the house toward the garden hose.

They laughed and teased each other with a feeling of camaraderie as they hosed off before taking turns changing behind the shed. As Jesse walked through the yard, she curled her

toes into the wet earth and tried to remember the last time she felt grass under her bare feet. The grass felt good. She felt good.

Gabriel waited for her by the back door. Chuckling, he shook his head. “Florence must think we’re out of our minds, playing in the rain like kids.”

“You know,” Jesse, said, “that reminds me of a sign I once saw in a little shop. I didn’t get it then. The sign said some people don’t have enough sense to go out into the rain. I think I get it now.”

Peeking around the back door, Jesse made sure the coast was clear before scurrying across the kitchen and up the backstairs. The warm spray of the shower felt wonderful. She smiled, thankful her grandmother had been the only witness to their fun.

Guessing that Rachel might be among the visitors, Jesse took extra care with her appearance. In front of the full-length mirror, she paused to make a quick turn and inspect the simple cotton dress. She might never compete with Rachel’s beauty but at least she could feel more confident in the same room.

[Chapter list](#) *or scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 6

Everyone stopped talking when Jesse walked into the living room. She looked around at faces watching her. To her right, Rachel sat on the long sofa with her parents. Emma and her grandmother smiled from matching chairs across the room and to her left Gabriel stood talking to two teenagers sitting on the small sofa.

“Here she is now,” Gabriel said, crossing the room to guide Jesse toward the teenagers. Standing, the boy’s button down shirt fell over his loose-fitting jeans. Blue eyes sparkled from smooth, pink skin that had the natural appearance of being freshly scrubbed. Holding out a hand, Jesse smiled before a look of surprise splashed across her face when Gabriel introduced the boy as Pastor Jonas Wagner.

Pastor? Had she heard that right? “Nice to—to meet you, Pastor?” Too late, she realized her voice lifted, turning the statement into a question.

His tilted smile told Jesse he was amused by her reaction. “It’s nice to meet you too, Jesse,” he replied.

When Gabriel introduced the young woman with dark blonde, shoulder length hair as Olivia, the Pastor’s wife, Jesse stared unblinking. Were these teenagers married? Was the boy really a preacher?

“It’s good to meet you, Jesse,” Olivia said in a sweet, almost childlike voice.

Taking Olivia’s hand, Jesse paused, looking into soft brown eyes. She had never sensed such gentleness and humility in a person before. “Olivia, you have a beautiful name.”

Olivia blushed lightly. “Thank you. I was named after my grandmother.”

Selecting a chair near the corner of the room, Jesse sat down to ponder such a surprising revelation. How could a teenager become the pastor of a church? A pastor was the leader, an elder, the person other church members looked to for guidance. Did her grandmother and Gabriel take the young man seriously? Surely, the Pastor and his wife were older than they appeared. Careful not to stare, she looked at the young couple, noticing the Pastor's glow. Was the bright quality of his face owed to his ruddy complexion or something else?

The Pastor rubbed his cheek, thinking. "We know several devil worshippers are in the area. Other than terrorizing innocent people like Mr. Drake, we don't know what their intentions are."

Victoria's fingers splayed out like a fan against her breastbone to ask, "Was Mr. Drake attacked by devil worshippers?"

"Yes. We have good reason to think so," the Pastor said. "They say the room where he was assaulted was a grisly sight—satanic symbols drawn on the walls, blasphemies against God. I heard there wouldn't be an investigation because the police department is understaffed. Several officers in the area are staying home with their own families." Shaking his head sadly, he said, "Churches burned down, Christians attacked." He looked at Gabriel to ask, "Is the shelter ready to open?"

"Yes," Gabriel answered. "The last of the equipment just came in. Nick will oversee supplies."

"Good," the Pastor said. "It's time to open the doors. We need to get the word out, let people know there's a safe place in the area." He paused, thinking, before saying, "It may be dangerous but witnessing for Christ has never been more important than it is today."

Looking around the room, Jesse noticed everyone, except Rachel, was nodding in agreement. She noted Rachel's eye roll before turning her attention back to Gabriel. "I know someone

who works for the local news station,” Gabriel said. “I may talk to him about doing a piece on the shelter. You’re right, Jonas. Things are getting more dangerous, even in this area. Battle lines are quickly being drawn.”

“Yes,” the Pastor said, staring off across the room, “the lines become more entrenched every day. It is time to take a stand.”

Looking uncomfortable, Mr. Swinney changed the subject. “Are we still meeting here tomorrow?”

“Yes. We’ll set up here as planned,” the Pastor said before looking to Gabriel. “Anything else we need to talk about tonight, Gabriel?”

“One thing,” Gabriel said. “As you’ve said, we can’t count on the police. I’m talking to someone, a friend I trust, about heading up a security team for the shelter.”

The Pastor ran a hand over the top of his short spiked hair. “I hate to think we’ll need one but I’ll leave that to you.” Turning, he said, “Florence, anything you want to discuss?”

Her face brightened as she looked to Emma. “Just to let everyone know, Emma has agreed to take charge of the kitchen. I know she’ll do a fine job.”

Nodding, the Pastor said, “Oh, absolutely. I was hoping Emma would volunteer for that. Which reminds me, Florence. Do you think you and Gabriel might have time to look over the list of responsibilities for the shelter we’ve been working on?” Seeing her grandmother nod, he turned his attention to Jesse. “I don’t mean to put you on the spot, Jesse, but, I’m wondering where you stand in all of this.”

Jesse’s eyes darted nervously around the room. “Where I stand? I—I guess,” she stammered before stopping as she met the Pastor’s intense gaze. Sitting back in her chair, she said, “No—I don’t guess, I know. I know where I stand. I have made a

decision, a commitment. I stand for Jesus.”

The Pastor glanced at Olivia with an almost imperceptible nod before his face relaxed into a smile. “We are very pleased to have you join us, Jesse.”

“Thank you,” Jesse said, feeling a little uneasy at being the center of attention.

The Pastor asked if anyone else had anything to talk about. When no one spoke, he stood to lead them in prayer. As the Pastor began to pray, the rhythm and tone of his voice changed, flowing out with a power and intensity that Jesse found stirring. She was beginning to think she might have underestimated the young man.

After everyone left, Jesse tidied up the kitchen while her grandmother and Gabriel worked on plans for the shelter. At the kitchen sink, she stared out the window thinking about all the changes that would take place. The shelter would be open and people would be moving into the house. She and her grandmother had been disappointed to hear Emma say she wanted to stay at the shelter to be near the kitchen. Her grandmother had planned to convert the glory room into a bedroom but that wouldn’t be necessary now.

Jesse mentally pictured the three bedrooms available. One room for the Pastor and Olivia, one for Charles and Victoria Swinney and—her eyes closed with a soft groan—Rachel would have the remaining room. The thought of Rachel in the same house left her feeling a little nauseous. How would Gabriel respond to the woman living in the same house? Her fingers tightened around the cup she was rinsing. He didn’t seem to encourage Rachel’s flirting, but he didn’t seem to discourage it either.

Drying her hands, Jesse turned to watch Gabriel and her grandmother working at the kitchen table. Her grandmother tapped a pencil lightly against her chin. Jesse smiled,

remembering years past when she had seen her grandmother do the same thing while grading papers. Leaning over the kitchen island, she propped her chin on her hands, content to watch Gabriel work. When he stopped writing and smiled at her, she smiled back before realizing what she was doing. Straightening, she looked down to smooth her dress and say, “I was just thinking about dinner. Any suggestions?”

Gabriel sat back and laced his hands behind his head. “Anything you’d like to fix is fine with me. What do you think, Florence?”

Her grandmother didn’t look up from her writing pad. “Think about what, dear?”

“About dinner, what to have.”

“Oh, anything is fine with me,” she answered distractedly.

Getting up from the table, Gabriel picked up his glass. Jesse busied herself wiping the already clean counter as he passed on his way to the refrigerator. After pouring himself a glass of tea, he moved to her side. She kept her eyes lowered to the dishtowel she was meticulously folding. “You were a million miles away a few moments ago,” he said.

Ignoring his comment, she smoothed down the towel’s edges before saying, “Maybe, pot roast.”

He continued to study her downcast face. “What’s bothering you, Jesse? Anything you’d like to talk about?”

“You know,” she said, wanting to change the subject, “I was surprised when you introduced Pastor Wagner. He seems so young.”

“I’ll take that as a no, you don’t want to talk about it,” he said, smiling. “The offer stands if you change your mind.” Taking a drink, he considered her comment about the Pastor before saying, “I think Jonas realizes people are surprised to hear he’s a

preacher at such a young age. Once you get to know him, he seems older.”

Jesse nodded. “He and Olivia do seem different, in a good way. How old are they?”

“Older than they look. They’re both twenty.”

“Really? I would have guessed sixteen.”

He smiled. “I’m sure the Pastor would find that amusing.”

“Oh, but you won’t tell him, will you?”

He looked as if considering the possibility before saying, “No. I won’t tell him.” She heard him chuckle as he turned to go back to the table. “Pot roast, I’m rather fond of pot roast.”

Over dinner, Jesse found herself thinking about the people who would come to the shelter. She turned to her grandmother. “Won’t most people coming to the shelter drive? What about parking? I saw a road leading to the shelter but there’s really no place to park a lot of vehicles.”

Her grandmother shot an uneasy look at Gabriel before he spoke up. “There’s a place for parking fairly close by.”

Jesse mentally pictured the area surrounding the shelter. “I don’t remember one.”

“You can’t see it from the shelter,” Gabriel said, starting to pay particular attention to the potato he was cutting. Jesse watched her grandmother and Gabriel across the table but neither looked up from their plates. Her grandmother picked up her glass before setting it down without taking a drink. “We built a worship center,” she said quickly.

“Worship center,” Jesse repeated, surprised. Falling silent, she digested the information before asking, “Why didn’t you tell me before now?”

“I suggested we wait,” Gabriel said. “Give you time to get

used to the idea of the shelter before breaking any more news.”

“I see,” Jesse said.

Her grandmother’s voice was apologetic, “I hope you’re not angry, Jesse. We didn’t want to upset you.”

“No, Grammy, really, I understand. I’m sure Gabriel told you how I overreacted when I saw the shelter.” Closing her eyes, her hand came up to rub her forehead. “I don’t know, I just felt so...”

“Overwhelmed,” Gabriel, said. “I think anyone might have felt the same way, Jesse,”

She stared at the table, remembering how badly she acted at the shelter. She had actually yelled at Gabriel. “I was awful,” she admitted.

“You were fine, Jesse,” Gabriel said. “I’d say you’re holding up very well under the circumstances.”

Her grandmother’s attempt at small talk did little to lift Jesse’s spirits. Self-reproach had ruined her appetite. She pushed her food around the plate before looking up to see Gabriel cutting a piece of pot roast with exaggerated gusto. Taking a bite, his lips turned up in a smile as he tapped his fork against the air. “Jesse, I must say, you do have a flair for cooking. The thought and consideration you put into dinner was definitely time well spent.”

Her grandmother’s look of surprise turned into a smile when she realized Gabriel was joking. She placed her napkin on the table. “I enjoyed your pot roast, too, but probably not as much as the game Gabriel is entertaining himself with right now.” Her voice turned playfully scolding to say, “Behave, Gabriel. Stop torturing Jesse.”

Chuckling softly, Gabriel excused himself to carry his dishes to the sink. Following, Jesse elbowed him in the side. “You heard Grammy, behave.”

A mischievous sparkle lit his eyes. “Yes, I believe I did. Florence said I should stop torturing you and behave. Torture? I don’t think my behavior could accurately be described as torture. And behave—what does that even mean? Such vague instructions leave me with no real sense of obligation to comply.”

Watching him, Jesse shook her head with a smile. “You did that when we were kids, used word games to rationalize and squirm your way out of trouble. Well, I have news for you, Mr. James. It doesn’t work with Grammy. I tried your trick when we were kids, and it never worked.”

“Ah...but did you apply the technique with the same skill? Word parsing is an art that takes practice and finesse.” His eyes lifted to the wall clock before saying, “Unfortunately, our conversation on the definition of acceptable behavior will have to be cut short. I need to make a call but I’ll be happy to resume the discussion later.”

In her room that evening, Jesse found it difficult to concentrate on the book she was reading. Her mind kept drifting to images of Rachel with her hand on Gabriel’s arm, seductive smiles, whispering in his ear. Would he resist Rachel’s charm? Would he even try? Why should he? She walked to the window to look up at the clearing sky. With an hour or so before sunset, she decided to take Gabriel up on his earlier offer and invite him out for a walk.

Jesse could see Gabriel’s door ajar as she approached. He sat at a computer desk with his back to her listening to a business report over the Internet. Engrossed in the report, he didn’t hear her light knock. “The company has new products waiting in the wings that should drive up growth in earnings. Their primary problem is capital,” the voice coming from the computer said.

Before Jesse could call his name, Gabriel asked, “Do they still have excess inventory?”

Her head cocked sideways before moving closer. Was he talking to the computer?

“Inventories are still backed up,” the voice said.

Flipping through a stack of papers, Gabriel said, “Fax me a report on customer base and trading history. I have everything else I need right here.”

Jesse leaned over Gabriel’s shoulder to see the man smile before saying, “I didn’t know you had company, boss.”

Gabriel glanced up at Jesse before saying, “Send the report, Kenny. I’ll call you when I’ve had a chance to look everything over.” With the press of a button, Kenny’s face was gone.

Jesse stepped back as Gabriel turned around in the swivel chair to face her. Silently, she stared at him.

“Hello, Jesse,” he finally said.

She ignored his greeting. “Boss? Why did he call you boss?”

“As his employer, he sometimes refers to me as boss.”

She shook her head, confused. “But you—you’re a youth minister.”

“Yes. I am a youth minister. I am also a person who engages in business and financial affairs.”

But, I thought—you led me to believe...”

He waited for her to finish the sentence. When she didn’t, he said, “I led you to believe the truth. I am a youth minister. I’m sorry if you assumed that’s all I do.”

She stared at him, unblinking. “If I assumed? So the problem is me, my assumption?”

He watched her a few seconds before responding. “To be

quite honest, Jesse, I don't understand why there should be a problem at all."

"You don't understand?" Her look was incredulous. "No, I don't guess you do understand." She threw up her hands before saying, "You know what? You're right. What you do or don't do is none of my business. Clearly, the problem is me. I'm too gullible. That's the real problem. I'm naive enough to think people are actually who they represent themselves to be. How stupid of me," she said, turning to leave.

He called her name, stopping her at the door. "Jesse, did you need something?"

"No," she said, keeping her back turned. "I don't need anything. I'm sorry I interrupted your work."

In her room, Jesse sat at the desk with her cheek propped on a fist. Gabriel might not understand, but there was definitely a problem. The problem was her thinking he cared enough to share facts about his life with her.

Nearing the kitchen the next morning, Jesse could hear her grandmother and Emma talking before she stepped through the door. Victoria was setting a plate of biscuits on a table already laden with food.

"There's our sleepy head," her grandmother said.

"Morning, Grammy," Jesse said. At the coffeepot, she looked back at her grandmother. "I'm sorry. I should have gotten up earlier to help."

"Oh, no need to worry about that. I have two of the best cooks in the county helping," she said before glancing up at the clock. "Everyone should be coming in soon."

Gabriel was the first through the door with Rachel close at his heels. Within seconds, Charles Swinney walked in with a man

Jesse didn't know. Her grandmother called to the man. "Nick, come over here and meet my granddaughter, Jesse."

"It's good to meet you, Jesse," Nick said with a light southern drawl. His smile was contagious, friendly and lit up his face. Lightly tousled brown hair and shirt cuffed at the forearms suggested an easy-going style while the playful glint in his golden brown eyes made Jesse think of a word her grandfather might have used, rascal.

Over breakfast, Jesse collected mental notes as talk bounced around the table. She soon learned that Rachel, Nick and Gabriel had gone to the same high school. Rachel reminisced about her time as captain of the cheerleading team before opening the archive of high school memories with a, do you remember the time, question to Nick. Gathering snippets, Jesse quickly pieced together an impression. Homecoming queen, cheerleader—Rachel's popularity had been assured while Nick's natural charm had set girlish hearts aflutter up and down the locker-lined halls. Watching Nick's head fall back with laughter, Jesse imagined he had enjoyed the Casanova role he apparently played.

Turning to Nick, Rachel's eyes lit up. "Did you hear about my trip last summer?" Without giving him a chance to answer, she said, "I was in Europe. I had a blast in Milan—rocked the catwalk." Sighing, her expression turned wistful. "Armani, Versace, Prada, Gucci—what girl could possibly resist?" She quirked an eyebrow at Jesse before saying, "Well, some might. Some people have no sense of style."

Gritting her teeth, Jesse stabbed at a piece of scrambled egg on her plate. Of course, model. That explained a lot, including Rachel's ability to walk perfectly in four-inch heels.

"Style, beauty, it's all in the eye of the beholder," Nick said.

Rachel erupted with laughter. "Really, Nicky, you're just too funny. I missed you." She watched him a second before

saying, “By the way, where’ve you been? Tiff said you went to California.” She curled her nose with a hint of distaste. “Really? California? Why would anyone go to California? New York is much more fun.”

Nick looked a little uneasy. “I was in California working.”

“Doing what?” Emma asked.

“Oh, this and that, some investigative work,” he said with a shrug, obviously not interested in talking about his occupation.

Jesse wondered if he had lived near her. “What part of California were you in, Nick?”

“Um, the southern part,” he said, taking a bite of food. Suddenly, his face brightened before leaning back in his chair. “Jesse, did Gabriel ever tell you how we met?”

“No, he didn’t,” she said. She wouldn’t tell him that Gabriel had never mentioned him at all.

Nick smiled. “It’s kind of funny, really. We were sophomores in high school when we met. Most kids are in some group by the tenth grade—you know, jocks, preps, nerds.” He shook his head with feigned sadness to say, “But not me. I was all alone—no group to call my own. I guess me and Gabriel were in the same boat. Just two lonely kids looking to fit in.”

Rachel swatted Nick’s hand. “Oh, puleasse, lonely kids looking to fit in. Gabriel never wanted to be in a clique and you were too busy chasing girls.”

Nick shrugged with a guilty smile. “Okay, maybe that’s how it was then.” Sliding his eyes to the side to look at Rachel, he said, “Somehow, and I know how, a rumor got started that I had gone out with the captain of the football team’s girlfriend. To make a long story short, four ticked off football players had me cornered in the boys’ locker room. When Gabriel walked in, I thought, great, another football player come to join the party, but

he wasn't. I remember Gabriel saying something like, four against one doesn't seem fair."

"Gabriel came to help and they let you go," Jesse guessed.

Nick shook his head, laughing. "Oh, no, they didn't let me go, but when the dust settled they knew they'd bit off two strips of hickory they didn't want to chew twice." Smiling, he tipped his head at Gabriel to say, "Gabriel will flat out fight when his back's against the wall."

Gabriel cleared his throat to get Nick's attention.

"Memory lane seems to be getting a little murky. Maybe we should change the subject."

"Oh, we were just kids," Nick, said. "No lasting harm was done." Smiling proudly, he looked at Gabriel to say, "We became my friend that day. Formed our own group," he said with a wink, "the black eyes." As everyone laughed, Jesse smiled across the table at Nick. She was glad Gabriel had a good friend in high school, one with a sense of humor.

Nick looked back at Jesse before his head tilted slightly. "Green eyes and honey skin, I bet some fine poems have been written about a whole lot less."

Blushing, Jesse averted her gaze before looking back to see Gabriel shoot Nick a sideways glance. Tossing his napkin on the table, Gabriel asked Mr. Swinney when they could expect the Pastor.

"He'll be here after Olivia's appointment with Dr. Haynes," Mr. Swinney answered.

Gabriel's question to Mr. Swinney diverted attention away from Nick's comment and Jesse was relieved to hear conversation resume. She looked over to see her grandmother's amused smile. "What, Grammy," she whispered with a questioning look.

"Oh, nothing," she said before asking Jesse if she would

help her prepare the bedrooms upstairs.

Rising from the table, Jesse said, “Just leave everything as it is and I’ll clean up later.”

Emma’s head shot up in protest. “Jesse, you go help Florence. I’ll straighten up the kitchen.”

“Rachel and I will help you, Emma,” Victoria volunteered.

Rachel scowled across the table at her mother. “I’m not cleaning up this mess. I’m going with Gabriel to see the shelter.”

“You can see the shelter some other time, dear,” Victoria said in a voice one might use to coax a five-year-old. “Charles said the men are unloading supplies and equipment this morning.”

Rachel’s makeup didn’t hide the angry flush in her cheeks. “I’m sure they hired workers, mother. They don’t need Gabriel,” she said testily.

“Actually, they do,” Gabriel said, getting up from the table. “We’ll need all the hands we can get this morning, but I’ll be glad to show you around later in the day if you want.”

Following Gabriel to the door, Nick paused to look at Rachel who was sitting with crossed arms and staring angrily at her mother. “Life’s little disappointments—think you’ll survive, Rach?”

Rachel’s eyes rolled up to Nick’s face. “Oh, shut up, Nick!”

Upstairs, Jesse pulled bedding from the closet before following her grandmother to the room at the end of the hall. Standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips, her grandmother said, “The Pastor and Olivia should have the largest room.”

Jesse squeezed past her grandmother with an armful of

bedding to sniff the air. The room smelled fresh. She dropped the linen on the bed to check the adjoining bathroom before she and her grandmother made the queen-size bed. On her way out the door, Jesse paused to say, “Grammy, Mr. Swinney said the Pastor and Olivia are coming here after Olivia’s doctor appointment. Is Olivia sick?”

Her grandmother’s shoulders drooped forward with a sigh. “That’s what the doctor says. At first, it was a just little cough, then a sore throat and trouble swallowing. Doctor Haynes says Olivia has thyroid cancer.”

Stunned, Jesse stared at her grandmother. “Olivia can’t be sick. She’s too young to be sick.”

“Oh, now, don’t you worry about Olivia. We’re trusting God to heal her. Dr. Haynes is a good doctor, but there’s one better. Olivia will be taken care of by the Great Physician.”

Sitting down on the end of the bed, Jesse said, “I want to believe God will heal her, Grammy. I don’t understand why God would allow such a sweet girl to be sick. She must be terrified.”

Instead of responding, her grandmother shooed her off the bed to pull wrinkles from the cover. As they worked through the other rooms in silence, Jesse noted her grandmother’s pensive expression. *Just as well*, she thought. She didn’t feel like talking either.

In the last room, her grandmother sat down in one of the two accent chairs. “Sit down, Jesse.”

With an inward groan, Jesse took a seat and stared at the floor. “What is it, Grammy?”

“For the last hour, I’ve been thinking about what you said. I’ve always heard we’re supposed to get wiser with age, but I’m not so sure I have. When I was younger, I thought I knew a lot more than I do now. Now, I realize there are many things I don’t know but through it all, I hold onto one thing, the one thing I

know for sure. I know God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to his purpose.” She nodded absently at some unseen object across the room before saying, “I believe Olivia will be healed.”

Closing her eyes, Jesse pushed her hands through the top of her hair, remembering the conversation she had with Gabriel—every person dies. Everyone in the Bible died, but some were healed and lived longer. Why were some healed and not others? Did God have some secret criteria? Trying to sort it all out was giving her a headache. She wouldn’t pretend to understand God. Her grandmother and Gabriel might console themselves by saying God is mysterious and beyond human comprehension but that just wasn’t enough for her. Why couldn’t it be enough? Why was she plagued with questions and doubt?

“Jesse,” her grandmother said, getting her attention, “you said you want to believe God will heal Olivia.”

“I do, Grammy, but—“

“No buts, Jesse. If you want to believe, then make a choice and believe. The Bible says it’s impossible to please God without faith.”

Make a choice and believe? Did her grandmother really think it was that simple? Jesse’s halfhearted response was unconvincing. “I’ll try, Grammy.”

Downstairs, the Pastor and Olivia sat with Victoria at the table while Emma fixed two plates. The Pastor looked like he’d aged over night. His clothes were wrinkled and he looked like he hadn’t slept.

The mood in the kitchen was somber. Jesse poured her grandmother a cup of coffee that she took to the table while Jesse stayed by the kitchen island. Meeting Olivia’s eyes across the room, Jesse forced a strained smile even though she felt like crying.

Fatigue could be heard in the Pastor's voice when he said, "Florence, I was hoping you, Gabriel and Jesse would join me in prayer for Olivia this evening."

"Of course," her grandmother said.

Jesse stared into her coffee cup. She couldn't understand why the Pastor would ask her to pray with them. Didn't he know she was a new convert? She wasn't even sure she knew how to pray the right way. Tears pricked the backs of her eyes. If Olivia wanted her to pray with them, she would. She might not know how to pray but she knew how to beg. She would plead with God to heal the young woman.

Jesse looked back to the table to see Emma standing behind Olivia's chair wringing her hands and looking as if she might start crying any second. Catching her grandmother's eye, Jesse discreetly signaled for her to look at Emma. Taking the hint, her grandmother's face brightened to say, "Emma, I don't think you and Victoria have seen my new flower bed."

Emma didn't miss the pointed look. "No, I don't guess we have," she said. "Maybe we could see it now."

Jesse poured the Pastor and Olivia juice and refilled their coffee cups before joining her grandmother on the front porch. Taking the rocking chair next to her grandmother, she looked over to see Emma and Victoria coming around the front of the house. "I'm driving Emma to the shelter to look at the kitchen," Victoria said, inviting them along. Hearing her grandmother decline the offer, Jesse did the same.

They sat in silence looking out over the mountains before her grandmother said, "My, everything looks fresh after the rain yesterday." Turning to Jesse, she said, "Do you think the mountains enjoyed the rain as much as you and Gabriel?"

Recalling their impulsive frolic in the rain, Jesse's spirits lifted. "I'm sure the mountains enjoyed the rain, but I'm guessing we had more fun. If I remember correctly, you're the one who

says we should give thanks in all things. Would you believe we just wanted to give thanks in the rain?"

"No," her grandmother said, shaking her head. "I can't say I'd believe that. What I might believe is that you were running through the front yard when you tripped and fell. I can't begin to imagine Gabriel starting a mud fight, so I'm almost certain you were in the flowerbed first."

Feigning surprise, Jesse said, "Grammy, you think I would start a mud fight?"

"Well, I saw you both slinging mud, so I know somebody started it. Between you and Gabriel, you are the most likely candidate."

Jesse laughed. "So, let me get this straight. You think your clumsy granddaughter fell into your flowerbed and then instigated a mud fight."

"Sounds likely," she said, hiding a smile behind the cup she lifted. Setting the coffee aside, she said, "Now, I didn't say you're clumsy, but we both know Gabriel James did not throw mud at you first." Watching Jesse, her expression softened. "Have I told you how good it is to have you home, Jesse? You just don't know how thankful I am."

Reaching across the arm of her chair, Jesse covered her grandmother's hand with her own. "I'm the one who's thankful. You were right about things getting worse. I'm grateful to be with family and in a safe place. I'll tell you a secret, Grammy. I like being home. If horrible things weren't going on in the world, I could be very happy here. I like spending time with you."

Nodding, she said, "And Gabriel? Do you enjoy spending time with Gabriel?"

The question took Jesse by surprise. She wouldn't deny what her grandmother already knew. "Yes. I enjoy spending time with Gabriel, too."

Chuckling, her grandmother said, “What was that Nick said over breakfast? Green eyes and honey skin? Did you see Gabriel’s face when Nick said that? I thought he might bite his fork in two.”

“No, Grammy, I’m afraid you’re imagining things. I don’t think Gabriel was jealous, just protective. I think he still sees me as a bothersome kid sister.”

“Maybe,” her grandmother said. “I guess there could be other reasons for the changes I’ve seen in him since you’ve come home.”

Jesse stopped rocking. “Changes? Like what?”

“Well, I’ve noticed he seems happier with you around, more cheerful and talkative, and he’s taken to doing peculiar things. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I would have never believed Gabriel James was playing in the rain.”

Smiling, Jesse pushed her chair back and let it rock forward. “It was nice to laugh. Gabriel is a lot of fun,” she said before her smile began to fade. She bit her lip, considering the question she wanted to ask. Finally, she said, “Do you think Rachel is attracted to Gabriel? I think she is.”

“Yes,” her grandmother said, “I’m sure you’re right about that. She doesn’t try to hide the fact, but Rachel’s not the only woman to show an interest in Gabriel over the years.”

Not surprised to hear women find Gabriel attractive, Jesse said, “No, I’d say not. Has Gabriel had a lot of girlfriends?”

Her grandmother seemed to think about the question before saying, “You know, it’s hard to say for certain. Gabriel is a private person, but, no, I don’t ever remember him dating anyone. I do know plenty of women in church and around town have cast an admiring eye his way but he never seemed to pay much attention. I think he was always too busy with his work.”

“So, you’ve never met any of his girlfriends?”

“If he’s had any, I’ve not. To tell you the truth, I have worried about him over the years. After his parents died, he withdrew, seemed like he had something on his mind all the time. He doesn’t let too many people get close, but I hoped that one day he would settle down and marry. He could probably have his pick of women. He’s smart, handsome, wealthy—“

“Wealthy?” Jesse cut in.

Her grandmother nodded. “I guess he didn’t tell you that he’s the one who put up half the money for the shelter.”

“No. He didn’t mention that,” Jesse said, adding the information to the growing list of things Gabriel had kept from her.

“No,” her grandmother said, “I guess he wouldn’t talk about that.”

“But, Grammy, I knew Gabriel’s parents. They weren’t rich.”

“No, they weren’t,” she said. “When Gabriel’s parents died in the car accident, he had to sell everything to pay off their debt. I know that was a terrible time for him, but he wouldn’t let anyone help. He went back to school right after the funeral. He’s never talked about it but I think his faith was sorely tested during that time.”

“You know, Grammy. He was the same way when we were kids. Whenever he got hurt, he would walk away to be by himself.”

Shaking her head, her grandmother said, “He’s proud. Too proud, if you ask me. He always wanted to do everything himself, and he has. He put himself through college.”

“Business major, I guess,” Jesse said under her breath.

“MBA,” her grandmother said.

“What?” Jesse asked.

“I said Gabriel has an MBA. He worked the first few years of college and still graduated at the top of his class. You two have that in common. You both did very well in school. I may be biased, but I think Gabriel has a brilliant mind for business. He started investing when he was in college and by the time he started graduate school he was doing very well.”

During the silence that followed, Jesse thought about the telephone call she received telling her Gabriel’s parents had been killed in a car crash. Deeply grieved by the news, she had wrestled with the idea of calling him. Each time she picked up the telephone, images of Gabriel in the arms of another woman had stopped her. She never considered the possibility that he might be alone. Had he been alone? Surely, he had girlfriends her grandmother didn’t know about. She didn’t seem to know about Rachel—maybe there were others. Pushing aside the troubling thoughts, she looked over to see her grandmother’s worried expression. “What is it, Grammy?”

“I was just thinking about the look on your face when you found out about the worship center. I should have told you sooner. I shouldn’t keep things from you. I’ll tell you everything if you want to hear it.”

Jesse fell over the side of her rocking chair to place both hands on her grandmother’s arm. “Yes, Grammy, please. I do want to hear it. Let’s just get everything, all the secrets, out in the open.”

Her grandmother nodded. “I guess I should start by telling you that I might have lost everything if God hadn’t sent Gabriel home when He did.”

“Lost everything? But, I thought Grampy...”

“No, Jesse. Your grandfather inherited this land but we

had taken out a substantial loan to build the house in addition to everything else we owed. When Gabriel came home, I had a lot of debt and almost no money.”

“Oh, Grammy, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

“I didn’t want you to know, Jesse. You were in no position to help. Still, that was a difficult time. I even started thinking God had turned away from me. When Gabriel came home from college for a visit, he knew something was wrong. Eventually, I told him everything. He spent days pouring over my finances and studying maps of the land before laying out options. He negotiated the sale of a few acres on the eastern boundary and somehow managed to turn a modest sum into more money than I would have ever thought possible.”

“Gabriel did that?” Jesse asked.

“Yes, and he still manages my finances to this day. I trust him completely. Gabriel is family to me and I know he thinks of me the same way. I gave up trying to figure him out a long time ago. He’s a man who keeps his own secrets, but he’s also a man of depth and integrity.”

Jesse was shocked to hear what Gabriel had done for her grandmother. “You’re right, Grammy. Gabriel is a remarkable man.”

They sat in silence a few minutes before Jesse noticed her grandmother fidgeting in her seat. She could tell something was bothering her, so she asked, “What is it, Grammy?”

“Well, there may be one other thing you should know. Around the time Gabriel took over my finances, I couldn’t pay your tuition.”

Jesse’s head fell back against the rocker. “Oh, Grammy, why didn’t you tell me? I could have—”

“No,” she said firmly. “You couldn’t have done anything. I

would never have told you. I couldn't put that worry on you. You'd already had too much sadness in your life. Don't you think I know what your life was like growing up with your father and Claire? I had to be there for you. I had to be there for Sarah."

Sarah—Jesse hadn't heard her mother's name in years. Swallowing the lump forming in her throat, she said, "You've always been there for me, Grammy, but I've been such a burden."

"Jesse," the sternness of her grandmother's voice was almost startling, "you need to hear this and I mean really hear it. You have never been anything but a blessing, the greatest joy in my life. You've brought me more happiness than you could ever know." Shaking her head, she smiled softly as she looked down the front steps. "I can still see you, ponytail bouncing, running up those steps with a handful of flowers. You were such a loving, sweet child—just like your mother. And when you went off to college, I was so proud."

Jesse closed her eyes. College—instead of volunteer work, she could have gotten a job. Her grandmother should have told her she couldn't afford to pay her tuition. She stopped, realizing what her grandmother had said. She turned to her grandmother to say, "Grammy, you said you couldn't afford my tuition but it was paid every semester."

Her grandmother stared out across the front yard. The name was barely audible. "Gabriel."

The quick snap of Jesse's head might have been mistaken for a muscle spasm. She stared at her grandmother's lowered head. "Grammy, did you say Gabriel?" A nod confirmed that she had heard correctly. Jesse was stunned to hear Gabriel had paid her tuition.

A few seconds passed before Jesse realized her grandmother was talking. "When Gabriel took over, he said not to worry, everything had been worked out. I guess I was so relieved that I just accepted it without question. I didn't know until later

that he had paid everything up to date himself, including your tuition. Later, when I realized he had invested all the money from the land sale, I offered to repay him but he wouldn't accept anything.”

Jesse knew that Gabriel paid her tuition as a favor to her grandmother but she didn't understand why he had not contacted her for reimbursement. She started to ponder the question aloud but stopped when she saw the lines of tension around her grandmother's eyes. Sighing, she reached out to pat her grandmother's hand. “Grammy, I'm not upset or angry with you. I know you don't want to hear this, but I wish you had told me. Still, I'm not too proud to say I'm grateful for Gabriel's help. I'm glad he was there for you when I wasn't. Thank you, Grammy, for telling me.”

Her grandmother's face began to relax and she eased back in the rocker. “I love you more than anyone, Jesse, but I love Gabriel, too, just like he were my own grandson.” Smiling, she said, “Well, that's everything. No more secrets.”

During the silence, Jesse wondered why her grandmother had not mentioned Gabriel and Rachel dating as teenagers. Had she forgotten? She began tentatively. “I seem to remember Gabriel and Rachel dating. Do you remember, Grammy? Was it serious?”

Her grandmother looked puzzled. “Did they date? You know, I wondered about that years ago, but no, I don't think they ever dated. As far as I know, Gabriel has never shown an interest in any woman.” She cast a sideways look at Jesse to say, “Until now.”

Jesse shook her head. “You're engaging in wishful thinking, Grammy. If Gabriel were interested in me, he would have said something long ago. I think you know I had a crush on him when we were teenagers, but—well, we're friends now.”

“I did know you were sweet on him, but I thought he felt

the same about you. You two were joined at the hip growing up. But...maybe you're right. Maybe I read more into things than I should." Looking over to see Jesse's gloomy face, she said, "Would you like to see the worship center?"

Shrugging, Jesse said, "Sure, why not?" Halfway down the front steps, Jesse stopped. "How far is it, Grammy? Maybe we should drive."

Her grandmother's face brightened. "I have a better idea. Let's take the four-wheeler."

"Really, Grammy? You can drive a four-wheeler?"

"No, I can't, but you can."

"Oh, no, Grammy, I've never driven one. I don't think—"

"Jesse, you used to fly up and down these mountain trails on a dirt bike. Surely, you can drive a four-wheeler. It's just a car with no roof or a motorcycle with extra wheels."

Shaking her head, Jesse laughed at the comment, car with no roof. "You know what, Grammy. Why not? Why not go on an adventure?"

Puttering around the corner of the house, Jesse smiled triumphantly, feeling more confident after backing out of the shed without incident. Before she could turn the machine off, her grandmother hoisted a leg to slide on behind her. Twisting around, Jesse breathed a sigh of relief to see her grandmother sitting upright and unhurt. "Here we go," Jesse said, easing the throttle back to start around the side of the house toward the woods.

Ridged tires dug in to carry them over pine needles and around a mossy boulder. After going some distance and circling an area of thick underbrush, Jesse called, "Hold on, Grammy," before slowing to cross an uneven rough area.

As they cleared a tree line, Jesse felt a tap on her shoulder before looking around to see her grandmother point toward a tall

oak tree to their left. “That’s the path to the shelter, she said, loud enough to be heard over the noise of the four-wheeler.” Nodding, Jesse pulled the throttle back to pick up speed as they crossed the grassy tract leading to a large white building.

Hopping on one foot, her grandmother held onto Jesse’s arm as she pulled her other foot across the seat. Smiling at the awkward dismount technique, Jesse said, “You have to admit, Grammy, it would have been much easier to climb out of a car.”

“Easier, but not as much fun,” she said, turning to look at the building. “See, nothing fussy, just a place to worship. And in the back is an open area for parking.”

Walking together up wide front steps leading to oiled wooden doors, Jesse said, “Looks solid, well-built and bigger than I thought it would be.” Inside, the faint smell of fresh paint and wood polish lingered in air. Jesse walked through the foyer toward double open doors before pausing to scan two sections of pews divided by a wide aisle covered in ceramic tile. Windows lined eggshell white walls to allow plenty of natural light.

Jesse’s eyes moved to an enormous cross against the wall behind the pulpit. Except for the circle of thorns hanging from the vertical piece, the cross was a larger replica of the one in her grandmother’s prayer room. Her eyes fixed on the crown of thorns as she moved up the aisle. The ring of sharp spikes protruding from every direction brought up disturbing images. Slipping a finger beneath a barbed point, she shook her head and stepped back before turning with a gasp. “Gabriel, you scared me.”

“I’m sorry, Jesse. I didn’t mean to frighten you but I didn’t know you were coming out.”

“Grammy wanted to show me the worship center,” she said, looking around the empty room. “Where is Grammy?”

“I didn’t see her when I came in. I know,” he said, taking her hand to lead her down the aisle. “She must be in one of the

offices.” In the foyer, he walked around a partition she hadn’t noticed earlier that led down a short hallway of offices. One of the doors was open. “Here she is,” Gabriel said.

Looking up from the desk drawer she was rummaging through, her grandmother’s eyes briefly paused on their linked hands before smiling up at them. “Gabriel, I thought you were at the shelter.”

“I was,” he said, “until I heard a vehicle in the area. Imagine my surprise to discover you two had come roaring through the mountains.”

“Roaring through the mountains,” her grandmother said, laughing. “Yes, we roared along at a snail’s pace and I risked life and limb to climb on and off the contraption.”

“Grammy,” Jesse said, smiling, “you’re ruining our daring, adventurous image.”

Turning to Jesse, Gabriel said, “Since you like to travel, Ms. Hart, maybe you’d like to go to town with me this evening. I thought we might check on Mr. Drake.”

Jesse was about to accept the offer when Rachel stepped through the door. “I’d like to go. I need to pick up some things from the house,” she said.

Dropping Jesse’s hand, Gabriel crossed his arms as he turned to look at Rachel. “I thought I asked you to stay at the shelter where it’s safe, Rachel. Did you walk here alone?”

Shrugging, she said, “There’s a path. It’s not that far.”

The annoyance in Gabriel’s voice was clear when he said, “We just talked about the risks of walking in the woods alone when you came to the shelter earlier. There are dangerous animals in this area. You could be hurt.”

Rachel’s lower lip began to quiver as she stared back at Gabriel. “I didn’t think about myself. I was worried about you.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “Are you mad at me, Gabriel?”

“I’m not angry, Rachel, just concerned for your safety. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Well, you know what, Gabriel? I am hurt,” Rachel, said in a tremulous voice. “You said I would be welcome here, but I’m not.” She cast a tormented look at Jesse before saying, “I know some people don’t want me around.”

Gabriel moved to offer Rachel a handkerchief. “I’m sure that’s not true, Rachel.”

“Yes, it is, and I hate it here,” she said, dropping her face into the handkerchief she held in both hands.

Placing an arm around Rachel’s shaking shoulders, Gabriel said, “Excuse us,” before leading the weeping woman out the door.

Jesse stared at the empty doorway before turning to lean over with her elbows on the desk. “Grammy, I believe that performance deserves an Oscar nomination.”

“Be nice, Jesse,” her grandmother said.

Jesse managed to control her voice but not the angry heat flooding her cheeks. “Does being a Christian mean I can’t express an opinion unless it’s sappy sweet?”

Sitting back in her chair, her grandmother looked up at her. “We are all human, Jesse. As humans, we are messy. We have thoughts, emotions and all the other things that are part of being wonderfully complicated, and yet, human. Jesus teaches us to love others as we love ourselves.”

Releasing a slow breath, Jesse got control of her anger before saying, “I think I’ll get some air while you finish your work.”

Sitting on the steps of the worship center, Jesse thought

about her grandmother's words. She had always tried to see the best in people, look for the positive, the potential. She'd never met anyone she just didn't like...until now, until Rachel. Her grandmother said she should love Rachel. Love her? She didn't even like her. She didn't like the way she pouted. She didn't like her shallow prattle about designer clothes or the way she put one foot directly in front of the other when she walked.

Jesse disliked Rachel for several reasons, but most of all, she hated the way she flirted with Gabriel. At the thought, she closed her eyes. That's it—I'm jealous. Rachel is everything I'm not—beautiful, outspoken, self-assured and bold enough to go after the man she wants. Her shoulders slumped forward with the truth she couldn't deny. She was jealous of Rachel.

When her grandmother came out, Jesse fell in step next to her. “I was wrong, Grammy. I shouldn't judge Rachel. How do I know she wasn't really upset?”

Nearing the four-wheeler, her grandmother touched her arm. “I haven't missed the looks Rachel gives you or the comments she makes. I'm proud of the way you handle yourself, Jesse.”

“But I don't say or do anything, Grammy.”

Nodding, she patted Jesse's arm. “Exactly.”

With the four-wheeler safely in the shed, Jesse walked to the back door. Hearing Gabriel's name, she stopped to look around before seeing the partially opened kitchen window a few feet away. The voice sounded like Nick's but she couldn't be sure. “C'mon, Gabriel. You know a woman can cloud a man's thinking. There's a lot at stake right now.”

Jesse turned to leave but Gabriel's words stopped her in her tracks. “I have always loved her.” She edged closer to the window to hear him say, “I have been patient and waited for God's timing but I no longer feel God's hand holding me back. I want to be with her, spend time with her. I know we have some

things to discuss, past misunderstandings to work through, but I know this is the right thing to do. I'm going to tell her how I feel at the first opportunity."

Moving from the window, Jesse hurried around the house. Gabriel said he has always loved her. Her who? Rachel? She pressed her hand against her stomach. The thought was as painful as having her insides scraped out with a spoon. He said they had past misunderstandings. Is that why he stopped seeing Rachel? That would explain why he hadn't dated all these years. Had Rachel broken his heart? Her grandmother didn't think Gabriel and Rachel dated but she knew better. He had brought Rachel to her house when they were teenagers.

Inside her room, Jesse carefully considered the evidence. Stacking known information on the scale of likelihood left her with the small, flickering hope that Gabriel had been talking about her. After all, she reasoned, her grandmother knew Gabriel as well as anyone and she said he seemed happier with her around. He had taken her hand earlier and invited her to town. Was he hoping to talk to her alone? [Chapter list](#) or *scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 7

Downstairs, Jesse could hear Gabriel's voice in the living room. She stepped inside the door before hesitating. Rachel and Gabriel were talking to three men she didn't recognize. From across the room, Gabriel motioned her over. "Jesse, there's some people here I'd like you to meet." As Jesse approached, Rachel casually stepped around to position herself between Gabriel and Jesse. Appearing not to notice Rachel's tactic, Gabriel introduced Jesse before starting to name each man in turn.

Matthew Sanders was a tall, muscular African-American with sharp, black eyes. The scar across his cheekbone lifted a fraction in a smile as he inclined his head in greeting. Several details about the man—buzz haircut, erect posture and carefully creased trousers, suggested the military training Gabriel confirmed. Probably in his late thirties or early forties, the man chosen to organize a security team struck Jesse as a self-controlled man, a man who would prove to be fearsome in battle.

Anyone might think Steve Owens and Paul Sinclair were brothers. Although Steve's auburn hair was a few shades lighter than Paul's, they looked a lot alike. Jesse guessed the young men were in high school, possibly seniors, and their ruddy complexions made her wonder if they played some type of outdoor sport.

Jesse's guesses were wrong but she hadn't been too far off. The cousins had graduated high school the previous year and they did spend a great deal of time outdoors, but not in any sport she would have imagined. Both were avid hunters, known in the area for their tracking skills. Even with their hunting credentials, Jesse was surprised to hear the young men were the first volunteers for the security team. Their open, boyish smiles and carefree laughter made her wonder if they had the toughness and strict self-discipline Matthew Sanders might expect.

When Jesse commented that Paul and Steve could be mistaken for brothers, Paul threw an arm around his cousin's shoulder. "We might as well be brothers," he said, ruffling the back of Steve's hair. "We lived next door to each other all our life. Steve, here, has three older sisters and I have two. We had to learn survival skills early on."

"Yeah," Steve said, smiling. "A fella's sure not safe with that many females in the house—tea parties, dolls."

Paul shook his head. "And dress up," he said, starting to laugh. "Remember the time Becky and Trista tried to make you play dress up? If you hadn't taken Becky's favorite doll hostage, you'd a been wearing lipstick that day."

Jesse found it difficult to concentrate on the cousins' humorous account of growing up with sisters while Rachel was fondling Gabriel's arm and brushing nonexistent substances from his clothes. She might have ignored the message Rachel was sending, but not Gabriel's response. He didn't move away or seem to mind the familiar touches. When she looked over to see Rachel fingering a curl at Gabriel's collar, she'd had enough. At the first break in conversation, she forced a brittle smile and excused herself.

In the kitchen, Jesse slumped into a chair. The glimmer of hope she'd tried to keep alive was quickly fading. A few minutes later, she turned at the sound of Gabriel's voice as he came through the doorway. "Jesse, what are you doing?"

"Um, getting a drink," she said, rising quickly to go to the cupboard. "Would you like some tea? Maybe your guests would like something to drink."

"No, thank you. I don't care for anything and our guests left a few minutes ago."

She sat down at the table. "I'm sorry. I should have said good-bye."

He watched her a few seconds before taking a seat. “Are you all right?”

She stared at the amber liquid in her glass without making eye contact. “Yes, I’m fine.” She knew the seemingly insignificant question she was about to ask would tell her everything she wanted to know. She tried to sound casual when she asked, “Are we still going to see Mr. Drake?”

Before he could answer, Rachel breezed through the door. “Here you are,” she said, coming to stand behind Gabriel and rest her hands on the back of his chair. “What time are we leaving?”

He ignored Rachel’s interruption and continued to watch Jesse from across the table. “That’s what I came to tell you, Jesse. My plans have changed. Rachel needs to pick up some things from her house and I have something rather important to talk to her about.”

Jesse nodded, staring at the table. Several seconds ticked by before she trusted herself to speak. “Sure, I understand. Maybe some other time then.” Lifting her eyes to Rachel’s face, Jesse was prepared for the smug smile but not the mimed kiss or the contrived sympathy when she said, “Poor, Jesse. She’s probably bored stiff. We should let her tag along, darling.” Bending down to Gabriel’s ear, she purred, “We have all night to talk about private matters.”

Getting to his feet, Gabriel turned to face Rachel. His voice was quiet when he said, “The private conversation I have in mind has been put off too long. I have some business to attend to but I’d like to leave in two hours.”

Jesse watched Gabriel walk from the room before looking back to see Rachel’s catty smile. “He’s right about one thing,” Rachel said. “The long, private conversation I have in mind has been put off way too long.”

Jesse rose stiffly to her feet. “Excuse me,” she mumbled before walking toward the back stairway.

In her room, Jesse sat on the edge of the bed with tears slipping down a wooden face and Gabriel's words echoing in her mind. He has always loved Rachel. She didn't blame Gabriel or Rachel for the way she was feeling. If she wanted someone to blame, she could look in the mirror. She should have learned her lesson ten years ago.

When her grandmother came in later that evening, Jesse complained of the headache that had actually developed by then. Giving her two aspirin, her grandmother said she looked peaked before issuing orders Jesse was more than willing to comply with. "You stay in bed and rest, sweetie. You'll feel better tomorrow."

Hearing a knock at the door, Jesse looked up from the open Bible she had stared at blindly for hours. Thinking her grandmother had come to check on her, she called for her to come in.

"Florence said you're not feeling well," Gabriel said, coming around the bed.

"Headache," Jesse said, avoiding eye contact.

His hand felt cool against her forehead. "You don't feel feverish. Can I get you anything? Maybe some aspirin or something to drink."

"No, thank you. I took aspirin earlier."

After a short silence, they both started to talk at the same time. "I'm sorry, Jesse. What were you going to say?"

She lifted a hand to her temple. "Just that my headache is getting worse. Would you mind if we talk later?"

She could feel him watching her but she kept her eyes on the Bible without looking up. "I was hoping to talk now, but it can wait until you're feeling better," he finally said.

"Thank you," she said, sighing with relief.

At the door, he hesitated with his back to her. “Jesse,” he said before pausing. He shook his head before saying softly, almost to himself, “No, this isn’t the time.”

The door shut quietly and Gabriel was gone. Jesse’s hand came up to an aching throat. He was gone, her hopes of love were gone and nothing would ever be the same between them. She couldn’t remember ever feeling more alone than she did right then.

Later that night, Jesse’s eyes fell to the Bible she kept across her lap to use as a diversion in case someone came in. Distractedly, she skimmed down lines of words and turned the page before something caught her attention. She read the verse over again. Jesus walked by strangers to say, follow me, and they dropped everything. They left jobs, families and homes to go after a man they didn’t know—how strange. She turned back to read from the beginning of the chapter. Surely, she had missed something important.

Jesse looked over at the clock display to see the time, 5:00 a.m., before laying the Bible aside to consider what she had learned. God had literally come to Earth in human form to save humanity, to save her. She was amazed at His teachings, what He suffered. How could she continue to feel depressed and alone when Jesus loved her and promised never to leave her? Closing her eyes, she felt the presence of God. The love she had searched for all her life had been right in front of her. In the early morning hours, she experienced a fundamental shift in her thinking.

Getting ready to go downstairs, Jesse looked in the mirror. The smile swelling in her heart lifted the corners of her mouth. God knew everything about her, accepted and loved her. She picked up the Bible, God’s journal, to hug it close. His love and mercy were inexpressible, His promises unfailing. She might never fully understand God, trillions and trillions of times more intelligent than her, but she felt certain that she was loved by the highest power in the universe. That was enough.

From the kitchen door, Jesse greeted everyone with a new sense of confidence in knowing who she was. She would no longer wear labels other people placed on her, labels she placed on herself. She was who God said she was, and God said she was beautiful, lovable and valuable.

“Well, now,” her grandmother said, meeting her at the kitchen door, “you look like you feel better this morning.”

“Oh, much better, Grammy,” Jesse said, kissing her cheek before noticing the notebook her grandmother carried. “Are you going somewhere?”

“No. Just gathering cookbooks for Emma. We left breakfast out for you.”

At the back door, Nick turned to say, “Well, look at you, Jesse. You look like a ray of sunshine piped right in from heaven this morning.”

Picking up the carafe to pour coffee, Jesse smiled. “Thank you, Nick. Actually, I feel like a ray of sunshine this morning.”

Gabriel joined her at the coffeepot. “Glad to see you’re feeling better. Nick and I have some work to do this morning but I’ll be back later. Maybe we can pray for Olivia then.”

Jesse's hand came up to her flushed cheek. “Prayer was postponed because of me?”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Jesse. Everyone understood that you didn’t feel well,” he said before following Nick out the door.

Looking around the empty kitchen, Jesse turned her wristwatch around to see the time. Half-past eight, no wonder everyone had left already. At the table, she was about to bow her head when she heard the sharp smack of stilettos against ceramic tile behind her. Rachel—she knew the sound all too well. She waited without turning, hoping Rachel would take her coffee

elsewhere.

The cupboard door slammed shut before Rachel came around the table to fall into a chair without speaking. Jesse looked across the table at the woman's sullen face before bowing her head. The silent prayer was longer than originally intended. Seeing a quick puff of air push Rachel's lips forward as she rolled her eyes, Jesse's fingers tightened around the fork she lifted. She loosened her grip on the fork and forced herself to relax, determined not to let the woman get under her skin. With all the cheerfulness she could muster, she smiled. "Good morning, Rachel."

Rachel stared into the coffee cup she held between both hands. "Yeah, right," she muttered.

Ignoring the surly reply, Jesse focused on her food. What did Rachel have to be so grumpy about anyway? Hadn't she spent the evening with Gabriel? Remembering Rachel's suggestive comment on what her and Gabriel's private conversation would entail, Jesse felt herself deflating. Still, her curiosity was beginning to get the best of her. Why wasn't Rachel gloating across the table with the same smug smile she had yesterday? Maybe she and Gabriel had a disagreement or perhaps she was ill. A headache might explain her dour expression.

Minutes passed in silence before Jesse shook her head. *This is ridiculous*, she thought—*two adults sitting at the same table not speaking*. She and Rachel might never be friends, but surely, they could be civil. After all, they might be stuck in the same house together for months. Jesse forced a pleasant tone to ask, "Are you feeling okay, Rachel? You look like you didn't sleep well."

Rachel's narrowing eyes glowered over her coffee mug. "Think I look bad, Jesse?" The cup smacked against the tabletop. "Well, let me tell you something. I could be in hair rollers and sweat pants and still look better than you."

The strip of bacon dangling in front of Jesse's open mouth dropped from her hand. "Oh, no, I didn't mean—you look fine."

The chair scraped back and Rachel stood to lean forward with her hands on the table. "You don't fool me, Jesse. I know your game. I invented the game."

Living in a dorm, Jesse had heard countless doors slammed in anger but she had never heard a door slammed with more vigor than the one she was staring at right then. She was surprised to see the glass still intact. Propping her elbows on either side of her plate, her chin dropped between her hands. Should she try to talk to the woman? No—bad idea. Sighing, she closed her eyes. "Lord, you know I didn't mean to be insulting. What else can I do to make peace?" When no answer came, she shrugged in defeat. "I give up. I'm going to leave it in your hands, Lord."

Jesse was loading the last dish into the dishwasher when Gabriel leaned through the doorway. "They're waiting for us upstairs," he said before turning to leave.

"Gabriel," Jesse called his name. When he came back into the kitchen, she hesitated before admitting, "I'm a little nervous. I've never prayed in front of anyone before."

"Hmm," he said, thinking. "Each person prays in their own way, but I'd suggest concentrating on God and just say what you feel in your heart. You can pray silently if you'd be more comfortable. God knows our thoughts."

"Okay," she said, nodding. "That makes me feel better."

In the Glory room, Jesse walked with her grandmother to stand behind Olivia who was facing the cross. Following her grandmother's lead, she placed her left hand behind Olivia's right shoulder. The Pastor rubbed oil between his hands before placing them on either side of Olivia's neck. With Gabriel's hand on the Pastor's shoulder, Jesse was struck by the thought that they were connected, united in their purpose to call on God. As the Pastor

began to pray, Jesse closed her eyes, imagining his words racing through the atmosphere to God's ear.

With every fiber of her being, Jesse concentrated on God, recognizing Him as the highest power in the universe. She praised God for His love, His goodness and mercy. A sense of urgency quickened her spirit as she began to petition for Olivia's health, for her life. Jesse thought the light breeze was coming from an open window until it grew stronger. At some point, she realized the wind wasn't in the room but within her. She felt an exquisite sense of peace that could only come from the presence of God. She wasn't sure how long they prayed, but somehow, Jesse knew God had heard their pleas.

Olivia dropped her face against Jesse's shoulder, clinging to her as a child might cling to a mother. Wrapping Olivia in her arms, Jesse felt an inexplicable bond. "God heard," she whispered to Olivia. "Through faith, you have accepted healing given at Calvary." Jesse wasn't sure why she had said that. She wondered at her own words. She looked over Olivia's shoulder to see the Pastor staring at her with the oddest expression. Falling to his knees, he bent his forehead to the floor and thanked God for healing the woman he loves. After the Pastor led Olivia from the room, Jesse went to rinse her face.

Later, in the living room, her grandmother and Gabriel stopped talking when Jesse walked in. Gabriel took out his cell phone and excused himself to make a call while her grandmother busied herself searching for the remote control. When her grandmother sat down to turn on the news, Jesse sat down next to her.

"Were you and Gabriel talking about me, Grammy?"

"Yes," she said, "as a matter of fact we were."

Surprised by her grandmother's candor, Jesse said, "Really? May I ask what you were saying?"

Her grandmother continued watching the news as she

answered, “Yes, you may ask.”

When her grandmother kept watching the news without saying more, Jesse sighed, recognizing the game being played. “Okay, Grammy, I'm asking. What were you and Gabriel saying about me?”

Muting the news, her grandmother turned to her. “I was just reminding Gabriel of a dream I had several months ago. In the dream, I saw a large puzzle, a child’s puzzle with only five pieces forming the picture of a human hand. Four pieces, four fingers of a hand were present but one piece was missing. For some reason, all I could think about was the missing piece. I was very troubled because I knew the hand needed every member to function properly.”

“Hmm,” Jesse said, “that is a strange dream. What do you think it means?”

“I didn’t know what it meant then, but I do now. The four fingers represent four people who would soon be joined by a fifth. The fifth member would complete the hand to make it whole. The hand is an instrument God will use in these last days.”

Jesse leaned back against the sofa, thinking. The four people were likely her grandmother, Gabriel, the Pastor and Olivia. Without looking at her grandmother, she asked, “Is the fifth member still missing?”

“Not any more. She came home.”

Jesse’s eyes closed with a soft groan. Surely, her grandmother didn’t think she was the fifth person. She could only be a weight to a group that had spent their lives dedicated to God. She already knew the answer but she asked the question anyway. “And who do you think the fifth person is, Grammy?”

“You, Jesse. You’re the fifth member.”

Shaking her head, Jesse said, “No, Grammy, I’m not. I

couldn't be.”

“Yes, Jesse, you are. The fifth person is you. I wondered before, but now I'm sure. I think Jonas and Olivia knew the day they met you.”

“But I don't know enough, Grammy. I have all kinds of problems. I'm—I'm not good enough.”

“And who is good enough? No human is good enough. That's why Jesus came to Earth to save us. God knew you before you were born. He knows you better than you know yourself. God knows who you are, Jesse. Will you argue with God?”

Jesse sat back, thinking. Her grandmother asked the same question she had answered the night before. “No. I won't argue with God. I am who God says I am,” she said.

Her grandmother patted her knee. “Then be exactly who God says you are because God knows exactly what He's doing. God is good.”

“Yes, Grammy, God is good.”

“All the time,” her grandmother said, lifting the remote to take the television off mute.

Jesse stared at the talking head without hearing the words. Her mind was elsewhere. Did her grandmother's dream mean anything or was she assigning meaning to a meaningless, random dream? Did the dream matter at all? Wouldn't she do whatever God wanted her to do? How would she know what God wanted? She turned to her grandmother to ask but changed her mind, not wanting to interrupt the news. She touched her grandmother's arm. “I think I'll go outside, Grammy.”

In the backyard, Jesse breathed in the sweet smell of honeysuckle tumbling in a yellow mass over an old piece of nearby fence. How could she have missed something so obvious for so long? Gabriel was right. In its beauty and complexity,

nature testified of a creator, an intelligent master designer.

Walking into the woods, Jesse paused to study the veins in a leaf and examine a mountain laurel. Preferring to be alone, she passed the path leading to the shelter, deciding instead to go to the boulder overlooking the upper pond. Many teenage problems had been pondered on that rock. She would go there now.

Stopping to watch a squirrel scamper up and down a tree trunk, Jesse tilted her head. How did it keep from falling? She was still thinking about the squirrel when a blackbird landed on a nearby limb. Curious that a bird would come so close to a human, she watched black marble eyes staring back at her. The bird seemed as interested in her as she was in it. Thinking she might be near its nest, she moved along the path at a quicker pace before looking around to see the bird land on a bush a few feet away.

Feeling a little spooked by the bird's odd behavior, Jesse hurried along the path before one foot stuck to the ground in mid-stride with the word stop echoing in her mind. She pulled her foot back and stood still. The word had been clear, as if someone had shouted a thought inside her head. Even when the blackbird opened its wings behind her, she didn't move. Her eyes darted around nervously before a wave of dread washed over her at the sight of a bear coming onto the path in the distance.

Her body was immobilized with fear but her mind ran wild, falling over itself in a panic—run, play dead, climb a tree, stay still. She couldn't remember what she was supposed to do. Did she ever know? When the animal came up onto hind legs to sniff the air, she stopped breathing. Seconds stretched into an eternity before the creature came down heavily on its front paws to amble out of sight. When she thought her legs could obey simple instructions, she took a careful step back before turning to move quietly, quickly along the path in the opposite direction.

Running at breakneck speed, Jesse rounded a clump of bushes before her feet scrubbed the ground in an effort to stop. Sidestepping the impact, Gabriel's arm came out to catch her as

she fell forward. After steadying her on her feet, he asked, “Would you mind telling me what you’re doing?”

Gasping for air, she managed the word, “Running.”

He stared at her a few seconds and she couldn’t tell if he was annoyed, stunned or both. She decided on annoyed, when he said, “Did we discuss the dangers of venturing off in the woods alone?”

“Yes, we did,” she said, still breathing heavily.

His eyes narrowed with a questioning look. “Is something wrong?”

She knew telling him about the bear would bring a lecture she didn’t need to hear. She had already learned her lesson. “I’m just agreeing with you. I shouldn’t have gone off in the woods alone,” she said, stepping around him to start along the path.

Falling in step beside her, he said, “I was hoping to find you, to tell you the good news. I called the hospital to check on Mr. Drake.”

“Really? He’s doing better then?”

“Dr. Haynes said his condition has improved significantly, miraculously, considering the original prognosis.”

“And did you explain the difference between a miracle and healing to Dr. Haynes?”

He laughed softly. “No. I spared him the lesson, but he did say Mr. Drake may be released soon.”

“Amazing,” she said, thinking about the man’s condition just a few short days ago. She was still thinking about the awesome power of God to heal when she stopped. “That’s the bird,” she said softly.

“What bird?” Gabriel asked.

She turned around slowly to face him. “Gabriel, I know this may sound bizarre, but I think that bird, the one in the tree behind me—well, I think the bird was...”

When she hesitated, he asked, “Was what?”

“Following me,” she said, expecting him to laugh, to say she was imagining things.

He didn’t laugh or even look amused. Watching the bird, he put a hand on her shoulder to guide her past the tree and into the backyard. As they neared the porch, Gabriel looked over his shoulder to see the bird turn on the same branch as if watching them.

Safely inside the house, Jesse began to wonder if she weren’t the victim of an overactive imagination rather than bird stalking. “Bird stalking,” she said under her breath, shaking her head at the absurdity. Maybe it wasn’t even the same bird. Most blackbirds do look alike, she reminded herself. The more she thought about it, the more ridiculous the charge sounded. Offering Gabriel a bottle of water, she said, “I can’t believe I said that out loud—a bird following me.”

“I’m glad you told me,” he said, taking the water and setting it aside. “Jesse, you can’t walk in the woods alone.”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “I won’t do that again.”

“If you think you’re being followed by anyone or anything, will you tell me?”

She watched him curiously. Anything? Noting his serious expression, she said, “Yes. I’ll tell you if I ever think I’m being followed.”

“Good,” he said, apparently satisfied with her answer. He watched her face a few seconds before saying, “I wanted to tell you about Mr. Drake but I was also hoping we could talk about yesterday. I think you should know what Rachel and I discussed.”

“No—no,” she stammered, eyes darting around the room before fixing on the wall clock. “I’m sorry, but I can’t right now. I need to—to check on something,” she said before hurrying for the backstairs.

Jesse sat in the window seat staring out at the mountains. Gabriel wanted to talk, tell her what he and Rachel talked about. She knew what he would say. He would tell her that he’s in love with Rachel. He would say his relationship with Rachel wouldn’t change their friendship. She couldn’t bear to hear it right then. She needed time—maybe a few days, a week, but not right then.

The next day Jesse stayed close to her grandmother. She didn’t want to be caught off guard by Gabriel again. Just as she and her grandmother prepared to leave for the shelter, Gabriel, followed by several people, came bounding through the front door. Their smiles and laughter filled the room with cheerful energy. When Gabriel crossed the room to stand in front of them, Jesse asked, “What’s happened?”

By his smile, she knew it was good news. “The Pastor called. He said Dr. Haynes ordered new scans and tests for Olivia.”

Jesse’s hand lifted to her heart. “And?”

Gabriel smiled at her expectant face. “Doctors have confirmed a miracle.”

“Grammy!” Jesse cried, turning to her grandmother.

Within minutes, Jesse was certain she had hugged everyone in the room. With her back against the wall, she scanned faces until seeing her grandmother weaving her way through the crowded room toward her. Her once neat bun hung lopsided from her head with random pieces of hair sticking out. “Are you okay, Grammy? You look like you’ve been in a hurricane.”

“I have,” her grandmother said, laughing, as she tried unsuccessfully to tidy her hair. “I’ve been through a hurricane of hugs.”

Gabriel came over to stand between them. “Florence, I think more people will be coming to dinner than we can comfortably fit around the table.”

“Are you suggesting a cookout, Gabriel?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling. “That’s what I’m suggesting.”

She nodded. “This might be the last chance we have.”

Gabriel turned to Jesse to ask, “Are you up for a cookout?”

She would have agreed to anything right then. “Sure,” she said. “A cookout sounds good.”

Jesse dropped a peeled potato on top of the growing pile just before Emma and Victoria came rushing through the door. Emma took an apron from the hook. “Cookout,” she said, laughing. “Why, we haven’t had a cookout in a good while. I’m about ready for some good down home fun.”

Tying the apron at Emma’s back, Victoria said, “It will be just like old times.”

A few hours later, Jesse looked down the counter at bowls of potato salad, baked beans and coleslaw. “Grammy, I believe we have enough food here to feed a small army.”

“Good, because that’s what were feeding, an army,” she said.

Victoria was taking the last batch of cookies from the oven when the sound of a male voice called from the living room. “In here,” her grandmother called back.

Steve Owens and Paul Sinclair stopped just inside the kitchen door. Steve tilted his nose in the air to say, “Mm—sure smells good in here.” His eyes scanned the counter of food before fastening on a plate of cookies on the table. He started for the cookies with an excited grin. “Is that oatmeal raisin?” He reached out to take a cookie before jerking his hand back. “Aww, Emma,” he said, rubbing the back of his hand.

A dishtowel dangled from the hand on Emma’s hip. “Have you washed your hands young man?”

Looking down at his hands, Steve stammered, “Well, I—uh.”

Pointing toward the sink, Emma nodded. “Mm-hm, thought as much.”

With both hands on her hips now, her gaze swung to Paul. “I reckon cleanliness is next to godliness,” Paul said, hurrying across the room to join his cousin at the sink.

Drying their hands, the cousins turned to eye Emma cautiously from across the room. Pouring a second glass of milk, Emma smiled. “Well, get over here, boys, and have some milk and cookies.”

Steve and Paul were still sitting at the table munching cookies when Gabriel appeared. He crossed his arms and leaned against the doorway to watch the two men. Winking at Emma, he stepped forward. “Emma, have you seen two men sent down to carry food back to the picnic area?”

Emma’s eyes rolled up, thinking. “Nope. Can’t say as I’ve seen anybody ‘round here asking about food to carry back.”

Steve and Paul looked at each other like two kids caught with their hands in a cookie jar as Gabriel leaned between them to ask, “Were you hoping to lighten the load a bit?” Seeing their guilty expressions, he straightened with a laugh. “Don’t feel too bad. The smell of warm cookies might divert any man from his

task,” he said before noticing a plate of cookies on the opposite side of the table. “Not many men could resist Emma’s oatmeal raisin cookies.”

Paul winked at his cousin before smiling up at Gabriel. “Mm-hm, they sure are good. They just melt in your mouth, all sweet and buttery.”

“They do smell good,” Gabriel said, starting around the table. He smiled at Emma as he passed before stopping. His eyes narrowed slightly, questioning, before a slow smile of realization crossed his face. Going back around to stand behind the cousins, he said, “I’m guessing Emma issued a lesson in hand washing.”

Laughing, Paul pointed at his cousin. “Sure did, and Steve yelped like a schoolgirl.”

Steve smiled at his cousin. “Nobody yelped, you lying hound.” Getting up from the table, he threw an arm around Emma’s shoulder. “Thanks for the cookies, Miss Emma. Now you keep that quick draw of yours primed and ready. Paul could stand a few lessons in manners, too.”

Chuckling, Gabriel shook his head at the cousins before saying, “Florence, we thought the lower pond would be a good place to set up.”

“Oh, that is a good place,” she agreed.

After the food had been carried out, her grandmother took off her apron. “I guess the men can take it from here,” she said.

[Chapter list](#) *or scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 8

Going to her closet, Jesse flipped clothes hangers forward until stopping at a black dress she had once worn to a funeral. *The color matches my mood*, she thought. With all the excitement, she had agreed to the cookout, but now she wished she hadn't. Gabriel and Rachel would be together. She turned to look longingly at the bed. What excuse could she give for crawling in and pulling the covers up over her head? She wouldn't lie and she couldn't admit the truth. Releasing a long breath, she said, "Please, God, help me get through this without breaking down and crying in front of people."

Sitting down on the bed, she bent forward, letting her head fall into her hands before looking up to see the Bible on the nightstand. Turning to the page she had marked the night before, she read the highlighted words. "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." She placed the Bible back on the nightstand. "I have to go," she said aloud. "I'll have to face them eventually." Hadn't she learned that hoping and wishing never changed anything? She couldn't change the circumstances but she could change her attitude. She would make the best of it."

Applying lip-gloss and a spray of her favorite perfume, Jesse turned in the mirror to inspect the free-flowing skirt and light summer top. The colors were bright and cheerful. Now, all she had to do was smile and act natural. Act natural? Her body tensed as she imagined seeing Gabriel and Rachel together as a couple for the first time. Act natural might be better stated as maintain an appearance of composure without bursting into tears.

Her grandmother was in the living room with Emma and Victoria when Jesse walked in. "My, everyone looks lovely," her grandmother said, looking around the circle of women. "Especially you, Jesse. That shade of blue is very pretty with your dark complexion."

Jesse managed a halfhearted smile. “Thanks, Grammy.”

As they crossed the backyard, her grandmother laced her arm through Jesse’s to whisper, “I believe Gabriel will think you look pretty as well.”

If she and her grandmother had been alone, Jesse might have told her about Gabriel and Rachel. Instead, she patted her grandmother’s arm. She would know soon enough. As they neared the pond, Jesse was surprised to see so many people had already arrived. Adults mingled while children ran and played. Several men stood around Gabriel as he operated a massive grill at the corner of the clearing. In the distance, teenagers tossed a football while another group played horseshoes. The atmosphere was warm and festive. By the time she and her grandmother reached the rows of picnic tables, Jesse had been introduced to more people than she could possibly remember.

Jesse was chatting with a group of women from the shelter when the sound of a slow moving vehicle caught their attention. The silver minivan passed cars parked along the gravel road to pull right up to the clearing. All eyes were on the Pastor as he went around to the passengers’ side. Everyone at the table stood when they recognized Mr. Drake walking between the Pastor and Olivia. As the three neared the pond, a single handclap broke the silence to spark a crescendo of applause and cheering.

Stepping onto a low-cut stump with Olivia on one side and Mr. Drake on the other, the Pastor lifted his hands toward heaven. A hush fell over the crowd as the Pastor’s voice rang out. “We give You glory and honor and praise, Almighty God.” He looked from Olivia to Mr. Drake before his eyes swept the crowd. “You are witnesses to the healing power of God. Lift up your hearts and give thanks, glorify the living God!” The Pastor’s shout to praise God was met with a resounding, “Hallelujah!”

The soft chant, “Jesus,” gained volume until the name echoed through the mountains. Although smaller in number, the energy Jesse felt around her surpassed any concert she had ever

gone to as a teenager. Watching Olivia's face, Jesse swallowed back tears. "God is good," she whispered.

Sitting at a picnic table between Olivia and her grandmother, Jesse listened to the light conversation passing around the table without saying much. The sight of Olivia's face, alive and happy, made Jesse smile before looking around to lock eyes with Mr. Drake. He watched her from across the table before his expression softened to say, "When I was in the hospital, I heard a voice, a sweet voice in my ear. I love you—that's what I heard, laying there in that hospital bed." His eyes began to mist before repeating quietly, "I love you. I hadn't heard those words in a long time. Just a few words—I never knew how important words could be." Visibly collecting himself, he looked around the table. "Thank you all for being my friends."

The Pastor nodded. "It is good to have friends. And the best friends are those who pray for us in our time of need."

As the Pastor talked about the power of prayer, Jesse caught Mr. Drake's silent message of thanks. She returned his smile, thanking God for giving her words Mr. Drake needed to hear.

Distracted by her own thoughts, Jesse only half listened to conversations going on around her. She had been expecting Gabriel and Rachel to join them at the table, but they never did. In fact, she had not seen Rachel all evening and Gabriel took his meal with the men who assisted him at the grill. Although puzzled by Rachel's absence, Jesse managed to push the woman from her mind and relax as the evening progressed.

As dusk began to fall, several people gathered around a man playing classical guitar by firelight. He was an excellent guitarist, playing impressive compositions. Just as she was beginning to think Gabriel might avoid their table all evening, Jesse looked up to see him coming in their direction. She lowered her gaze to focus on the tablecloth she was needlessly smoothing around her drink as he greeted everyone

She didn't need to look around to know Gabriel was standing behind her. When he said, "I thought I might take a walk," all eyes turned to Jesse, knowing the comment was meant for her. When she didn't respond, he said, "Jesse, would you care to join me for a walk?"

She shook her head. "No, thank you. I wouldn't care to talk—walk," she corrected quickly.

Even before her grandmother spoke, Jesse could feel her eyes boring through the side of her head. "Jesse, I think a walk would do you good."

The tablecloth Jesse stared at didn't supply her with an excuse to decline the offer. The awkward silence became embarrassing before she turned with a strained smile to take Gabriel's offered hand.

As they walked in silence around the clearing lit by staked torches and lanterns, the haunting melody behind them grew more distant. She easily recognized the famous piece, Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. After a few moments, Gabriel said, "This has been a good day, a day to celebrate."

"Yes," she replied without looking up.

He stopped at a blanket spread over a grassy area. "Would you mind if we stop here? I was hoping we could—"

"Talk," she said quietly.

"Yes, Jesse. I would like to talk to you about a few things."

Releasing a defeated sigh, she sat down on the blanket. She looked around in the dim light to see they were far enough away from the others to have a private conversation. Gabriel had chosen a good place to talk.

Sitting down next to her, he draped an arm around her shoulders before his other hand slipped beneath hers. "You have

delicate hands,” he said, lifting her hand to his lips.

She turned her face away so he wouldn't see her stunned expression. What was he doing? Questions began to zip through her mind. Had she been wrong? What was he thinking? Why wasn't he with Rachel? What did he want to talk about? Pushing all the questions aside, she was left with one thought. He couldn't possibly say anything more painful than what she was expecting. With that in mind, she began tentatively. “Gabriel, do you think Rachel might misunderstand if she sees us together?”

During the silence, she glanced up to see his puzzled expression. He finally said, “Would you mind telling me why you ask that?”

Hiding her frustration at his tactic of using a question to avoid answering, she shrugged one shoulder. “Well...it's fairly obvious that Rachel is attracted to you, and I—well, I wasn't sure how you might feel about her.”

“I see,” he said, nodding slowly. “Have I behaved in a way that might lead you to think I'm attracted to Rachel?”

Her face burned with guilt at the memory of eavesdropping. “I don't know, um—well, maybe there was something.” Once the floodgate cracked, words she couldn't stop burst forth. “I did notice that you don't seem to discourage her flirting and you canceled plans to visit Mr. Drake so you could be alone with her.” She bit her lip, shocked at what she'd said, what she'd implied.

He was silent a few seconds before saying, “You thought I chose to spend time with Rachel instead of you. I'm sorry you misunderstood, Jesse. It is true that I wanted to be alone with Rachel, but not for reasons you might think. I wanted to talk to her about her behavior, the way she treats you and her attitude in general.”

Surprised, she turned to him. “Really?”

“Yes—really. I have never had a romantic interest in Rachel and I’m not involved with her now.”

“Never? But, you dated.”

“No, Jesse. Rachel and I never dated. After high school, I left for college and she moved to New York to pursue a modeling career. I’m not sure what brought her home six months ago, maybe problems in her career or a failed relationship. I will admit that she has shown an interest since coming home, an interest that I’ve tried to discourage without being hurtful.”

Remembering Rachel’s outburst over breakfast, Jesse said, “She was angry this morning. She must have thought I knew what you talked to her about.”

“I’m sure our discussion left Rachel in a bad mood, but you had nothing to do with that. My problem with her is nothing new. It began years ago. Unfortunately, my disinterest became her challenge. There were more than a few awkward high school moments. As you know, I was a clumsy teenager.”

“Clumsy? Oh, no, you weren’t clumsy. You were—” she choked back the word wonderful to say, “tactful. You were always kind.”

He laughed softly. “Let’s just say, I was less than skilled when it came to dealing with the opposite sex. I remember one day in particular that highlights my teenage blunderings. I hadn’t been driving too long when I stayed after church one afternoon to help the Pastor with a project. Rachel was waiting in the church parking lot. She told her parents I would be driving her to meet them at your grandmother’s house.”

“I remember that day,” she said softly.

“Yes, I think you do. I didn’t know it then but that day changed our lives. I’ve gone over it countless times in my mind. The sun was shining and it was warm. You looked beautiful, happy and smiling. You waved and I was thinking, hoping, you

were waiting for me. Before I could talk to you, you disappeared and I didn't see you again that day. After that, you were different, distant, and I was too young, too blind to understand why."

The pain she felt was almost physical. She had been wrong. "I didn't give you a chance to explain," she said.

His arm tightened around her. "We both should have done things differently. I should have talked to you sooner. Fear of ruining our friendship kept me from telling you how I felt for a long time, but that day I was going to tell you. I had planned to ask you out."

"For a drive," she said quietly.

"Yes, but I didn't get the chance. The day the window was smashed, when I was bandaging your cut, you said I hurt you. We both knew you were talking about the past but I didn't know how I'd hurt you. I didn't know until the day you met Rachel. At first, you didn't recognize her. When you did, you looked back at me. I knew then. Ten years ago, you thought I'd brought Rachel to your home as my girlfriend. I was the one who hurt you when you were very young. I never meant to hurt you, Jesse. I loved you then and I love you now."

Silent tears slipped down her face as he held her. Relaxing against him, she closed her eyes, listening to the soft melody playing in the distance. "The song—do you know what it is?"

"Yes," he said, "the theme song to Love Story."

"Beautiful song," she said.

"Yes," he said, "but not nearly as beautiful as you, Jesse. So often, I thought of this day, what I would say. Ten years ago, I was young, afraid to say what I felt, but not anymore. Today, I can tell you from the heart of a man that you are unquestionably the most beautiful of all of God's creations. I've seen mountain views that made me pause in wonder, sunrises and sunsets that could steal a breath, but nothing captivates me like you do."

“I’ve always cared about you, too,” she said. “We talked about feeling connected to someone, maybe without knowing why. My connection has always been with you, Gabriel, and I know why.”

His hand came under her chin to keep her from looking away. “Say what you feel, Jesse.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “I love you. That’s what I feel—what I have always felt.”

His lips touched hers in a kiss that was soft, searching, before he drew back to say, “I’ve waited so long for you to come home.”

Later that night, Gabriel led Jesse around the clearing in the shadows of trees. She could still see a few people gathered around the campfire in the distance. At the front door, he kissed her goodnight. “Sleep well, Jesse.”

She turned in the doorway, watching him disappear down the steps before going inside to drift back against the closing door. A lamp switched on in the corner to illuminate her grandmother’s smile. Surprised, Jesse asked, “Grammy, what are you doing up so late?”

“Well, now,” she said, getting up from the sofa, “I couldn’t very well go to sleep with my granddaughter out and a question burning in my mind.”

Taking her grandmother’s arm as they walked toward the stairs, Jesse said, “Since I was with Gabriel, I don’t think you were worried about me. So, tell me, Grammy, what scorching question is sweltering in your mind?”

Laughing, she said, “I don’t know if it’s all that dramatic, but I would like to know if I was right. Did a walk do you good, child?”

Remembering her reluctance to go with Gabriel, Jesse

laughed. “Oh, yes, Grammy, you were right. A walk did me a world of good.” Sighing happily, she said, “We’re in love.”

Her grandmother didn’t seem surprised. “Yes, you are, and it’s about time you both admitted it.”

Jesse kissed her grandmother’s cheek. “Oh, we did admit it, Grammy. It was wonderful, romantic, beautiful, with moonlight and soft music. I confess, Grammy, I’m madly, hopelessly in love,” she said before floating up the stairs.

Jesse woke up early the next morning to bounce out of bed, eager to embrace the day. Thinking she would be going to the shelter with Gabriel, she put on slacks and comfortable shoes but took extra time to fix her hair and add a touch of makeup. Starting past the dresser, she noticed three sticks of gum she had left there the day before. The jingle from the commercial popped into her head—kiss longer. Smiling, she slid the gum into her pocket.

Downstairs, Jesse greeted her grandmother with a cheerful, “Morning, Grammy.”

“Morning, sweetie. You look chipper this morning.”

“I can’t remember ever being more chipper,” Jesse said, leaning in to kiss her grandmother’s cheek. She pointed to the box her grandmother carried. “What’s that?”

“Recipes,” she answered. “I’m meeting Emma at the shelter this morning to work on menus. Gabriel said you’re coming up with him later on. He wants to show you the hydroponic greenhouses he’s so proud of.” Shaking her head, she said, “I tell you, I would have never believed it—growing gardens without dirt. Beats all I ever seen, but it works.”

“I know, Grammy. I was surprised to hear about the greenhouses, too. I can’t wait to see them.”

In the kitchen, Jesse returned the Pastor and Olivia's smile. "You look happy this morning," Olivia said, darting a secret glance at her husband.

"I am happy," Jesse said, touching Olivia's shoulder as she passed on her way to the coffeepot. She pulled a cup from the cupboard and turned around with a sigh. "Why wouldn't I be happy? The birds are singing, the sun is shining and it's a lovely morning. Don't you think?"

The Pastor cast an amused look at Olivia before saying, "Oh, very lovely." Glancing at his watch, he said, "I should get going."

Jesse replaced the carafe before asking, "Are you going to the shelter?"

"Not this morning," the Pastor said, "We're going to town to share the good news of Jesus."

"Really?" Jesse asked. "Who's going with you?"

The Pastor started ticking names off on his fingers. "Let's see, Charles, Nick, Matthew and five other men from the shelter. Oh, and that reminds me. Gabriel said to tell you that he had to go into town but he'll be back in a couple of hours."

Just as the Pastor pushed his chair back, Victoria came through the door. She looked like she had been crying. "What's wrong, Victoria?" Jesse asked.

"Rachel, she left sometime last night. She came to the cookout late, stayed a few minutes before saying she was coming back here."

Jesse felt her stomach turn over. Had Rachel seen her and Gabriel together?

Victoria's hand flew up to wipe away a tear before fishing in her purse for tissue. "We couldn't find her this morning. When I finally got through to her cell phone, she said she was bored and

had a friend pick her up. I haven't been able to reach her since. We think she's with Tiffany. Charles is pulling the car around now."

The Pastor stood up. "Victoria, you stay here. I'll go with Charles."

"No, Pastor," Victoria said, waving a handful of tissue in protest. "Charles just wanted me to let you know that he won't be going into town with you this morning. He said to go without him. We know there are people who desperately need to hear the message you're taking." Her hand went to her forehead as if warding off a headache. "I'm sure Rachel is fine. She sometimes acts without thinking. This certainly isn't the first time her father and I have gone looking for her."

Victoria's strained smile twisted the knife of guilt burning in Jesse's stomach. She wished there was something she could do. With that thought, she stepped forward. "I'll go with you, Victoria."

"That's sweet, Jesse, but I couldn't ask you to do that."

Setting her coffee aside, Jesse went to give Victoria the reassuring hug she knew the woman needed. "You're not asking, I'm offering. I'm sure you're right. Rachel is just visiting friends. We'll find her in no time." With an arm around Victoria's waist, they started for the door.

"Jesse," the Pastor called, "maybe you should call Florence or Gabriel—let them know you're leaving."

She smiled over her shoulder. "I'll probably be back before anyone even knows I'm gone."

On the front porch, Jesse heard a soft whimper before Victoria burst into tears. She had been right. Victoria didn't want the Pastor and Olivia to know how upset she really was. After buckling the crying woman into the passenger side of the sedan, Jesse climbed into the backseat. Meeting Mr. Swinney's eyes in

the rear view mirror, she said, “I want to help.” With a silent nod, he eased the car down the drive.

Hearing an occasional snuffle coming from the front seat, Jesse knew Victoria was still crying. At first, she didn’t know why Victoria seemed so worried but as they neared a part of town Jesse was unfamiliar with, she began to understand. She was shocked at what she saw—vandalized and boarded up houses and shops, overgrown lawns, broken windows and littered streets.

Sitting back in her seat, Jesse wondered why there was so little traffic. Where was everyone? Why did the area look almost deserted? She knew prices on everything, especially food and gas, had risen over the last months. Maybe people had nowhere to go, no gasoline, or both. Recent news reports said families and groups were starting to band together for protection and to pool resources. Was that it? She also wondered how many people from town were staying at the shelter.

As the car slowed to pull onto the drive of a brick, ranch style house, Jesse could see the lawn hadn’t been cut and there were no cars in sight. Mr. Swinney blew the horn and waited before saying, “No one’s home.”

“Go to the door and make sure, Charles,” Victoria urged.

Mr. Swinney pressed the horn, holding it down for a long blast. “You can see no one is home, Vickie,” he said, sounding agitated.

Victoria grabbed for the door handle. “I’m not leaving here until I know Rachel is not in that house. If you won’t go, I will.”

Taking hold of his wife’s arm, Mr. Swinney said, “Stop it, Vickie. Calm down.”

Victoria was struggling to pull her arm from her husband’s grasp when Jesse opened the back door. “I’ll go, Mr. Swinney,” she said, getting out of the car without waiting for a reply. She hurried up the walkway to the front door. Pressing the doorbell,

she leaned close to listen before knocking with an open hand. When the door jarred forward, she hesitated only a second before stepping inside to call out. “Is anyone home?” Hearing a noise, she moved quickly through the entryway into a large room to see overturned furniture and papers scattered across the floor.

“Rachel, is that you?”

“In here,” came the faint reply.

Without stopping to think, Jesse skirted an overturned chair to rush across the room toward an open doorway. “Rachel, where are you?”

On the other side of the door, Jesse stopped, caught off guard to see a woman sitting on a kitchen counter. Before Jesse could speak, an arm snaked around her throat to jerk her back against something solid. Her scream didn’t make it past the crushing pressure on her windpipe.

“Move it,” the woman barked, coming off the counter in one fluid motion. Jesse clawed at the arm around her throat steering her toward the door.

Outside, a shove to her back sent Jesse stumbling forward. She clutched her throat but before she could take in a breath of air, a hand in her hair yanked her head back. Her screams were choked hisses as she was propelled forward at a quick pace. When she lost her balance, the iron grip on her hair kept her upright, dragging her until she managed to get back on unsteady legs.

A block away, Jesse was thrust through an open door to fall to her knees wheezing. When she could take in air, she sat back on her heels with a hand at her throat. Her eyes darted between the man and woman watching her.

The woman crouched down to look at Jesse. Her lips puckered into a jeering pout. “What’s wrong, princess, having a bad day?”

Aside from a sneering expression, the woman looked

ordinary. She didn't look like a criminal. With her dark blonde hair pulled back into a short ponytail, she might have been any soccer mom. "Please," Jesse begged, "please let me go. I don't have anything, no money." The woman didn't seem disappointed and Jesse knew she didn't care about money. The question came in a frightened whisper. "What do you want then?"

Without standing, the woman twisted her upper body to the right. "Barry, the princess thinks she should ask questions." Jesse looked up to see the hulking man shake his head slowly before a blow to the side of Jesse's face sent her sprawling to the floor. "Don't try me again, princess," the woman warned.

Jesse couldn't stop the tears sliding down her face. She dropped her forehead to her knees and tried to pull herself together enough to pray. Her mind was a jumble. She couldn't think clearly and the taste of blood in her mouth was beginning to make her nauseous. Hearing the woman's voice coming from another room, she looked up to see the burly man sitting in a chair between her and the door. Arms crossed over his massive chest looked like tree trunks. Watching her, his head tilted slowly to the side as if he were examining an odd bug. Terrified by his waxen stare, she dropped her face back to her knees.

Jesse didn't look up again until she heard footsteps. The woman fell into a chair in front of her to drape one blue jean clad leg over the chair's arm. Her lips curved into a smile that didn't show her teeth before saying, "Don't worry, princess, I called for your chariot. We'll be leaving here soon."

Jesse's throat worked convulsively to swallow back nausea. Where were they taking her? The same question kept running through her mind. What do these people want? They hadn't asked for money or checked her pockets.

Hearing a noise, Jesse's head jerked up to see the big man coming toward her. As he pulled her from the floor by her hair, she tried to support her own weight but her legs felt like rubber. The damp blouse clinging to her body became suffocating and

everything began to move in and out of focus. She could hear a loud ringing in her ears as her body began to sway before losing complete control of her limbs. The last thing Jesse saw was the woman coming closer before a hand sliced the air in slow motion to connect with Jesse's face.

Opening her eyes, Jesse realized the moans she heard were her own. She looked out to see the concrete floor she was lying on before her eyes slammed shut against images of her kidnappers' faces. The pain in her left arm was almost unbearable. Turning her head slowly, she stared at the twisted limb splayed out from her body. Clenching her teeth against the pain, she rolled onto her side before trying to sit up.

Standing, Jesse leaned against the wall for support as she frantically scanned the walls and ceilings, searching for a way out. No windows, one door and a mesh-covered ceiling vent that was too small to climb through. She moved to press her ear against the door. Silence, no sounds could be heard coming from the other side. Her hand tightened around the knob to twist and pull several times before stepping back to run a hand through the top of her hair.

The question kept screaming through her mind. What do these people want? The answer stopped her cold. Isn't it obvious? They want to kill me. Clearly, the woman is a deranged sociopath, and the man, who knew what madness lurked behind his lifeless eyes. Terror wrapped around her like a boa constrictor suffocating its prey. Her heart began to hammer against her ribs before she ran to the door to pound with her uninjured hand. "Help me! Somebody, help me!"

Sagging against the door, she started to cry. She was helpless and would be murdered at any moment. "Dear God," she moaned, sliding to the floor, "help me." Her grandmother, Gabriel, she would never see them again. She didn't want to die. She wanted to see Gabriel again. She wanted to see his face, his

smile. He often knew what she was thinking. “I love you, Gabriel,” she whispered, rolling onto her side.

Jesse stared at the gray wall. The nightmare was real. Had she slept or lost consciousness? Lifting her head, she winced from the pain. Her body was stiff and her arm throbbed. She looked down at her left hand at purple, swollen fingers the size of sausage links.

Pushing herself up, her eyes fixed on the door before struggling to her feet. The doorknob didn’t turn. Still locked—big surprise, she chided herself. Her head fell back to release a long breath. At least she was calmer now. “Please, Jesus, help me get back home to Grammy and Gabriel,” she prayed.

Pacing, Jesse stopped to stare at the door, the only way out. She had to think. Tapping the heel of her hand against her forehead, she ordered herself to think...think...think. On television, she had once seen someone open a locked door with a credit card. “And do you have a credit card,” she asked herself, ramming her right hand into the pocket of her khaki pants. She froze, surprised. Her pocket wasn’t empty after all. Three sticks of gum she had taken from the dresser that morning lay across her open palm. She closed her eyes, remembering what she had been thinking when she took the gum. Would Gabriel ever kiss her again? Pushing away the distracting thought, she hurried to the door.

Pressing the stick of gum into the slit between the facing and the door, she begged, “Please, let this work.” She carefully worked the gum into the opening before feeling it stop against something solid. After forcing the gum into the crack from every possible angle, she blew out a frustrated breath. The gum bent from the pressure. Discouraged, she slumped against the wall.

Jesse sat on the floor with her back against the wall. She had been sitting that way, chewing the gum and staring at the door a few hours when she heard a noise. Someone was coming. Goose bumps ran up her arms just before a clear voice inside her head

said, “Use the gum.” Her mind began to race. Use the gum? How? Pushing herself up the wall, she got to her feet and stuck the gum on the inside of her right hand just as the door opened.

“Hello, princess,” the woman said with fake pleasantries as she walked past Jesse. With the woman’s back to her, Jesse took a quick step toward the door before hearing, “Don’t even think about it. You don’t want to deal with me, much less, Barry.”

With her hand on the door’s edge, Jesse stared at the man who had guarded her earlier. Her hand slid down the edge of the door until she felt the protruding latch. Without taking her eyes off the man, she quickly pressed the gum against the spring latch and pushed it back into its hold. With the gum firmly packed into the opening, she stepped away from the door.

“I’ve always hated people like you,” the woman said, before drawing out the name, “Jesse.”

Jesse whirled around. “You know my name.” The woman’s lips curled with satisfaction at Jesse’s shocked expression. The question tumbled out. “What do you want?”

“Asking questions again, princess?”

“No—no,” Jesse stammered, taking a step back. “No questions.”

The woman’s lip curled into a sneer. “Did you really think you would get away with your conspiracy against god?”

Jesse froze, shocked by the allegation. “Conspiracy against God? No, you’re wrong. I love God,” she said, taking a step forward in her eagerness to convince the woman. Tears gathered in her eyes and her hand came up to her heart. “Please,” she said in a breaking voice. “You have to believe me. I love Jesus with all my heart.”

The woman’s eyes closed as if fighting back pain before opening with a look of rage. She lunged the few feet separating

them to land a blow to Jesse's jaw that sent her staggering back against the wall. Pinned by the throat, Jesse stared wide-eyed as the woman snarled, "You will know the true god soon enough, Jesse. The master is everywhere. He watched you walk in the woods, in the hospital. He saw you get in the car." Fingers tightened around Jesse's throat. "Where's your god now, Jesse? Show me." Suddenly, the woman's expression went blank before her mouth twisted into a bizarre smile.

Jesse could feel the blood draining from her face as she watched eyes roll back until the woman's pupils disappeared. The angry expression transformed into an unnatural, hideous sight. "You are Gabriel's weakness," the creature growled. Pressure against her windpipe turned Jesse's scream into a high-pitched squeal. Lips distorted into a fiendish smile before saying, "A woman can lift a weak man up and bring a strong man down. Like Delilah, you will bring one chosen and celebrated to his death."

"No," Jesse choked as the face moved closer with a low, guttural laugh.

She could hear sniffing at her ear before feeling something slick and wet move up the side of her face. "Fear," the word was drawn out in a low voice as if savoring the taste. "Gabriel's fall will prove the God he serves is unable to protect. The time is at hand. Humans will soon fall on trembling knees to worship the one destined to rule."

Just as quickly as the woman's face had distorted, it changed back to its original look of human fury. Spit sprayed across Jesse's face before her head slammed back against the concrete wall. With a feeling of sick dread, Jesse watched the fist draw back. "Call on your god, Jesse, to save you from this." The punch to Jesse's face left her addled and sliding to the floor.

The woman squatted in front of Jesse's collapsed frame. "Want to hear a secret, princess? We're only keeping you alive for proof of life." The flat edge of a knife slid down Jesse's cheek. "When we don't need you anymore, I'm going to carve up your

pretty face.” The knife’s point flicked upward within a breath of Jesse’s pupil. “And make no mistake, Princess, I will kill you, but not before you beg for it to end.”

Jesse turned her head to see the woman walk out the door before meeting Barry’s vacant stare. Her eyes fell to the massive hand wrapping around the doorknob. When the door was flush with the wall, she thrust her body sideways, pressing her back against the door to keep it from moving while being locked from the other side.

She lay curled on the floor, waiting. The pain was excruciating but the fear was far worse. If she didn’t escape, Gabriel would die. Pushing herself up the wall to a standing position, she tried to listen at the door but blood pulsing against her eardrums made it difficult to hear. Would the door open? Her eyes fixed on red drips splashing against the dusty floor. Wiping her hand across her mouth, she stared at the crimson stain before squeezing her eyes shut. She couldn’t fall apart now.

Curling a shaking hand around the doorknob, Jesse looked up to release a shuddering breath. “Oh, God, please, help me.” When the door moved a fraction, her heart lurched into her throat. Slowly, she pulled the door back to put an eye up to the small slit. Seeing no one around, she dug the gum out of the lock before easing out and pulling the door quietly closed behind her. Her eyes moved frantically around the weakly lit area without seeing any windows or doors.

Fighting back fear, she moved to the center of the dimly lit space to scan chipped walls, searching for a way out. Then she saw it, a faded red and white exit sign hanging from the ceiling near metal steps on the far side of the room. Heart pounding, she crept across the floor to start up grated steps. A door loomed at the top of the stairs. Pushing the door forward a bit, she peaked through to see a large, empty space with no windows. Where was she? Abandoned factory? She pushed the question aside. She didn’t care where she was, only where she wanted to be, away

from these people.

Slipping through the door, Jesse edged toward the large square opening in the wall to her right to ease her head around the bend. Windowed doors, maybe offices, lined both sides of a long rectangular area. With a sharp intake of breath, she pulled back. A light was on in one of the offices. Pressing her back against the wall, she willed herself to stay calm and resist the urge to run.

Moving to ease her head around the corner again, she studied the office with a lit window. She would have to stay close to the wall to keep from being seen in case someone looked out. Her eyes moved to the exit sign, gauging the distance. Too far, they would easily chase her down if she ran.

Tension tightened the coil of fear in the pit of Jesse's stomach as she imagined the hulking man or the woman coming out of the lit room at any moment. She had to go, now. Taking deep breaths, she steadied her nerves before edging around the opening to move quietly along the wall. Nearing the lit office, she could hear voices. Her legs began to quiver and the sound of chattering teeth was deafening in her own ears. Gritting her teeth, she lowered herself awkwardly to the floor. Crawling with one hand was slow but she was careful not to make a sound. She froze at the sound of a woman's angry voice. "Come on, Mark. I only slapped her around a little."

"Impatience is your weakness, Marissa. She must be kept alive until we have Gabriel. He would sense her death."

The woman's next words made Jesse's blood run cold. "What about the preacher and that old woman? We can't go near the house and that old hag never leaves."

"I don't care about the others. Gabriel is the key," the man snapped. His voice turned mocking to say, "Gabriel, the man surrounded by angels. Gabriel, the great protector, and yet he couldn't even save his own girlfriend. Am I the only one who sees the humor in that?"

The woman didn't sound amused. "Have you forgotten the first rule of combat, Mark? Never underestimate your opponent."

"Maybe you've forgotten my first rule, Marissa. The first rule is the only rule, there are no rules," he said before giving a low, self-satisfied chuckle. "Try to be patient, dear. We've waited this long. One more night is of little importance."

Ignoring the shooting pain in her arm, Jesse used both hands to crawl for the exit. She had to get to Gabriel. By the time she reached the door, she was soaked in perspiration. Using the doorknob, she pulled herself to her feet to fumble with the lock. Cool air moved across her face as she stepped outside. Obeying the voice inside her head, she turned the lock back and quietly pulled the door shut before hurrying, stumbling down several steps and across the dark parking lot.

With no thought of direction, she ran along the street until stopping to catch her breath. She looked around, guessing she was somewhere near the outskirts of town. The area had no streetlights but the moon was shining brightly in the star-studded sky. Starting to run again, she traveled some distance before making out the indistinct outline of darkened houses up ahead. She was wading through tall grass toward the first house when she stopped. No—the word came clearly to mind, not these houses.

Dread washed over her at the sound of voices in the distance as Sam Huskins' words came to mind. God help anybody caught out alone after dark. Looking around for a place to hide, she spotted a hedge. Just as she ducked down, she lost her balance. Her left arm crumpled under her weight before hitting the ground with a dull thud. Tears mingled with sweat as she writhed on the ground in pain.

Exhausted, unable to move, she lay behind the hedge. The familiar voice told her to be strong. Her head rolled from side to side. "I can't. I can't go on," she whispered miserably. She dropped her right arm over her eyes before images of Gabriel's

face began to fill her mind. She had to try. Rolling onto her stomach, she waited for the dizziness to pass before pushing off the ground. Without knowing how she had gotten to her feet, she stumbled ahead.

On the walk in front of a small house, Jesse stood staring at the front door before moving forward to find the door unlocked. Inside, she stood motionless, listening. The house was dark and there were no sounds. The moon gleamed through curtains to her right and she could make out the outline of furniture but no telephone. She moved across the room toward a doorway. Looking around, she stopped, her eyes fixing on the telephone hanging on the opposite wall. Turning the receiver over in her hand, she could make out faintly glowing numbers. Hearing a dial tone, she sagged against the wall in relief.

At the sound of Gabriel's voice, disjointed noises quivered from her convulsing throat. "Jesse, I know it's you," he said. "Breathe, Jesse. Try to calm down." She took a ragged breath but couldn't control her tears. Gabriel's voice was pleading. "Jesse, please, I need to know where you are."

"I—I don't know—a house," she choked.

"Jesse, it will be okay. Listen to me very carefully." She nodded, determined to do whatever he said. He spoke slowly, calmly. "Find a piece of mail, anything with an address."

Holding the receiver tightly to her ear, she looked around the room. The soft light coming through a row of windows to her left faintly illuminated contours of cabinets.

Her eyes scanned the room before coming to rest on a small china cabinet. Forcing herself to put the receiver down, she went to the hutch. In the second drawer was a stack of papers. She hurried to the window where the light was stronger to sift through the material. Papers fell to the floor as she focused on the envelope she pulled from the pile. Mentally repeating the address, she hurried back to the telephone. "125 Mill Road," she said

before hearing Gabriel's released breath on the other end.

“I'm in town. I can be there in five minutes—stay on the phone, Jesse.”

Plaster scraped against her back as she went to the floor. She clutched the receiver to her chest as her body convulsed with sobs.

Minutes later, Gabriel burst through the door calling her name. At the sight of her huddled against the wall, he fell to his knees in front of her. Her vision was beginning to cloud as she felt herself being lifted from the floor. Even in her state of delirium, she knew she was in Gabriel's arms in the back of his Jeep. She tried to talk but couldn't form words. Her body felt sluggish, surreal, as if trapped in a dream. The hand she lifted to Gabriel's face came crashing to her body before pain dissolved into darkness. [Chapter list](#) *or scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 9

Fighting against the cloak of shadows shrouding her just below consciousness, Jesse tried to open her eyes. Someone was screaming. She wanted to cover her ears but her arms wouldn't move. Terror filled her mind—she was tied down in the concrete room. Tortured screams grew unbearably loud as she struggled against hands trying to pin her. Gabriel—she could hear his voice in the distance. He was coming for her. She called to him.

“Jesse, I've got you. You're safe.” She tried to listen but couldn't hear past the sound of someone gasping for air. Gabriel's voice drew closer. “Shhh, Jesse. You're safe with me. No one will hurt you. You're home now.”

She called his name. “Gabriel?”

“Yes, Jesse, I'm here. No one will hurt you.” With a soft moan, she relaxed, allowing herself to be pulled back into the tide of oblivion.

Voices floated into Jesse's awareness before she groggily opened her eyes. The Pastor and Olivia were standing by the bed, praying. Turning her head, she saw her grandmother and Gabriel on the other side. Tears streamed down her grandmother's face. “Grammy, don't cry,” Jesse said. She was surprised at the weak sound of her own voice.

Her grandmother bent over to brush the hair from Jesse's face. “I've never been so worried, child. You were very brave.”

Jesse didn't understand. Brave? How had she been brave? Why was she in bed? Starting to move, she closed her eyes against the pain. She felt like she'd been run over by a bus. Hazy memories began to flash through her mind—a woman's angry face, a concrete room. She had been kidnapped. Rachel—had she been kidnapped, too? “Grammy, where's Rachel? Is she safe?”

“Yes,” her grandmother said. “Rachel is safe at home.”

Olivia came around the bed to touch Jesse's hand. "We were so worried, Jesse. We prayed, but I was still afraid." Her tear soaked face moved Jesse with love for the young woman.

"God heard," Jesse said before meeting Gabriel's eyes. His face was haggard, as if he hadn't slept for days. She couldn't stop looking at him.

Her grandmother bent over to kiss Jesse's cheek. "We'll leave you and Gabriel alone," she said.

"We praise God for bringing you home, Jesse," the Pastor said.

When everyone left the room, Gabriel positioned himself next to her on the bed before carefully sliding an arm beneath her shoulders so her cheek rested against his chest. "I love you, too," he said softly.

"You heard," she said, listening to the comforting sound of his heartbeat against her ear.

His fingers grazed her temple as he smoothed her hair back. "I'm getting used to holding you. You've slept in my arms two nights now."

She was so tired but she wanted to stay awake, to hear his voice, so she kept talking. "Grammy let you to sleep with me?"

"Let me," he said, his chest moving with soft laughter. She didn't let me, she insisted. You were calling for me."

"Yes," she said sleepily, "someone was screaming, but I could hear you."

His lips brushed the top of her hair. "You were screaming, Jesse. You were badly injured when we found you. Dr. Haynes wanted to admit you to the hospital but we refused."

Her eyes opened then. "You're right. We can't leave the house," she said, her breathing becoming labored. Talking was an

effort but she had to tell him. “I heard them—”

“Shhh, Jesse,” he whispered against her ear. “I know. Mark Banner, the man we met at the hospital, was behind the kidnapping. They contacted me with demands for your release.”

With his hand stroking her hair, she started to relax. “God saved me, Gabriel.”

“Yes, Jesse, God saved us both.”

“Yes,” she murmured softly, drifting off to sleep.

Before Jesse opened her eyes, she could hear Gabriel calling her name. “Florence made chicken broth,” he said, helping her to sit up and place pillows behind her back.

“I don’t know,” she said, eyeing the tray he positioned across her lap. “I’m not sure I can eat.”

He stopped stirring the broth to look at her. “You will try, won’t you?”

She ate the spoonful he held to her lips before holding out her hand. “I will try, but I think I can feed myself.”

“I was looking forward to nursing you back to health,” he said, surrendering the spoon.

“Thanks, but I think I can handle I.” Putting down the spoon, she picked up the glass of tea. Her hand began to tremble with the weight.

“Seems you need me after all,” he said, taking the glass.

She leaned back against the pillows to watch him. “I do need you, Gabriel.”

He lifted her hand to his lips. “We need each other, Jesse,” he said before placing the spoon in her fingers. “Now eat, please.”

After eating half the soup, she sat back. "I'm thinking about a bath," she said, nodding yes, as he shook his head no. Minutes later, he was wrapping the brace on her arm in plastic.

In the bathroom, Jesse's mouth fell open with a gasp when she looked in the mirror.

"Jesse, do you need help?" Gabriel called from the other side of the door.

"No. I'm okay," she answered before lifting fingers to her puffy, bruised face. Deep purple ran along her jaw line. Her lips were swollen and her hair hung down her back in tangles. She looked frightful. *Frightful, but alive*, she thought. The bruising would fade and she would heal.

Gabriel stood behind Jesse's chair drying her hair. He turned the hair dryer off when her grandmother came into the room. Jesse could hear laughter in his voice when he said, "Florence, Jesse has agreed to keep my hairdressing skills quiet."

"I don't see why," her grandmother said, smiling. "I think you're being too modest, Gabriel. Other men could take a lesson."

Jesse could only guess at the look Gabriel gave her grandmother that made her laugh before quickly agreeing to keep his secret. Bending down, she gave Jesse a light hug before asking how she was feeling. "I feel like a new person after a bath, Grammy. You can add nursing to Gabriel's list of talents."

"Yes," her grandmother said, offering Gabriel a look of gratitude. "Gabriel is a man blessed with many virtues."

Over the next week, Gabriel spent evenings with Jesse in her room. They read the Bible, talked and enjoyed each other's company. The bruising was quickly fading and she could feel herself getting stronger until she no longer needed help with simple tasks. Shortly after she started taking meals downstairs,

she ran into Charles and Victoria Swinney. The meeting began with an outpouring of apologies from Victoria before Jesse stopped her. “None of us could have known what would happen,” Jesse said. “No one is to blame.”

“Is Gabriel still angry?” Victoria asked. “The way he looked at us when he found out you were missing, I don’t think he’ll ever forgive us.”

“No, Victoria, Gabriel isn’t angry,” Jesse, said. “I’m sure he was just concerned at the time.”

Mr. Swinney’s voice held a hint of anger when he said, “Now that Rachel is at the shelter, maybe she won’t find herself getting so bored and wanting to run off.”

“Did Rachel move to the shelter?” Jesse asked.

“Yes, and I think she’s really sorry about everything that happened,” Mrs. Swinney said.

Seeing Victoria’s sad expression, Jesse touched her shoulder. “Rachel isn’t responsible for what happened. None of us did anything wrong. Please don’t feel bad, Victoria.”

Mr. Swinney was quick to agree. “She’s right, Vickie. We shouldn’t feel guilty. The kidnappers are the ones to blame.”

Sitting on the sofa between her grandmother and Gabriel, Jesse hid a smile when Gabriel’s fingers moved beneath hers to tickle her palm. Catching his hand, she smiled before lacing her fingers with his. She looked around at excited faces waiting to see the Pastor’s interview scheduled to be shown on the local evening news.

“Oh, it’s starting,” her grandmother said, turning up the volume on the television.

The Pastor, who almost looked his age of twenty in a

smart suit, contrasted with the reporter wearing a more casual button down shirt. Looking into the camera, the reporter said, “As reports of violence continue to spread, a number of people from surrounding areas are leaving their homes in search of a safe place for their families. Many have found their way to a local shelter here in Mountain Valley provided by the Mountain Valley Freedom Church. Jonas Wagner, pastor of the church, is here with us to talk about the shelter.” Turning to the Pastor, the reporter said, “Tell us, Pastor Wagner, what prompted the church to build a shelter at a time when others might have questioned the need?”

Tugging gently at his collar, the Pastor’s eyes moved from the reporter to the camera, looking a little nervous. “We—well, uh, we started planning after one of our most trusted and respected church members received revelations from God. She and another church leader funded the project to help care for those in need.” Appearing to relax, he turned to the camera to say, “God loves every person and His spirit continues to strive with humanity during these last days.”

“Last days,” the reporter said, nodding. “There’s been a lot of talk about last days, judgment day and the apocalypse. Some comments made by Christian leaders have stirred up quite a bit of controversy in recent months. Even here in the Bible belt, known for traditional values, Christians are being harassed and churches vandalized. What do you think is behind the changes we’re seeing?”

“Hostility towards Christians is nothing new,” the Pastor said. “Opposition to Christianity has been growing for several decades in this country. As a nation, we are turning away from the God of the Bible and the Judeo-Christian principles this nation was founded on.” Smiling, he said, “But God isn’t shocked over our news headlines, so Christians shouldn’t be either. Bible prophecy is like a history book written in advance. We know the enemy is hard at work, recruiting for the coming battle.”

The reporter’s chin dropped slightly. “Coming battle?”

“Yes,” the Pastor said. “The battle prophesied in the Bible. I think most Christians familiar with Bible prophecy know we’re nearing the end of the age. The battle of Armageddon is coming and Satan is busy expanding his army.” The Pastor was about to say something else when he stopped. After a few seconds, his eyes widened as if he’d just heard a startling secret before looking into the camera to say, “A critical event is on the horizon. People will be astounded.”

Appearing uncomfortable, the reporter glanced down at his notes before quickly asking the next question. “How many can the shelter house and at what point will people be turned away?”

“Oh, no, we wouldn’t turn anyone away,” the Pastor said. “We want to help everyone who comes.”

The reporter looked mildly surprised. “There’s space and resources to provide for an untold number of people?”

“No,” the Pastor said, smiling softly. “We don’t have unlimited resources, but the God we serve does. We will welcome anyone who comes and we’re eager to share our greatest treasure first, the good news of Jesus Christ.”

After giving the shelter’s location and contact information, the reporter ended the interview.

Muting the television, her grandmother turned to the Pastor. “Good interview, Jonas,” she said before others joined in to say the same.

“I guess it went okay,” the Pastor said modestly. “I think David asked good questions. He also brings up a point we may need to think about. More people are coming to the shelter than we first expected. The suggestion has been made to build more sleeping quarters before winter sets in. Several carpenters have volunteered. They say the portable sawmill could be used to mill lumber.” Leaning back in his chair, he smiled. “I was at the shelter earlier today. People are volunteering and pitching in to help one another. There’s a spirit of sharing and harmony.”

Gabriel smiled. “The worst of times often brings out the best in people.”

“I’ve often found that to be true,” the Pastor said.

Later that evening, around the supper table, Jesse placed her napkin on the table before noticing her grandmother watching her. Moving closer, she examined Jesse’s face before saying, “You look like yourself again.”

Jesse looked over to see Gabriel smile. He knew Jesse found her grandmother’s comment amusing. She might have asked her grandmother who she looked like before but she was afraid to hear the answer. Instead, she said, “I feel like myself again, Grammy. The bruising is completely gone and Dr. Haynes said I can stop wearing the brace soon.”

Eyeing the blue wrap on Jesse’s arm, her grandmother asked, “Does your arm hurt?”

“Not at all, Grammy. I feel fine.”

Feeling a hand on her shoulder, Jesse looked around to see Gabriel standing behind her. “It’s a nice evening, Jesse. Would you like to stargaze with me on the front porch?”

“Sure,” she answered, starting to get up before hesitating. “I guess I should help clean up first though.”

Her grandmother smiled at her hopeful expression. “Go on out with Gabriel. We have plenty of help. Besides, a fresh breath of air will do you good.”

Jesse smiled, remembering the last time her grandmother said something would do her good. “Thanks, Grammy,” she said, taking Gabriel's hand.

On the porch swing, Jesse snuggled in against Gabriel’s side, listening to the high-pitched chirping of katydids. “You were right,” she said, breaking the long silence. “It is a nice evening and the sky is full of stars to gaze at.”

“Yes—nice night,” he said absently.

Moving out of the curve of his arm, she turned to say, “You seem preoccupied. Is something bothering you, Gabriel?”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “I need to talk to you, Jesse.”

By the dim light filtering through the living room curtains, she could see the outline of his lowered face. She touched his arm. “Whatever it is can’t be that bad.”

“Actually, I think it could be. What I’m about to tell you may change the way you feel about me, about us.”

Stunned, she stared at his shadowed profile. Was that possible? Could he really tell her something so terrible that her feelings for him would change? *No*, she thought, *he isn’t capable of anything that bad*. She needed to reassure him. “No, Gabriel, nothing you say could ever change the way I feel about you.”

“I hope so, Jesse, because I love you. Ten years and two thousand miles couldn’t break the bond we share. We both had things to accomplish apart, but I knew that one day we would be together. That’s what I held onto all these years. After college, I came back here to wait for you, knowing that eventually, you would come home. I thought about you every day.”

“You—you thought of me? Then why didn’t you contact me? Grammy had my number. You could have called.”

“Don’t you remember, Jesse? You were angry when you left ten years ago. You refused to take my calls, didn’t respond to my letters. I didn’t know what happened or how you felt when you left. I was seventeen, not in a position to go after you. Later, when I might have arranged a chance meeting, I was being followed. The same people who kidnapped you have been watching me for years. I couldn’t let them know how important you were to me. I couldn’t put you in danger.”

Jesse’s mind went back to the one phone call she refused.

“Gabriel, you called one time and I never received any letters.”

“No, Jesse, I called several times and wrote to you. Claire said you didn’t want to talk to me when I called and you never responded to the letters. You were probably the only teenager in Washington without a cell phone or computer.”

“I wasn’t allowed to have those things. Claire, she said—well, it doesn’t matter. I just wasn’t the typical teenager, I guess. Gabriel, I’m sorry. I should have given you a chance to explain before I left. I wish I had been honest and told you how I felt.”

“That’s all in the past now,” he said. “Let’s just put it behind us.”

Her expression turned puzzled. “I still don’t understand why people are following you. You don’t know who they are or what they want?”

“No. I don’t know. I tried to find out years ago, hired investigators. The first detective left a message to say he was flying to Italy. He said he would contact me but I never heard from him again. No one has heard from him since.”

“You think something happened, something bad?”

“I don’t know—yes, I think so. Instead of hiring a single detective, the next time I contracted a firm out of New York. Three weeks into the investigation, they asked me to fly up. The night before the meeting, a man came to my hotel room. He looked nervous, terrified. He said his firm’s services were no longer available—no explanation. On his way out, he handed me an envelope.”

“Envelope? What was in it?”

“A refund and note.”

“What did the note say?”

He shook his head. “That was several years ago. I’m not

sure I remember exactly.”

She was too curious to let him evade the question. “Maybe you remember what it said in general then. That’s not a message someone would easily forget.”

“No,” he said quietly, raking a hand through his hair. “I guess not. The note mentioned a secret society, powerful elites involved in some corporate globalist scheme.”

“Globalist scheme? What could something like that possibly have to do with you?”

“According to the note, the same secret society has deciphered the Bible code that somehow identifies me as a threat to their plans.”

“Bible code, I’ve never heard of that. What is it?”

“Some people claim there’s a message system hidden within the text of the Hebrew Bible. They say the Bible code can foretell events and be used to predict the future.” Taking her hand, he said, “Look, Jesse, that’s not what I want to talk about right now. The point is, I was in a difficult position, concerned about you but unable to make contact. You didn’t exactly pick the safest place to live. South California—gangs, murders, robberies. I started to worry, especially this last year with everything that’s been going on.” Falling silent, he stared ahead before saying, “A year ago, I hired someone to watch over you, someone I trust.”

Several seconds passed before she finally spoke. “Watch over me? You mean you—you hired someone to spy on me?”

“Nick, he works for me.”

“Nick? You own the company Nick worked for in California?”

“Yes.”

“You—you actually paid Nick to follow me?”

“Yes, but not when you were with Tom.”

“Tom—the champagne, that’s how you knew how we met. You checked on Tom. You knew what type of man Tom was before I did.”

“Yes,” he said quietly, “I knew. I knew he was a philanderer but not a physical threat. I never intended to interfere in your life, Jesse. I wanted you to make your own decisions, but I had to know you were safe.”

He knew what type of man Tom was, but didn’t intend to interfere in her life? She had to ask, “What if Tom and I had married?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I knew that would never happen. I knew you would never marry Tom.”

“You knew? How?”

“You were not meant for Tom. If he hadn’t broken off the engagement, you would have.” One hand came up to rub the back of his neck before saying, “Look, Jesse, I know how strange this sounds. I sound like a stalker, a lunatic, but I had to tell you. I’ll ask you to forgive me but I can’t say I’m sorry. Your safety was too important.”

Would he have let her marry Tom? Her need to know pushed her to ask, “What if Tom and I hadn’t broken up? What if we had married?”

“I knew that would never happen,” he said, impatient to change the subject.

“Please, Gabriel, just answer the question.”

The stretch of silence was followed by a soft groan and she knew he didn’t want to answer, but he would. He would tell the truth. “I knew a lot about Tom,” he said quietly. “I knew what he was thinking. He began to hate his own nature—torn between his desire for you and old habits. He tried to live in two worlds at

the same time, but eventually, he had no choice but to walk away. I didn't interfere, Jesse, but I would have. I would have influenced circumstances, used any means necessary to keep you from marrying Tom, or anyone else."

Influenced circumstances—any means necessary, what would Gabriel have done? If he had only known, one phone call would have brought her running home. Maybe she should have been angry, possibly shocked, but she wasn't. If any other man were telling her this, she would have been, but not Gabriel. She knew him. Sighing, she touched his arm. "You can't protect everyone, Gabriel."

"No, not everyone, Jesse, just you. I lost my parents in a car accident authorities called suspicious. I had to try and protect you." He leaned forward, seeming distracted by his own thoughts. His voice was quiet when he said, "When you were kidnapped, they sent a picture. I saw you, beaten and unconscious. You could never know what that did to me. I really thought I would lose my mind."

The pain in his voice was heartrending. "That's over with now, Gabriel, and I'm okay. We're together now." She moved to caress his back. "Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

"No, nothing else."

She shook her head slowly, thinking. "I'll just be honest, Gabriel. I'm shocked. I'm shocked that you actually had a man waste a year of his life as my private bodyguard. I can't begin to imagine how boring that job was."

Encouraged by her lighter tone, he turned to her. "Would it help to know that Nick jumped at the chance to live near the beach?"

She pushed his arm. "Gabriel, I can't believe you. You're ___"

"I know," he said, catching her hand. "I'm awful, but I'm

also desperate. Besides, Nick owed me more than a few favors. You wouldn't believe the trouble he caused me in high school." His smile faded as he continued to watch her face in the faint light. "Maybe I do owe Nick an apology, but right now, I'm asking for your forgiveness, Jesse. Could you ever forgive me?"

Sighing, she shook her head. "Don't you know how much I love you? Nothing could ever change that. Of course, I forgive you. I really can't imagine anything I wouldn't forgive you."

Curious, she watched as he moved to kneel in front of her before taking her hands. "No more secrets, Jesse. No more misunderstandings. Tomorrow isn't promised and I don't know how much time we have left, only God knows. But whether days or decades, I want to spend the rest of my life with you." She felt a ring slide onto her finger before he said, "Jesse, will you marry me?"

Was she dreaming? Would she wake up disappointed? She reached out to feel the roughness of his cheek. Could a dream be this real? Dream or not, her answer would be the same. "Yes, Gabriel, I will marry you."

Standing, he pulled her into his arms for a long kiss. "I have always loved you, Jesse." Smiling, he looked down at her to say, "I can still remember stepping between you and a pack of boys armed with salamanders. Even at the age of twelve, I knew I was more than a little smitten. I was secretly hoping valor in the face of danger would win fair lady's heart."

"I remember," she said. "The other boys picked on you for hanging around with a girl."

He laughed softly. "That never bothered me. I'm sure they're still not as smart, funny or pretty as you. When given the choice, I'll always keep company with you. I missed you, Jesse. I don't want to be apart any longer. Let's get married Sunday."

"But—can we? Don't we need a license?"

“Just say yes and I’ll take care of everything. I happen to know the County Clerk. We can get married after worship service.”

Her mind ran with the possibility. “Yes,” she said, nodding. “We’ll get married Sunday.”

He kissed her before asking, “Do you mind taking my name? I know some women prefer to keep their maiden name or hyphenate.”

“Oh, no,” she said quickly, “I don’t want to do that. I want to be Mrs. Jesse James.”

“Jesse James,” he said the name under his breath. “You’ll have an interesting name.”

“Well, since you shared your twelve-year-old crush secret, I’ll tell you that I used to daydream about becoming Mrs. Jesse James. Whole pages of my diaries are filled with the name, Jesse James. I really love that name.”

Hurrying through the kitchen door, Jesse almost collided with Emma. “Sorry, Emma,” she said before going to her grandmother. “Grammy, you’ll never guess,” she said, unable to control the excited giggle. Before her grandmother could say anything, Jesse blurted out, “Gabriel proposed and we’re getting married Sunday.”

Her grandmother’s hand came up to her heart. “This Sunday?”

“Yes, Grammy,” Jesse said, laughing at her grandmother’s expression.

“Plans, we need to make plans,” her grandmother said, taking Jesse by the hand to pull her toward the table.”

“Oh, no, Grammy, we won’t need a lot of plans. Just a small ceremony after worship service. Maybe invite a few friends, seven or eight at the most.”

Stopping in mid-stride, her grandmother turned to look at her as if she had sprouted a second head uttering an unknown language. “What? What’d you say?”

At her grandmother’s expression, Jesse started backpedaling, “Um, Amber—she won’t be able to make it on such short notice, but we should invite friends, yours and Gabriel’s. Anyone you’d like to invite is fine with me, Grammy. The more the merrier.”

Emma looked almost feverish with excitement as ideas swirled around the kitchen table. Her grandmother, writing almost as fast as she talked, stopped suddenly. Jesse watched her expression change before asking, “What is it, Grammy? What’s wrong?”

Her grandmother turned to her with solemn eyes. “Some might question marriage at such a time, Jesse.” Jesse stared in utter shock when her grandmother said, “What if it’s not God’s will for you to marry?”

Emma’s hand came up slowly to cover her open mouth during the silence. Several seconds passed before Jesse could speak. “Grammy, what are you saying?” When her grandmother didn’t answer, she said, “I know, Grammy—I know I don’t have a right to be this happy with all the sadness in the world, but God knows my heart and God knows how much I love Gabriel.” Willing herself not to cry, she said, “Still, I won’t marry Gabriel without God’s blessing.” She swallowed around the painful lump in her throat to ask, “What does God say, Grammy?”

Her grandmother closed her eyes before starting to nod slowly. “Glory to God on high,” she said before turning to Jesse. “God has searched your heart, Jesse. He knows you have a great love for Gabriel, but God is your first love. He ordained your union with Gabriel long ago and has brought you back together at this time for His purpose. Because of your willingness to sacrifice your heart’s desire in love and obedience, God reaffirms his sanction of your marriage and will surely strengthen and bless

you.”

Jesse felt like a deflating balloon as her forehead drifted to the table.

Her grandmother touched her shoulder. “Come with me, I have a dress to show you.”

Standing in front of the dressing mirror, Jesse ran a hand over the soft fabric of her grandmother’s wedding dress. The floor-length, off-the-shoulder gown was simple and yet flowing with intricate floral lace embroidery.

When her grandmother lifted the gown from the cedar chest, Jesse had been speechless.

Smiling, she lifted a hand to touch one of the delicate white flowers woven through loosely uplifted hair. Sonja had created the perfect hairstyle to complement the romantic style of the dress. She studied the face looking back at her in the mirror. For the first time in her life, she didn’t see all the flaws she normally would have. Her lips weren’t too big. Her hair wasn’t too drab. The woman staring back at her was beautiful.

Descending the stairs, Jesse smiled at the chattering group of women waiting at the bottom. Everyone stopped talking as she went to stand in front of her grandmother. “Lovely,” her grandmother said, taking her hands, “simply lovely. Jesse, I have lived many years and seen many brides, but I have never seen a woman more beautiful or radiant on her wedding day than you.”

“Thank you, Grammy,” Jesse said, giving her grandmother a hug before stepping back to fan her eyes. “Don’t make me cry, Grammy, I’m not sure how this makeup might react.”

Pulling up outside the worship center, Jesse stared at all the people gathered around the building. She cast a nervous look at her grandmother. “Why haven’t they gone inside?”

“There’s no room. The building is full, Jesse.”

She looked back out the window to ask, “Who are all these people?”

“They are our brothers and sisters, our friends. Gabriel is well known and respected in these parts and the people at the shelter love you both.”

Walking with her grandmother toward the side door of the worship center, Jesse could feel her nerves beginning to surface. In the foyer, Dr. Haynes smiled and held out an escorting arm. As the doors opened for their entrance, Jesse heard soft music and the rustling of people standing punctuated by soft gasps. Jesse's breath caught as she stepped through the opening doors into an enchanted fairyland. Candles bathed the room in a soft glow to accent countless flower arrangements. White bows at the end of each pew flowed out to the sides as if holding hands to welcome her. Her eyes traveled up the aisle sprinkled with rose petals before lifting to see Gabriel waiting for her, looking strikingly handsome in a dark suit.

She took her place at Gabriel’s side and they turned to face the Pastor who smiled at them before looking out across the room. “We are gathered here today to join this man and this woman in the bonds of holy matrimony, a union established by God. We thank God, our Lord, Jesus, for this joyous occasion, for the precious gift of love. Today, we celebrate the love between a man and woman, between Gabriel and Jesse.”

He looked from Jesse to Gabriel to say, “Marriage vows are written where they are kept alive, in the heart. Wedding vows are a reflection of our heart’s intent, sacred promises we make in front of God, family and friends. As you become one in the sight of God and man, what pledges do you make to this woman, Gabriel?”

As Gabriel turned to face Jesse, everyone knew they were about to hear from a man in love. His expression declared his

feelings as powerfully as any words ever could have. “Jesse, when I look at you, I’m reminded of the words of Solomon. You are my delight, my treasure of rare beauty.” He paused, watching her a few seconds before saying, “I will never be as eloquent as Solomon with words, but my love will be revealed through my actions every day. Our marital bond reflects my union with God and I pledge to be faithful and put no other person on Earth before you. I will love you, cherish and protect you until God authorizes the release of my last breath.”

Jesse didn’t hear the soft crying coming from the pews or see hands joining with gentle glances. Her focus was on the man standing in front of her, the man she was hopelessly in love with. Looking into his eyes, her response came easily. “Solomon was said to be magnificent, a man God blessed with great wisdom and riches, but even Solomon in his finest hour would pale in comparison to you in my eyes. I am blessed and privileged by God’s appointment to be your wife. Simply put, I love you completely, Gabriel James. I will honor and cherish you, put no person on Earth before you until God authorizes the release of my final breath.”

As husband and wife, Gabriel and Jesse walked down the aisle to step from the worship center. Jesse’s eyes widened in wonder as an incredible warmth swirled around her. She stood transfixed to gaze out at the most beautiful sight she had ever seen. Three overlapping rainbows of epic size and fantastic color filled the sky. “We are in the presence of God,” Gabriel said, dropping to his knees.

Without taking her eyes off the rainbows, Jesse lowered herself to her knees at Gabriel’s side. “Amazing,” she breathed.

Kneeling with the others, the Pastor cried out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord, God, the Almighty, the one who was, the one who is, and the one who is to come.”

Everyone seemed gripped in the same experience, staring out in wonder through air that sparkled with fine particles of gold

dust floating from the sky. When the rainbows evaporated a few moments later, Gabriel helped Jesse to her feet. She looked up at him to ask, “Do you think God did that for us?”

“I think God gives the very best wedding gifts,” he said.

People were still talking about the rainbows as everyone gathered at the upper pond to wish the newlyweds well. Jesse was surprised at all the arrangements as she looked around at the decorations, tables, chairs and a buffet station of food. Hearing their name, Gabriel and Jesse joined her grandmother at a table holding a spectacular three-tier wedding cake. Morning glories flowed from the center of the top tier to trail down little crystal staircases joining the layers. Like everything else, the cake was extraordinary.

At the first opportunity, Jesse pulled her grandmother aside. “Grammy, the decorations, the cake, everything is just beautiful. How did you do all this?”

Moving to Jesse’s side, her eyes traveled around the area, gesturing at the people around them. “Look, Jesse. See all these women? When you have this many women working together, anything is possible. Well, the men helped some, too,” she admitted with a chuckle.

The women were friendly and Jesse happily returned their hugs and thanked them for all their help and kind words. She eagerly accepted invitations to come to the shelter and promised to visit soon.

As Jesse was talking to a small group of people, she realized they assumed she was among those responsible for the shelter. She was about to deny credit when she felt Gabriel’s arm go around her waist before saying, “Give thanks to God. He provided the shelter just as He provides all things.”

Less than an hour later, Gabriel leaned in to ask, “Are you ready to go, Mrs. James?”

Noting the twinkle in his eyes at using her new name, she smiled. “I’ll just let Grammy know we’re leaving.”

Jesse hugged her grandmother. “Thank you so much, Grammy, for everything. This day couldn’t have been more perfect.”

Hearing the parting comment that she shouldn’t worry while they were away, Jesse paused to look back at her grandmother but she was already talking to someone else. Shrugging off the odd remark, she took Gabriel’s hand to stroll leisurely along the path leading home. She smiled to herself as she mentally rehearsed her new name and thought about what it would be like to wake up in Gabriel’s arms each morning.

Still daydreaming when they entered the backyard, Jesse didn’t notice Gabriel was leading them toward the shed until he freed her hand. She watched him disappear inside the building before hearing a four-wheeler start. What was he doing? Would he really take the four-wheeler out on their wedding day? When he got off the machine, she looked at him curiously.

“Trust me,” he said, holding out a hand to her. She looked down at the full skirt she had changed into earlier before looking back at him. “Trust me,” he said again.

She smiled and took his hand. “I do trust you.”

As they traveled into the woods, Jesse knew Gabriel had a destination in mind. They left the trail and were traveling deeper into the woods, further away from the house than she had ever been. She looked up through sun-speckled treetops before Gabriel patted her arm. Getting her attention, he pointed to a patch of broken terrain they were nearing. After crossing the dry creek bed, they climbed a gently sloping hill before the vehicle slowed and came to a stop.

Jesse relaxed her hold on Gabriel to look around. The small cabin with shuttered windows looked like it had been set down in the middle of the woods without disturbing its

surroundings. At the sound of moving water, she turned to see a gurgling creek nearby. Just beyond the creek, through hanging foliage, a hammock swayed in the light breeze between two trees. The quaint scene would have made the perfect postcard. Taking Gabriel's hand, she slid from the seat. "Grammy never mentioned a cabin. Is this yours?"

"No, Jesse," he said, leading her up a rocked walkway, "the cabin is ours."

"It's certainly out of the way. Why did you build it so far back in the woods?"

"After leaving college, I became consumed with finances, creating a strong financial base for myself and..."

"And Grammy," she said, turning to look up at him. "I know what you did for Grammy, and for me."

"She told you," he said, nodding. "Yes, it's true. I wanted to help Florence. She's always treated me like family, made me feel like I have a home. I do care about Florence, but it was more than that. I also wanted to feel connected to you."

She looked at him, puzzled. "Did you plan to stay here, away from everyone? I'm not sure I understand."

"No. I never planned to stay here, just visit. When I came home from college, I found myself becoming engrossed in work even though everything came easily and just seemed to fall into place. My success defied natural explanation, the kind of success that could only come from God. When I could have relaxed, I didn't. I became so focused on work that I began to neglect my relationship with God. One day the Lord spoke to my spirit. No man can serve two masters. I realized then that I had lost sight of my priorities, my sense of balance. I needed a quiet place without distractions, a place to think. When Florence heard I was looking at property to build a cabin, she suggested I build on her land."

"Good suggestion," Jesse said.

At the front door of the cabin, Gabriel smiled. “No cell phone signal, no television or computer. Other than a few builders, no one, not even Florence, has ever been here.”

Jesse started to move through the open door but before she could step inside, Gabriel lifted her in his arms. “Would you ignore the time honored tradition of allowing the groom to carry the bride over the threshold, Mrs. James?”

She smiled, arms going around his neck. “You’re such a romantic, Mr. James.”

“Yes,” he said, kissing her before setting her onto her feet. “You’ve found me out. I am an incurable romantic.”

“It’s charming,” she said, looking around the room with polished hardwood floors, a tan suede couch, matching chairs and rocker. The room was masculine, but at the same time, comfortable and inviting.

Two pictures on the mantel over a rock fireplace caught her attention. She crossed the room to examine a photo of Gabriel’s parents standing side-by-side, smiling for the camera. She had always thought Gabriel’s mother was beautiful with exotic almond eyes and high cheekbones. Gabriel resembled his mother but his personality had been more like his fathers, reflective and quiet. She moved to the next photo to see a picture of herself and Gabriel taken when they were teenagers. In the photo, Gabriel was watching her play with a puppy intent on licking her face.

His voice was soft against her ear. “Florence packed your things last night.” She could feel his warmth against her back as his arms encircled her waist. He looked at the photo over her shoulder. “Do you remember that day, Jesse?”

“Yes. The last summer I spent with Grammy. I didn’t know anyone took a picture.”

“That photograph is one of my most cherished

possessions,” he said, gently nipping her ear before his lips trailed down the side of her neck. “Perhaps, Mrs. James, you would be willing to spend a few days alone with your husband.”

Closing her eyes, she relaxed against him. Her body began to melt, turning to liquid with an exquisite longing for something just beyond her imagination. She turned to face him, the tension building in her body transferring to the gentle pressure in her fingers moving slowly up the front of his shirt. “Your wife is very willing, Mr. James,” she said softly, watching his eyes darken with passion. She lifted her face as his mouth lowered to hers in the prelude to the most erotic experience she would ever know.

[Chapter list](#) *or scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 10

Three days sped by too quickly. Jesse could not have imagined a more romantic setting to spend their honeymoon than the little cabin in the woods. She and Gabriel splashed under a waterfall, swam in a pristine rock basin pool and watched spectacular sunsets from a hammock. Gabriel was gentle and attentive and she would never forget the soft caresses, tender kisses and whispered endearments they shared. Sighing, she looked around the cabin. Maybe one day they would come back.

Moving forward on the seat of the ATV, she slipped her arms around Gabriel. His hand covered hers before looking back to ask, “Ready?”

“Yes,” she answered, resting her chin on his shoulder. “I’m ready.”

The Sun was setting when they pulled into the backyard. The four-wheeler stopped abruptly. “Stay here,” Gabriel said before racing across the lawn toward the door. He was up the steps and inside the house before she realized there were no lights on in the house. Swinging her leg across the seat, she started for the back porch before Gabriel met her at the door. “Everyone is okay. The electricity’s off,” he said.

Jesse crossed the kitchen to give her grandmother a hug. “It’s dark in here,” she said, looking across her grandmother’s shoulder to see the Pastor and Olivia coming through the door.

The Pastor clapped Gabriel on the shoulder. “Glad you made it back safe.”

“Thanks,” Gabriel said, looking around the dimly lit room. “What happened to the power?”

On his way to the kitchen table, the Pastor said, “Something’s wrong with the power lines. Electricians from the shelter are working on them now.” Joining the others at the table,

Jesse sat silently, wondering at the feeling of heaviness in the room. The lantern cast a reddish glow on lowered heads around the table. She looked at Gabriel, noting his tense expression. They both knew there was more behind the somber mood than a temporary loss of electricity. The stretching silence began to tell its own story before anyone spoke. Something terrible had happened.

Unwilling to wait any longer Gabriel said, “What’s wrong?”

The Pastor lifted his head with a sigh. “Before the power went off, there was a news report. David Patterson has been murdered.”

The stunned look was still on Gabriel's face when he rose from his chair to walk out of the room. Jesse looked around the table. “Who’s David Patterson?”

“The reporter who did the piece on the shelter. His body was found in an alley this morning,” the Pastor said.

Staring at the table, her grandmother shook her head. “David and Gabriel were close friends. He did the interview as a favor to Gabriel.”

Jesse went to the front porch where she knew Gabriel would be. He was leaning forward with his hands on the porch rail. By his side, she stared out at the thick darkness shrouding the moon and stars in its gloom. What could she possibly say to comfort him? As a counselor, she should have known what to say but her mind was blank. Then she remembered the simple words that had once told her someone cared when she had been heartbroken. She touched his arm. “I’m so sorry, Gabriel.”

Straightening, he pulled her close. He didn’t speak or make a sound but she could feel the grief that was almost physical. Silent tears slipped down her face. Nothing would bring his friend back. Not knowing what else to do, she held onto him, quietly sharing in his sadness.

The next morning Jesse woke up to an empty pillow at her side. She ran her hand lovingly over the imprint where Gabriel's head had lain. Had he slept at all? During the night, she had awakened to see him staring at the ceiling in the shadowy darkness.

Just inside the kitchen door, Jesse stopped. Gabriel and Matthew Sanders were standing over a map splayed out on the kitchen table. Dressed in camouflage, Matthew looked more intimidating than she remembered. With his finger still on the map, Matthew's dark eyes snapped up to see Jesse watching them.

"I'm—I'm sorry," she stammered, taking a step back.

Gabriel called to her before turning to Matthew to suggest they take a break. Watching Matthew roll up the map and tuck it under his arm, Jesse approached hesitantly. "Sorry, Matthew. I didn't mean to interrupt."

His serious expression softened into a smile. "No problem. We need a breather anyway," he said before excusing himself and leaving out the back door.

Gabriel offered her coffee before turning back to refill his own cup. "The power lines should be repaired today," he said. "We can't supply power to all areas of the house with generators but we have the important things covered. The coffee pot and Florence's television rank high on the list of priorities."

Leaning back against the counter, Jesse studied his face. "I thought I'd barged into the war room at the Pentagon," she said, hoping to lighten the mood. When he didn't respond, she asked, "What are you and Matthew meeting about?"

"We're looking over property lines—maybe add observations posts, tighten security," he said, avoiding eye contact.

She watched him over the rim of her cup as she sipped her coffee. He seemed edgy but she didn't know why. To keep the

conversation going, she asked the first question that popped into her head. “Do the men carry weapons?”

“A security team without weapons would be pretty useless.”

Noting the hint of sarcasm that slipped into his voice, she set her cup aside. “What is it, Gabriel? What’s wrong?”

“The power lines to the house were cut. The security team suggested surveillance posts, maybe reassess the way intruders are dealt with.

“Intruders,” she said, puzzled. “How are they dealt with now?”

“The men have orders not to discharge weapons unless fired upon.”

One shoulder lifted questioningly. “Why would you change that?”

“To use deadly force, if necessary. The enemy should not have the advantage of first strike.”

Her face went slack with surprise. “Innocent people could be killed, Gabriel.”

“Innocent people have already been killed, Jesse,” he said quietly, holding her gaze. “More may be killed if I don’t honor my responsibility to keep people under my protection safe.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Thou shalt not kill, Gabriel.”

“Thou shalt not kill speaks of murder done in anger with premeditation and malice,” he said.

Stunned by his response, she hesitated before moving to touch his arm. “Gabriel, I know you’re grieving David’s death but you’re a man of God, a man who does the will of God. Is what you’re doing God’s will?”

He held her gaze without answering before turning away to look out the window over the sink. The silence stretched out before his head tipped back with a sigh. “Those who draw the sword die by the sword. For it is written, vengeance is mine. I will repay, saith the Lord.” Turning, he said, “I’ll talk to Matthew.”

“I know you’ll do the right thing,” she said, stepping into his embrace. Feeling his body go rigid, she looked up to see him staring over her head with a look of alarm. “Gabriel, what is it?”

Before she could turn around, he was across the room steadying her grandmother who looked ready to fall to the floor. “Florence, are you okay?” Gabriel asked, helping her into a chair.

Seeing the pallor of her grandmother’s face, Jesse’s heart dropped. “Grammy,” she called, rushing across the room to kneel by her grandmother’s chair.

“Florence, are you ill?” Gabriel asked, taking her hand. She didn’t respond but continued to stare ahead with a dazed look. Gabriel took out his cell phone. “I’ll call for Dr. Haynes.”

“No,” her grandmother whispered, shaking her head. “No doctor.”

Jesse looked up to see Olivia walk into the room with a frozen expression. As if in a trance, she turned around and walked back out the door without saying a word. Rising fear could be heard in Jesse’s voice. “Gabriel, something’s wrong. Something’s happening.”

“The news,” her grandmother said, trying to get to her feet. Her face was beginning to regain some color when Gabriel helped her from the chair.

Stopping inside the living room door, Jesse’s eyes fixed on the television. The reporter stressed that what they were seeing is not a hoax. Amazed, speechless, Jesse stared at the large metallic disk filling the television screen.

The newscaster couldn't keep the tremor from his voice when he said, "The unidentified flying object was discovered hovering over Washington D.C. approximately twenty minutes ago. According to reports coming out of Washington, the UFO managed to enter the nation's airspace undetected, leaving top military experts baffled. The North American Aerospace Defense Command and top military strategists are investigating the arrival of the alien spacecraft as we speak."

The words stuck in Jesse's mind, alien spacecraft. Do they mean spacecraft from another planet, another world? Jesse looked around the crowded living room to see stunned expressions mirroring her own. The feel of Gabriel's arm around her waist barely registered. "It will be okay, Jesse," he said. "Come over here and sit down."

She looked at him, bewildered, as he led her to the sofa. "Did he say alien?"

Forty minutes later, the news station announced the President of the United States was preparing to address the nation. Within minutes, the President approached the podium at a brisk stride. He confirmed reports that an alien spacecraft had entered US airspace undetected. His natural poise served him well as he delivered news that undoubtedly sent shock waves around the world. "Minutes before the spacecraft appeared, NORAD received the message that visitors from another galaxy come in peace. In response to the communication, the nation's armed forces were directed to stand down while remaining on high alert."

Jesse stared at the President as he encouraged people to stay calm. Was he kidding? She imagined the whole world teetering on the brink of mass hysteria. Ending the press conference, the President suggested this might be an extraordinary opportunity for humanity to gain knowledge and a better understanding of our universe. Quickly thanking the press, the President turned to leave without giving reporters a chance to

ask questions.

The screen flashed back to a reporter with the airborne spacecraft visible in a small, inset frame in the upper right corner. Experts sitting around the table with the reporter quickly launched into speculation on everything from the nature of the arriving life forms to the spacecraft's capabilities.

"Interesting," the Pastor said, just loud enough to be heard. Jesse turned to look at him, waiting to hear what he would say. Given her own state of apprehension, she was surprised to see the Pastor looking calm and collected. He sat quietly, reflectively, a few moments before saying, "I think the President is right. We need to stay calm."

With her attention off the television, Jesse looked around at the people in the room. Earlier, she had been too stunned to notice they had visitors from the shelter. The news must have interrupted a meeting. When the group stood to leave, Janice, a woman Jesse had met at the cookout, said the electricity should be back on within the hour. "Thanks for letting us watch the news," she said before turning to Jesse to ask, "Are you and Olivia coming to visit soon?"

Not completely over her shock, Jesse stared at the woman blankly a few seconds. "Yes, we—we hope to. Gabriel and I just got back last night," she said, rising to follow Janice to the front porch.

The four men had already started down the drive toward the road when Janice picked up the utility belt from one of the rocking chairs. The belt secured around her waist with a snap before she looked back at Jesse to say, "I guess you're pretty shook up over the news."

"Yes," Jesse admitted. "I imagine everyone is."

"Yeah," Janice said, nodding, "I guess everyone is, but I'm not. You know, it's strange, but I don't feel anything anymore. I was in the city when things really started getting bad. After all

the things I've seen over the last year, I don't think anything could shock me. I'm just thankful that I was able to get Timmy to a safe place."

Watching Janice's face, Jesse wondered what had happened to the woman. What had she seen? She seemed detached, emotionless. Was she suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder? She was about to ask Janice if she wanted to talk when the Pastor stepped out the front door.

"Janice, if you will, let everyone know we'll be at the worship center tomorrow morning. I have a theory on the UFO I'd like to share," the Pastor said.

"Sure thing, Pastor," Janice said as she started down the steps.

Jesse thought about following but changed her mind. She would wait and talk to Janice in private at the shelter. "Bye, Janice," she called, watching the woman disappear down the drive.

In the kitchen, the Pastor opened his Bible before looking around the table at those silently waiting to hear his theory on the UFO. Jesse followed his gaze, studying the circle of faces. True to her nature, Olivia's face reflected her emotion. Her eyes flitted around the table nervously before going back to her husband. By her frown and distant stare, Jesse knew her grandmother was engrossed in her own thoughts while Emma fidgeted and shifted uneasily in her chair. Gabriel would appear calm to the casual observer but the flicking muscle in his jaw told Jesse he was tense.

Just as the Pastor leaned forward to speak, the back door swung open before Charles and Victoria Swinney burst into the room. Mr. Swinney's words began to tumble out before he came to a complete stop. "We—they," he sputtered, hands beginning to flail. "People are panicking. They think the aliens have come to

wage war against humans and destroy the planet.” By his expression, Jesse wondered if he wasn’t thinking the same thing.

Victoria’s bulging eyes fixed on the Pastor. “They said you know why they’ve come.”

Moving around the table, Gabriel pulled out a chair for Victoria. “We were just about to discuss the matter. Sit down and join us.”

Mr. Swinney swung around to face Gabriel. “Sit—sit down? You expect us to just sit here while—”

Mr. Swinney’s angry words cut off sharply when he saw the expression on Gabriel’s face. One eyebrow arched before Gabriel said quietly, slowly, “Sit down, Charles. This is no time to lose our heads.” Seeing Mr. Swinney’s startled look, Gabriel’s tone softened to say, “Let’s sit down and discuss this calmly.” Swallowing, Mr. Swinney visibly collected himself before taking a seat next to his wife.

The Pastor placed his hands on either side of the Bible to say, “I’m not as shocked by the UFO as some might be. Over the years, we’ve been conditioned to accept the possibility of extraterrestrial life through movies, documentaries and reports about alien encounters and unexplained UFO sightings. I believe Satan is behind all of this—a scheme to send fallen angels back to Earth disguised as aliens. The Bible talks about fallen angels and Nephilim living on the Earth in the days of Noah.”

Jesse stared at the Pastor before realizing her mouth had fallen open. Emma asked the question Jesse would have. “Nephilim? What in the world is a Nephilim?”

“Nephilim are giants recorded in Genesis,” the Pastor said, starting to leaf through his Bible. “That’s in chapter six, and I believe, verse four,” he said, looking at Olivia to see her nod.

“Yes, four,” Olivia said.

The Pastor smiled at his wife. “Olivia has been blessed with an excellent memory for scripture.” Marking his place with a forefinger, he looked around the table to say, “Scripture is straightforward in saying there were giants, Nephilim, in the land during the days of Noah. Many scholars believe the giants were the offspring of fallen angels and women.” Tilting his Bible, he began to read, “There were giants in the Earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.”

Sitting back in his chair, the Pastor reflected on the words he’d read before saying, “I think Scripture is clear in saying children were born to the sons of God and women. Although debated by some, I agree with the many good Bible scholars who say the sons of God referred to in Genesis are fallen angels.”

Jesse looked over to see her grandmother nodding. “I think so, too,” she said. “I’ve always thought the sons of God were fallen angels.”

“We’re not the only ones to think that, Florence,” the Pastor said. “Early Church fathers thought so, too. Many believed fallen angels, in league with Lucifer, intermingled with the daughters of men to produce demonic hybrid offspring called Nephilim.”

Jesse’s mind reeled with what she was hearing. Was the Pastor suggesting angels and women lived together and had giant babies? She looked over at Gabriel expecting to see shock, or at the very least, disbelief, but he didn’t even look surprised.

The Pastor’s head bent over the Bible as he talked. “The book of Genesis says Noah was perfect in his generation. Perfect? We know that no man, except Jesus, has ever been morally and spiritually perfect. Like all humans, Noah had his faults. The Bible tells of a time when he became drunk and his sons had to cover his nakedness. I think Noah was chosen to repopulate the Earth for two reasons. He walked with God and he and his family

were genetically pure. The flood was sent to wipe out an infected human race but because angels couldn't die, those that came to Earth were punished by being chained in darkness."

"The Bible does say Noah was perfect in his generation," Gabriel said.

"I think, genetically perfect," the Pastor said, starting to fan through pages of the Bible he held. "If you look further on, giants, or Nephilim, were on the scene again in Moses' time and inhabited the land of Canaan."

"Satan knew," Gabriel said. "He knew the promised seed of redemption would come through Abraham, through Israel. He also knew what territory God had promised to Israel. Satan had hundreds of years to plant his own kind in the land while Israel was in bondage."

"Right," the Pastor said, nodding his agreement. "Satan probably expected a race of giants to wipe out Israel. But even if that didn't happen, he hoped Israel would intermingle with the people and pollute the bloodline Jesus would come through."

"But he failed," Gabriel said. "Israel wasn't destroyed and the bloodline wasn't polluted."

Mr. Swinney's head began to move slowly from side to side. "No...no...no, I don't think so. There are a few problems with your theory, Pastor. Not all Bible scholars believe the sons of God were fallen angels. I happen to agree with those who say the sons of God were godly descendants of Seth who sinned by marrying the immoral descendents of Cain."

"Some scholars do hold that view, but I disagree," the Pastor said. "The book of Genesis tells us that all flesh had become corrupted. That wouldn't be true for Sethite men who hadn't married Cainite women. Surely, every godly Sethite man didn't marry a wicked woman. That doesn't make sense." Beginning to look mildly agitated, he said, "The author makes a clear distinction between the nonhuman sons of God and human

daughters of men. That's what it says and that's what I believe."

Olivia touched her husband's hand. "I think you're right, Jonas."

"Thank you, Olivia. I guess you would agree with me, then, in thinking if the passage meant Sethite men married Cainite women, God would have simply said so."

"Yes," Olivia said, lowering her eyes. "I think so."

Gabriel leaned forward to say, "One thing you didn't mention, Jonas, the law of procreation. The Bible says everything produces after its own kind. Human parents wouldn't produce monstrosities, giants with supernatural strength."

"Good point, Gabriel," the Pastor said, sitting up straighter before turning to Mr. Swinney. "Look, Charles, I know you share the opinion of some respected scholars, but it just doesn't make sense to me."

Mr. Swinney stared at the table before his head came up with a start. "Ah, but you forget, Pastor, Angels don't marry. Jesus said so."

"Yes," the Pastor said, "that is true. In the book of Matthew, Jesus does say angels are not given in marriage. But that doesn't mean fallen angels in rebellion against God would ask for permission. They wouldn't, and I don't think they did."

"Angels are always described in the Bible as male," Gabriel said. "Angels performed human functions, eating food, carrying swords. Angels led Lot's family from the city by the hand."

"That's right," the Pastor said, pulling the Bible closer to turn pages. "The story of Lot reminds me of something else. Ah, here it is. The book of Jude says angels left their own habitation to go after strange flesh and give themselves over to fornication. Jude says angels were like Sodom and Gomorrah, engaging in

sexual immorality and perversion.”

Jesse felt like a fifth grader in a graduate class. She had followed the conversation enough to know the Pastor seemed to be making a strong argument, but she wasn't sure. She looked from her grandmother to Gabriel. Apparently, they agreed with the Pastor. If angels came to Earth in the past, they could again, she reasoned. Maybe the Pastor was right. Maybe bad angels were coming back to Earth.

Emma pulled her hands down the sides of her face, looking confused. “If fallen angels are chained up, how are they floating around the capital right now?”

“I know it can be a little hard to follow, Emma,” the Pastor said, “but not all fallen angels came to Earth. According to the book of Hebrews, there are more angels than we could ever count and one third followed Lucifer.” Closing his Bible, he turned to Mr. Swinney. “You've made some good points, Charles. Anything else?”

Mr. Swinney shook his head. “No. You've given me some things to think about.”

The Pastor looked across the table. “Florence, what do you think?”

“I think Satan would trick the whole world, even God's chosen, if it were possible,” she said.

“We know that's true,” the Pastor said before turning to Gabriel. “Gabriel, what do you say?”

“I'd say you're right, Jonas. Increased interest in aliens and UFOs has certainly set the stage for what's happening now. According to the President, NORAD received a message saying visitors are coming from another galaxy. I don't believe that. I think these visitors come from a different dimension.”

The Pastor nodded. “I think you're right about that.” He

scanned faces around the table before asking, “Anyone else?”

“You know,” Jesse said, shifting uneasily in her chair, “I’m new to all of this. I just want to make sure I understand. It sounds like you’re saying Satan has spent thousands of years sabotaging God’s plans and now fallen angels, pretending to be aliens, are coming back to trick the world.” She looked at the Pastor. “Is that right?”

“Yes. That’s what I think is happening,” the Pastor said.

Jesse’s palms came up in question. “But, why?” By his expression, she knew the Pastor didn’t know what she was asking, so she said, “I don’t understand why Satan puts all this effort into scheming. Why does he hate God? Why does he hate humans?”

The Pastor rubbed his ear, thinking. “All we know about the relationship between God and Lucifer is what the Bible tells us. Lucifer was an anointed angel, beautiful and wise. The Bible says he became proud and wanted to be like God. When he rebelled, one third of the angels followed. That’s when Lucifer became known as Satan, the adversary.”

Jesse couldn’t imagine anyone thinking they could outsmart God. Amazed by the very idea, she shook her head. “An angel really thought he could overthrow God? Obviously, he wasn’t too smart. How could he possibly think that?”

Gabriel smiled. “You probably understand irrational thinking as well as anyone here, Jesse. We know pride played a part but maybe there were other things involved as well. Some traditions say Lucifer was outraged when God created man in His own image. As the story goes, Lucifer was furious when he found out angels would minister to humans, inferiors created after them.”

Jesse lowered her eyes. She knew first hand that jealousy could provoke anger, resentment and a whole host of other negative feelings. “I see,” she said, “Satan was jealous. That’s why he hates us.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Gabriel said. “The Bible says pride was behind Lucifer’s rebellion but the story of jealousy comes from folklore. We do know God created man in His own image. Man was given the Earth to subdue and dominion over every living thing. Some think Adam’s influence over the Earth was transferred to Satan when Adam disobeyed God. In the book of Revelation, John describes a scene where an angel asks, who is worthy to take the scroll. Jesus is the only human found worthy to take the scroll that some believe is the title deed to the Earth.”

The fall of humanity, Satan’s hatred—it all sounded so tragic. Sighing, Jesse said, “All of this started because of pride.”

Rising from the table, Gabriel said, “Yes. Sin came into the world through pride.” Rounding the table, he paused at Mr. Swinney’s chair. “Are you okay, Charles?”

Looking dejected, Mr. Swinney stared at the table. “I don’t know. I wonder if I don’t sometimes ignore the principle of simplicity and search for explanations more readily assimilated into a human worldview. My superior intellect may actually hinder my comprehension of God’s Word.” Looking around at Gabriel, he asked, “Does that make sense?”

Gabriel stared at Mr. Swinney and few seconds. No one but Jesse would have known he was amused when he said, “I guess you’re saying if God could be dissected and rationalized by the human mind, even those with a superior intellect like yourself, then He wouldn’t be God.”

Sighing, Mr. Swinney said, “Exactly.”

Pulling the filter basket from the coffeemaker, Gabriel looked over his shoulder to say, “I’ve decided that Scripture says what it means and means what it says in spite of my opinion on the matter.”

Following Gabriel to the sink, Jesse touched his arm. “I’ll do that,” she said, taking the carafe.

Everyone except the Pastor had left the room when Mr. Swinney approached Gabriel. Studying his fingertips, Mr. Swinney said, “I think any rational person might question the implausible.”

“Yes,” Gabriel said, suppressing a smile. “Any rational person would.” Noting Mr. Swinney’s forlorn face, he said, “I suppose we all question things we don’t understand, Charles. I think you must be like the noble Berean Jew. Remember what Paul said about the Bereans? He said they were more noble than the Thessalonians because they questioned what Paul said and studied to find out the truth. Searching for answers is a noble pursuit.”

Mr. Swinney grew a few inches as his shoulders drifted back. “I think you may be right about that. I’d say I’m very much like the Berean Jew.”

Amused by Mr. Swinney’s reaction, Jesse turned to hide a smile. Gabriel had known just what to say to lift the man’s spirits.

Only Gabriel and the Pastor were in the kitchen when the coffee finished brewing. Hearing Gabriel ask the Pastor how he had linked the spacecraft to fallen angels, Jesse stopped to listen.

“To be honest,” the Pastor said, “I hadn’t given the matter much thought until a few months ago. The debate over the identity of sons of God came up on a Christian program I was watching and for some reason, one verse stuck in my head. As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be in the days of the Son of man. That’s when I began to study fallen angels and their role on the Earth in the days of Noah.”

“When you saw the UFO, you knew,” Gabriel said.

“Yes,” the Pastor said. “I knew history was about to repeat itself. I believe fallen angels and Nephilim were responsible for much of the mythology, legends of half-gods and demigods that are still taught in schools today.”

“That never occurred to me,” Gabriel said.

Shaking his head sadly, the Pastor said, “It’s ironic if you think about it. Teaching biblical principles our nation was founded on is forbidden while the study of polytheism and mythology in the classroom is encouraged.”

Jesse set a cup of coffee in front of the Pastor and Gabriel before taking a seat. The Pastor smiled his thanks before looking back at Gabriel. “Satan has been incredibly devious and methodical in his work behind the scenes. If we step back to look at the whole picture, we can see world events coming together in fulfillment of prophecy just as scripture foretells.”

“Yes,” Gabriel said, “the end of the age is surely near. I can’t begin to imagine what people will be faced with during the tribulation. The Bible says men’s hearts will fail for fear as they look at things coming on the Earth.”

The Pastor’s eyes dimmed as if imagining the future before saying, “In the stillness of the night I can hear creation groaning with birth pains as the Earth prepares for delivery.” Rising, he picked up his cup to walk around the table. He paused behind Gabriel’s chair to say, “These things must come, Gabriel. But God will continue to protect your heart with His own hand.”

Jesse watched the Pastor leave the room before lowering her gaze. She didn’t want Gabriel to know she was frightened. His fingers moved under her chin to lift her face. “Don’t try to hide yourself from me, Jesse. It’s okay to be afraid.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I read that God does not give us a spirit of fear.”

“Fear is a human emotion we all feel at times. You heard Jonas, God will protect my heart with His own hand. You’re my heart, Jesse.” He watched her lowered face. “Your fear is not for yourself, but for others, for me.”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m afraid something will happen to the

people I love.”

His voice softened to say, “Worry doesn't add a single second to any life or keep us from our appointed death. God saved you and He has shielded me from every attack. Do you think God will abandon us now?”

“No,” she said quietly. “I guess I just need someone to keep reminding me.”

“Then I'll do that,” he said.

In the living room, Jesse took a seat on the sofa next to her grandmother. “Any change?”

Absently patting Jesse's knee, her grandmother shook her head. “No—oh, wait, there was one thing. The Reporter said the light around the spaceship changes about every thirty minutes.”

Settling in beside Jesse, Gabriel asked, “How so?”

Her grandmother's face was animated as she talked. “The light changes color, like it pulsates before getting brighter.” Jesse was so absorbed in the description she was hearing that she jumped at the loud knock on the front door.

Everyone turned as Nick walked into the room. With a trace of drama, he announced, “I've come to talk to the five.”

“The five?” Gabriel said.

Nick nodded. “That's what people are calling you all, the five.”

Gabriel looked back at Nick, searching for any indication that he was joking before asking what had brought him out. “Is something wrong at the shelter?”

Nick turned to the Pastor. “The electricians said the Pastor knows why the aliens have come. People are scared, Pastor. If you have anything to say that might calm them down, it might be a good idea to tell them soon.”

“Yes,” the Pastor said, nodding, “that might be best. I was hoping to wait until contact was made, but we don’t know when that might be. Maybe you’re right, Nick. If you will, let everyone know that we’ll be at the worship center this evening at five.”

“I’ll do that,” Nick said.

The Pastor’s expression turned thoughtful before saying, “I think the discussion we had earlier has helped me pull my thoughts together enough to present my theory.” His lips twitched with a smile he managed to control before saying, “Charles has helped to sharpen my talking points.”

Jesse had noticed Mr. Swinney and Victoria weren’t in the room when she entered earlier. She turned to her grandmother. “Did Mr. Swinney and Victoria go back to the shelter?”

“Yes, a little while ago,” her grandmother said.

“Too bad,” Gabriel said. “Charles could help you prepare your notes, Jonas.”

The Pastor held out a hand to Olivia. “Since Charles isn’t available, maybe Olivia will be kind enough to help.”

After the Pastor and Olivia left the room, Nick started for the door before Gabriel called his name. “Nick, if you have a few minutes, there’s coffee in the kitchen.” Getting up from the sofa, he said, “There’s also the matter of an overdue apology we need to discuss.”

Nick looked mildly surprised before asking, “Mine or yours?” [Chapter list](#) *or scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 11

The evening was clear and warm with a few wispy white clouds scattered overhead as they made their way along the path to the worship center. Walking between Gabriel and her grandmother, Jesse looked up the path to see the Pastor lean in and say something to Olivia. The glow on Olivia's face as she looked up at her husband reminded Jesse of how wrong her first impression of the couple had been. She realized now that her misgivings about two people marrying so young had been unfounded. Jonas and Olivia obviously enjoyed a mature love and strong marriage.

Absorbed in her own thoughts, Jesse almost bumped into Olivia when she stopped in front of her. Stepping to Olivia's side, Jesse stood staring. She couldn't tell how many people were packed in front of the worship center but it was more than she would have ever imagined. Feeling Gabriel's hand at her back, she moved forward through the opening mass as they made their way to front of the worship center where Dr. Haynes stood on the top step holding a microphone.

Jesse stood with the others to watch the Pastor go up the steps to accept the microphone. After leading them in a short prayer, he launched into the topic on everyone's mind. Tense faces began to relax when the Pastor said he did not believe the aliens had come to destroy the Earth. Within minutes, those same faces clouded with doubt when he shared his suspicion, fallen angels disguised as aliens returning to Earth to plot deception and usher in apostasy. While the Pastor pointed to Biblical evidence to support his reasoning, Jesse looked around to see dubious frowns disappear and heads beginning to nod.

The Pastor's voice carried across the crowd. "The Bible tells us before Jesus returns the world will be like it was in the days of Noah. In the days of Noah, people scoffed at God and humanity ignored the warnings of coming judgment. People were

wicked, self serving and violent while justifying their own spiritual and moral decay. In the days of Noah, fallen angels walked the Earth. Angels left their own realm to cohabit with women.” A hush fell as the Pastor’s words began to sink in. Jesse knew what they were wondering. Would fallen angels again live with women and have children?

No one moved as they waited for the Pastor to continue, to answer the question. He looked out with a sober expression before saying, “I do believe fallen angels will attempt to deceive the world. The lie will be so clever that even God’s elect will reel in astonishment. I don’t know the course or method they will use, but I do know there will be great apostasy. Many who say they are Christians will turn from the truth.”

Jesse heard her grandmother’s whispered words. “Lord, help us.”

The Pastor sighed and shook his head. “Believers will suffer trials here on Earth, but I don’t think we will enter the great tribulation.” Looking up, he lifted a hand to heaven to say, “We will be caught up in the twinkling of an eye to meet our Lord in the air. We don’t know the day or hour, but whether days or years, we should remain vigilant and focus on the Lord’s business. We are to support and love one another.”

Closing her eyes, Jesse imagined the sense of peace the Pastor described in resting his head on the comforting pillow of assured salvation each night. “One thing is certain,” the Pastor said, “every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. No Bible believing Christian can deny that fact.”

The emotion in the Pastor’s face was gripping as he waited, allowing the silence to grow before saying, “Like every human that has ever lived, I will face God one day. My knee will bow before the highest throne in the universe. Like you, I have been given a choice. Will I bow in freedom and worship or shackled in dread and fear? My choice is freedom, everlasting life. What is your choice?”

The weighty silence lasted several seconds before the Pastor spoke. “There is nothing, absolutely nothing, more important for us to do right now than take time to reflect on our relationship with our creator.” As the Pastor’s chin drifted to his chest, heads bowed throughout the assembly.

The Pastor looked out as if seeing the scene he described when he said, “Adam and Eve ate the fruit God warned would bring death. Death entered the world through disobedience to demand the lifeblood promised. God, in love and mercy, was born into His own creation as a man. The Creator of all things embodied Himself in flesh that was torn and pierced for us. He opened His arms on a wooden cross to create a doorway to the Father for us. I can hear the Lord say, come, I am humble and gentle at heart. Come, and find rest—accept the gift of life so that where I am, there, you may also be.”

Jesse felt Gabriel’s arm go around her as she slipped up a hand to wipe away tears. The Pastor’s style of description, the imagery, was moving. His portrayal of Jesus dying on the cross was a touching scene. Open crying could be heard as those accepting Jesus and rededicating their lives began to make their way forward. The Pastor moved down the steps to meet men and women, young and old, starting to crowd around the steps.

Sometime later, the Pastor climbed the steps to announce the need for planning before calling Gabriel. The warm smile Gabriel offered was mirrored back at him from the people he faced. He praised them for working together before listing their many accomplishments. As he talked about the need for further organization to keep the shelter running smoothly, Jesse sensed eagerness all around her. Her grandmother was right. Gabriel was loved and respected by these people.

When they were asked to sit down, Jesse lowered herself to the grass before looking back to see Gabriel sitting on the steps. His eyes met hers briefly before moving across the crowd as he spoke quietly into the microphone. “Over the years, I’ve

heard people talk about their reasons for serving God. Many say they serve God because they want to go to heaven and fear the alternative.” Several heads nodded before he said, “I’d say that’s a good reason.”

“Hmm,” Jesse murmured, finding the comment curious.

She turned her attention back to Gabriel to hear him say, “Others say they serve God because He is their protector, their provider. We do know that God is a very present help in our time of need.” Pausing, he looked out at faces watching him. “Two good reasons to serve God have been given, but there may be others. If you serve God for reasons other than or in addition to those given, would you please come forward?”

Jesse waited, wondering what other reasons there might be. She looked around, surprised to see people getting to their feet. As they made their way forward, Nick directed them around the side of the worship center. When everyone settled down, Gabriel dismissed the children and those already working in childcare. After that, he called those with skills and training in various fields. Healthcare, carpentry, different kinds of maintenance, gardening and food preparation were just a few of the groups called.

Jesse looked up to see the sun lowering in the sky before glancing around at the handful of people still sitting on the grass. “I guess I can tell you now,” Gabriel said, offering a conspiratorial smile. “We’ve saved the best for last.” After reading down the remaining list, he asked people to come forward when they heard a job they were interested in.

When only Jesse remained seated, Gabriel looked up from his clipboard with a look of surprise. “What? Not interested in any assignment? Someone hard to please, I suppose.”

Getting to her feet, she brushed off her slacks. “I have a special assignment in mind,” she said, moving toward the steps. “Is wife to Gabriel James on your list?”

“Hmm,” he said, studying the clipboard, “that would be a full time job. Let’s see... wife to Gabriel James. Ah, here it is. Wouldn’t you know—bottom of the list.”

Leaning close to his ear, she said, “Well, then, I guess you really did save the best for last.”

Jesse rushed to cover the plate of left over sandwiches and tidy the kitchen. Drying her hands as she went, she hurried toward the door before looking back to toss the towel onto the kitchen island. She jarred to a stop before Gabriel’s arms encircled her waist. “In a hurry, Mrs. James?”

“Yes, to watch the news. Have they made contact? Anything happen?”

“No, nothing yet,” he said, releasing a tired breath. “I thought we might relax on the porch for a while.”

Curious, her head tilted back to look up at him. “What if the spaceship lands?”

“Someone will tell us,” he said.

Noting the hue of fatigue around his eyes, she stepped back and took his hand. “You’re right,” she said, leading him out the door. “Someone will tell us.”

On the porch swing, she curled up against Gabriel's side. The evening was cooling off and she could hear leaves rustling in the distance as if anticipating rain. After sitting quietly for some time, Gabriel said, “You’re restless, worried about the spacecraft.”

She smiled, thinking he had stated the obvious. “I’d say the only people not worried are those learning to crawl and still fascinated by their own toes.”

“I guess you’re right, but let’s talk about something else.”

Searching his mind for any other topic, he said, “Things seem to be going well at the shelter.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “I think so. You know, I was really surprised at the number of people. I had no idea there were so many.” Patting his knee, she said, “I think you have quite a few admirers. People just naturally respond to you.” Remembering the question she had earlier, she said, “I was a little confused by the first group you called, reasons for serving God.”

“I knew you were curious,” he said. “There’s actually a logical explanation. The shelter is more than a safe place for people to stay. We want to share the gospel and mentor new converts. We need mature Christians to lead Bible study and encourage others.”

“Mature Christians? How would a person’s reasons for serving God tell you if they’re a mature Christian?”

“Because their answer describes their relationship with God. Some accept Christ out of fear while others turn to God out of need. Regardless of a person’s reason for entering into a relationship, as they come to know Jesus they fall in love.”

She moved back into the curve of his arm. “Kind of like human relationships, I guess.”

“Yes,” he said, “but unlike people, God is perfect. We can love people without falling in love, but anyone who really knows God falls in love. There may be many reasons, but mature Christians love God simply for who He is, the creator, the one who first loved us. I think that’s our purpose, to worship and fellowship with our creator. That’s when we’re at peace, when we fulfill our true purpose.”

She thought about how she had changed since accepting Christ. “You know, I was never at peace before. I felt restless, like something was missing but I didn’t know what.”

“I think a lot of people feel the same way you did. They

feel a void in their life. Some try everything, anything to fill the emptiness but nothing works. I think humans are hardwired to connect with God, formed with an empty space designed exclusively for God.”

During the silence that followed, she sensed his mood darkening. His voice was quiet, sad, when he said, “Every human is born under the shadow of death. Death, just one uncertain heartbeat away. I wonder how often life's preoccupations turn into a deathbed's regret.”

She suspected he was talking about his friend, David, but his words made her think of her father. Had her father regretted his life? Successful, respected by his peers, he seemed to have everything, and yet he rarely smiled, never laughed. One day, without warning he was gone. Headache—brain aneurysm—death, his life had been over that fast.

“Jonas and I plan to work on the new construction tomorrow,” Gabriel said, pulling her from the past.

She nodded, her thoughts turning to the Pastor. “The Pastor is remarkable for his age,” she said before correcting herself. “Actually, he’s remarkable for any age.” She wondered if the Pastor and Olivia were from the area. Was the Pastor an ordained minister? She moved to look up at Gabriel. “The Pastor is articulate, seems well educated and Olivia is certainly bright, but they’re only twenty.”

“You wonder how Jonas could be a preacher at such a young age,” he said.

“I guess I am a little curious,” she admitted.

“A little curious,” he said, smiling. “Well, my curious wife, Jonas and Olivia are from Virginia where Jonas’ father is the pastor of a church. Their parents worked with other church members to create a home school program.”

“Home school? You mean the Pastor and Olivia have

never been to public school?”

“Never,” he said. “They were both home schooled, taught the Bible from an early age. Jonas was seventeen when he came here to live with his great uncle, Pastor Taylor.”

“I remember him,” Jesse said. “He was the pastor when I was a girl. Did Pastor Taylor train Jonas?”

“Yes,” Gabriel said before chuckling softly. “I can still remember the day Pastor Taylor announced Jonas would be the junior pastor. I’m sure the church had never been that quiet.”

Imagining a room full of stunned faces, Jesse shook her head. “I bet everyone was surprised.”

“Surprised, more like shocked. To be fair, try to picture how Jonas might have looked a few years ago. Keep in mind that he’s matured and grown several inches since then.”

“Was he nervous when he started preaching?” Jesse asked.

“Nervous—yes, you could say that. He had good reason to be. I remember looking around the building the day Jonas was scheduled to preach for the first time. The air conditioning was out, the building was hot and people were cranky. There was no shortage of crossed arms or skepticism in the room. Not exactly a welcoming sight.”

Jesse shook her head. “Poor Pastor.”

“Yes, poor Pastor,” he said, smiling at the memory. “When Jonas stood up to preach, his face turned deathly white just before he introduced himself. I was on the front pew, close enough to see his hands trembling as he opened that tattered Bible he still uses.”

“That’s a lot of pressure for a seventeen-year-old,” Jesse said.”

“Yes,” Gabriel agreed. “I had to admire his courage. You should have seen him, wrestling a screeching microphone from its

stand. When he stepped around the podium, I really thought he might pass out.”

“Oh no,” she breathed.

“But, he didn’t. He stood there looking out across the congregation and his face began to change, to glow. The air came alive, vibrating with energy and we could feel the presence of God. Jonas preached with a power and authority that could have only come from God. No one questioned Pastor Taylor's decision after that.”

“The Pastor can certainly paint a stirring image,” she said before falling quiet as her mind drifted in a different direction. She wondered what happened to Pastor Taylor.

Sighing, Gabriel said, “I really missed Pastor Taylor after he died.”

She turned to him. “I’m sorry,” she said, hugging him. Even with all the heartbreak in his life, Gabriel quietly continued to face life’s battles. He was a complex man, a man she would always love.

Hearing the front door open, Jesse looked up to see Olivia lean out the door. “The spaceship landed,” she said quickly before going back into the house.

An undertone of nervous excitement could be heard in the reporter’s professionally controlled voice. “We have just received breaking news. Contact has been made with the alien spacecraft. NORAD received a message from inside the spaceship requesting a meeting with US officials. One life form with the appearance of a tall, human male exited the vessel before the craft lifted into the air and disappeared. Although unconfirmed, sources indicate the alien has been escorted under heavy security to an undisclosed location.”

Over the next few hours, there was no new information coming into the newsrooms. Time was filled with guesses and

theories in response to questions undoubtedly weighing on minds across the world. Why had the alien come to Earth? Was he somehow related to humans? Where had the spacecraft gone? The newsgroups' guesswork took them well into the early morning hours. Jesse looked around the living room at bewildered faces. She wondered what they were thinking. Were they like her, frightened and confused?

At 3:05 a.m., reports came in saying there was talk of a conference being scheduled with world leaders. The information sent the newsroom into a renewed frenzy as the list of questions grew rapidly. Jesse rubbed tired eyes before her head fell back against the sofa. "I'm tired, think I'll go to bed," she said to Gabriel.

Jesse lay awake in the bedroom staring into the darkness, exhausted, but unable to sleep. She looked at the clock display. The sun would be up soon. The sound of slow, rhythmic breathing next to her was comforting. Rolling onto her side, she reached over to place her fingers gently against Gabriel's chest, wanting to feel his heartbeat.

"You're worried," he said softly.

"Yes," she said. "Who knows what will happen. I just feel like time is running out."

"Come here," he said, pulling her close. "The enemy often attacks just before a new dawn, but we know Satan is a liar," he said against her ear.

"You're right," she said, sighing.

"Yes, I am," he said, his arms tightening gently around her. "God reveals the future in His Word and whosoever believes shall have everlasting life." His fingers moved over her ribcage before saying, "So, you may want to repent, young lady, because we know what the future holds and our time is eternal."

Pushing against him, she tried unsuccessfully to squirm

away from his tickling fingers. “You’re right, you’re right,” she gasped before he let her catch his hands. Facing each other in the lifting darkness, she touched his cheek. “I do repent. I know God is in control.” She moved close to brush his lips with her own. “You are wise, husband,” she whispered.

Later that morning Jesse walked with Gabriel through the woods on their way to the shelter. In the distance, she could see rows of tents of different shapes and sizes. She returned smiles and greetings of people sitting in small groups outside tents talking. Some were reading and studying while others moved about attending to different tasks. A woman passed carrying a blanket and Jesse hurried to lift the bottom edge brushing the ground. The woman smiled her thanks as Jesse straightened one end of the material over the clothesline.

Inside the shelter, older teenagers supervised children drawing and playing at tables while others sat in circles listening to Bible stories. Gabriel’s voice lowered as he leaned in to say, “Without television, video games and the Internet to occupy their time, teenagers are more willing to help with the younger children.”

Stepping inside the enormous kitchen, Jesse inhaled the delicious scent of baking bread. She looked around at the flurry of activity. Men and women moved around the area collecting and depositing items for those preparing food at different stations. Lines of copper colored utensils hung from hooks with a row of enormous pots simmering over blue flames. The wall of stainless steel appliances reminded Jesse of a kitchen in a hotel she had once visited.

Hearing her name, Jesse turned to see Emma bustling toward her with a wide smile. “Well, look who come to visit,” Emma called cheerfully.

Jesse stepped back from the hug to say, “So this is where

you've been hiding yourself.”

“This is it,” Emma said, looking around proudly. “I tell you, we stay busier than popcorn on a hot skillet.” Looking as if struck by a thought, she said, “I’m glad you’re here. There’s something I wanna show you.”

Gabriel and Jesse followed Emma to a storage room filled from floor to ceiling with rows of large metallic bins. Pulling the lid off one of the two bins sitting on the floor, Emma looked at them to ask, “What’s that look like to you?”

Leaning over to inspect the powdery white contents of the bin, Jesse’s hand came up distractedly to rub her ear before looking back at Emma without responding. The answer was so obvious that Jesse thought it must not be the correct answer at all. Gabriel sounded a bit uncertain when he said, “The label says flour and it does look like flour. I’m guessing that it’s flour, Emma.”

Emma’s eyes rounded in her flushed face before laughing gleefully. “That’s what it is all right. It’s a bin of flour,” she said, head bouncing up and down with an excited nod.

Without moving her head, Jesse’s eyes slid to the left to see Gabriel looking back at her with a worried expression reflecting her own. Moving around the bin to place a hand on Emma’s shoulder, Jesse asked gently, “Did the flour bin look like something else to you, Emma?”

Puzzled, Emma stared back blankly before starting to giggle. The giggles quickly turned into uncontrolled laughter before Emma pulled her apron up to wipe her eyes. “I’m not crazy,” she said before stopping to consider the comment. “Well at least I’m not imagining flour is turning into something else.” Her expression sobered as she looked from Jesse to Gabriel to say, “When we use up one of these bins, it’s tagged empty and moved to the end of the line.” She waited for them to nod their understanding. “Well, yesterday,” she said, pointing at the flour,

“this bin was empty. It was tagged empty and moved to the end of the line.”

Jesse nodded. “Okay.”

“Well, today,” Emma said, leaning forward slightly, “it’s full...and nobody filled it.” Jesse’s eyes widened as she watched Emma wave at bins around the room, saying, “It’s not just flour. It’s rice, beans, coffee, everything.”

“Everything,” Jesse repeated, shocked at what she was hearing.

“Everything,” Emma said, watching their faces. “When we move an empty bin to the end of the line it’s full the next day.”

“And—and nobody fills them,” Jesse stammered.

“That’s right,” Emma said, nodding before crossing her arms to look at them. “I bet you’re wondering if other people checked the bins. Other people besides me, I mean.” Before Jesse could say anything, Emma said, “Well, they sure did.” She shook her head, chuckling. “Bless her ever lovin’ heart, Jesse done thought I’ve gone off my rocker.”

Jesse turned to Gabriel. “Miracle?”

“Without a doubt,” he said, stepping around the container to place his hands on Emma’s shoulders. “Emma, we are truly blessed to have you oversee the kitchen and now God continues to bless us and your kitchen by replenishing supplies.”

Jesse was still smiling when she and Gabriel neared the construction site where the Pastor and Olivia stood talking to a small group. As they approached, the Pastor’s head tilted questioningly at their excited faces.

Before Gabriel could finish relaying Emma’s news, the Pastor was bouncing from foot to foot. The sight of the Pastor dancing and praising God drew more than a little attention, bringing several from the construction site to ask what was going

on. As news spread throughout the camp, spirits lifted and people began to celebrate.

Leaving the Pastor and Gabriel at the construction site, Olivia and Jesse went to visit with the women and children in the camp. Inside the shelter, their offer of help was quickly accepted and they soon found themselves surrounded by a group of energetic three and four year olds. Rarely around children, Jesse was a little nervous at first but as the children crowded forward to present their latest drawing and introduce their favorite toys, she soon relaxed.

While admiring a crayoned drawing of stick figures with blue hair, Jesse noticed a nearby toddler wobbling across the floor in her direction. She picked the child up. Before she could say hello, a tiny hand shot out to pinch her lips together. Amused by the tot's open curiosity, she caught his hand to blow playfully on the back of his fingers. She was rewarded with the sweetest sound she had ever heard, an outpouring of innocent giggles.

Much to the children's delight, Jesse and Olivia took turns reading Bible stories. One read while the other created sound effects. Jesse couldn't help but notice how happy Olivia looked as she played with children clamoring for her attention. Jesse smiled, imagining Olivia with a child of her own, a sweet dimple faced child with big brown eyes and red hair. The image faded along with her smile as she thought of the growing danger in the world. Would she or Olivia have children? What would the world be like for a child to grow up in?

Shaking the disturbing thought away, Jesse pulled her attention back to the children circling around Olivia as she prepared to lead them in the teapot song. When it was her turn to lead, Jesse suggested a favorite her grandmother had taught her, the itsy bitsy spider. The children were happily following along when little Timmy pointed behind her to cry, "Gabol!"

Turning to watch Timmy run from the circle, Jesse saw Gabriel pick the child up. "That's right, buddy, it's Gabriel," he

said with careful pronunciation of his name. “I came to find out what happened to the itsy bitsy spider.” Lowering Timmy to the floor, he said, “I heard I could find out here.”

The children squealed with delight. “I know, I know,” they exclaimed with enthusiasm.

Flashing a smile at Jesse, Gabriel looked back at the children to say, “Why don’t you all show me together?” Starting the sing-along over, Jesse watched Timmy inch from the circle to perform his own adorable version for Gabriel. When they finished, Gabriel applauded all the children before lifting a beaming Timmy. “You did a fine job, Timmy. You know all about that itsy bitsy spider,” he said to the grinning tyke. Jesse watched Timmy wrap his arms around Gabriel’s neck. *Yes, she thought, Gabriel would make a wonderful father.* [Chapter list](#) or *scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 12

Entering the living room, Jesse returned Gabriel's smile. On the sofa, he lifted an arm, waiting for her to fill the space. She relaxed back to stretch out tired legs. Her time at the shelter had been both tiring and refreshing, reminding her that events unfolding in the world affected everyone. She looked across the room at the Pastor and Olivia. The Pastor sat with his arms crossed, eyes glued to the television. What was the Pastor thinking? Was he thinking about fallen angels and their plot to trick the world? Jesse's mind began to wander as she considered his theory. Could there be other explanations for the alien's arrival? Could the Pastor be wrong? He was only human, after all. Maybe the alien wasn't evil at all and intended them no harm.

In such a vast universe, wasn't anything possible? Maybe there was life in other galaxies. Maybe there were scores of planets just like Earth. In astronomy class, Jesse had been amazed to find out there were more than 125 billion galaxies. The textbook picture of the galaxy humans live in was stunning. The Milky Way looked like glowing dust particles swept into a swirl with each particle of dust representing a star or planet. She had been awestruck by the enormity. She couldn't wrap her mind around the size of just one galaxy, much less a universe with 125 billion galaxies.

Considering the size of the universe, Jesse was left with some disturbing questions. Did God really care about every single person? Could one person, out of billions, living on one planet, out of billions, in one galaxy, out of billions, really matter to the creator of the whole universe? How could one person on the surface of one tiny dot out of trillions of dots believe God loves them? Her shoulders slumped forward with an extraordinary feeling of insignificance. In the big scheme of things, she was nothing more than an irrelevant atom living on a particle of dust.

Jesse had become so engrossed in her distractions that she

barely felt Gabriel's hand move beneath hers. His arm tightened around her shoulder as he leaned close to say, "Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father's will. Made in God's image, don't you think we are more valuable?"

She thought about the miracles and healings God had blessed them with. God had saved her life. How could she possibly doubt after all that God had done for them? People, governments, they all failed, but God never failed. God was their only hope. "Yes," she said, nodding. "We are more valuable."

Turning her attention to the television, Jesse heard the main newscaster say, "According to information coming out of Washington D.C., the alien who made contact calls himself Arakiel. The visitor claims to be a messenger from Uron, a planet in another galaxy. He claims Uronians are watchers who have monitored this planet throughout history. Uronians never intended to interfere in human affairs and only come to Earth now to offer assistance at a time when humans face unprecedented challenges."

Sitting back in his chair, the reporter looked slowly to colleagues on his left and then right. The silence was fleeting before the panel erupted. A middle-aged woman was almost sputtering when she said, "Rumors are flooding the Internet—talk of danger from an unknown galaxy." She shook her head in disbelief. "Another galaxy? A threat from outside our own solar system?"

"We can't rule out the possibility," a young man said. "Arakiel came from another galaxy, so there could be others. We don't know what's out there. The visitor's technology is obviously more advanced than our own. Their spacecraft didn't make a blip on our most sophisticated radar screens."

Correspondents were still buzzing about reports and rumors when a breaking news bulletin flashed across the screen. Gabriel read the caption. "The President of the United States is preparing to address the nation."

Thirty minutes later, the President walked across the platform wearing a stylish two-button dark navy colored blue suit. His lean face appeared more strained than usual as he stood proudly, stiffly, before the cameras to discuss the visitor and rumors of a threat to Earth. The President confirmed reports that the visitor says he comes from another galaxy. “Arakiel identifies himself as a representative of the planet, Uron, and has come to Earth with an offer of peace and assistance.”

The President’s face was a mask of calm as he addressed rumors swirling around the Internet. “I am aware of unconfirmed reports of danger to our planet currently circulating on the Internet. I would strongly caution the press and social media outlets against promoting and publicizing such rumors without proper verification. Our visitor has not communicated any specific threat, internally or externally, to our planet.”

“Specific threat,” Gabriel said. “Interesting that he would use that phrase.”

Hands moving to either side of the lectern, the President said, “Given Arakiel’s endorsement of peace, the United States welcomes our visitor with an offer of friendship. The United States is honored to be the first nation to welcome an intergalactic traveler to the planet.” Closing his notebook, he assured information would be relayed to the public as it became available.

As the President prepared to leave, members of the press took to their feet, shouting, “Mr. President!” The Press Secretary moved forward but the President signaled him back and kept his place by the podium. After scanning the audience, the President called for the first question.

A rotund man who looked to be in his early fifties took the offered microphone. “Mr. President, can you tell us more about the specific wording of Arakiel’s offer of assistance? What type of assistance might Uronians offer?”

The President’s answer was brief. “Arakiel suggested

humans are unaware of the mysteries of our universe. The type of assistance he referred to was not explicit. As we continue discussions and get to know our visitor better, we will learn more about the Uronian offer.”

An attractive woman with short raven hair was selected to present the next question. “Mr. President, is there any truth to reports that Arakiel has said Uronians would require access to parts of Israel as a condition for their offer of assistance?”

The President was nodding his understanding of the question before the reporter finished speaking. “The report is true. A region in Israel, the Golan Heights, has been named as being essential to Uronian travel. According to Arakiel, Uronians built a marker over 3,000 years ago in the region to designate a point of contact between his planet and ours.”

After announcing last question, the President looked out across the audience before calling on a middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair. The man glanced at his writing tablet before saying, “The Uronian request for access of an area essential for contact and travel would seem reasonable. If it is determined that we would benefit by establishing relations with the Uronians, how will the United States respond if Israel refuses the Uronian condition? What position will the United States take?”

Unlike previous questions, the President paused before answering. He spoke slowly, thoughtfully, to say, “The United States recognizes Israel as a sovereign nation, a nation with the right to make decisions in their own best interest. Turning over control of any territory and airspace within a nation certainly warrants careful review and consideration.”

The President thanked the press and left the room before the news flashed back to the half circle of reporters. In the living room, Jesse turned to hear the Pastor say, “The destiny of the World is closely tied to Israel and Jerusalem. Many believe our nation’s success has been closely tied to our relationship with Israel. God blesses those who bless Israel and curses those who

curse Israel.”

“Israel is the key,” her grandmother said.

“Yes,” the Pastor said, nodding, “Israel and Jerusalem are often called God’s timepiece. Many Christians saw the prophetic re-gathering of Israel and the miracle that happened in 1948 as a message to the world, a warning that the Day of the Lord is drawing near.”

Jesse turned to her grandmother to whisper, “What’s he talking about?”

“The prophecy that Israel would be born as a nation in one day,” she said.

The Pastor shook his head sadly before saying, “Sometimes, obvious warnings are ignored. I’m reminded of something a friend of mine pointed out a few years ago. He said in 1991 President Bush gave a speech at the Madrid Conference to pressure Israel to turn over land to the Palestinians. While the President was in Madrid giving his speech, a hurricane changed direction and traveled about one thousand miles out of its expected path to slam into one of the President’s homes in Maine. Some believe that was a direct warning. The hurricane was so unusual that it inspired a movie called *The Perfect Storm*.”

“That would have gotten my attention,” Gabriel said.

“Mine too,” the Pastor said, nodding. “My friend says the worst of times in the United States corresponds with our country’s misdealing with Israel. The United States has moved away from Israel. As a nation, our relationship with God and God’s people has turned lukewarm at best.”

Jesse thought about her own disinterest in national and political affairs. She could reason that one person couldn’t make a difference but she didn’t think that would excuse her in God’s eyes.

Breaking the silence in the room, Gabriel said, “I think we are all burdened by our country’s actions and maybe our own lack of engagement in political affairs. We should remember that God is merciful and faithful to forgive those who repent.”

Over the next week, the Secretary of State traveled with Arakiel as he toured the globe and met with top officials in several countries. Incredible crowds rallied to get a look at the alien being hailed as a celebrity and world hero.

Jesse watched the giant on camera as he smiled and waved to adoring crowds gathered in Spain. His age would be difficult to guess. He had a look of maturity but no sign of aging on his unblemished wheat colored complexion. His height was estimated to be nine feet and yet he appeared perfectly proportioned. Hair as white as snow grazed shoulders in an attractive and yet slightly messy, layered style. He was flawless, even beautiful. His stride was powerful and graceful at the same time and there was nothing awkward about him.

While the visitor continued to explore the planet, Jesse and Olivia spent their days at the shelter with the children while the Pastor and Gabriel worked at the construction site. With fewer arriving at the shelter, people began to settle into a comfortable routine. Most worked during the day but split into groups after the evening meal to pray and study the Bible. Everyone seemed eager to learn and those selected to lead Bible studies were said to be doing an excellent job.

Six days after Arakiel began his world tour, Jesse sat in the living room with her grandmother and Gabriel. She closed the book she was reading and covered a yawn. She was about to excuse herself for bed when a red flash from the television caught her attention. The words, breaking news alert, blazed in a red box across the bottom of the screen before clips of Arakiel waving to crowds appeared in a split screen view.

As her grandmother turned up the volume, Jesse heard the commentator say, “The Uronian representative is scheduled to meet with the United Nations’ Security Council within the week. Political and public pressure has played a major role in the Council’s vote to approve Arakiel’s petition to allow open press access. The visitor says the Uronian proposal affects every human and should be a matter of public record.”

The scene flashed to crowds lining city blocks hoping to get a glimpse of Arakiel’s motorcade. Watching the fanfare, Jesse said, “I’ve never seen anything like it. A tour of the world’s most famous people wouldn’t create such excitement.”

“We’ll soon hear what he has to say,” Gabriel said. His voice lowered to ask, “Are you worrying again, Jesse?”

“Maybe,” she said guiltily. “I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t help it.”

“I guess we all worry sometimes,” he said. “Even apostles who had Jesus physically with them in a boat were terrified in the middle of a raging storm.”

“Yes,” she said, “but if I remember correctly, Jesus questioned their lack of faith.”

He smiled. “Hmm...I believe you’re right.”

She pressed her elbow against his side. “You knew I would remember that. Think you’re clever, Mr. James?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do, Mrs. James. I’m clever enough to marry an incredibly charming woman. Have I told you how beautiful you are today?”

She cast a quick look across the room to see her grandmother still focused on the news before looking back at him. “You may have mentioned it this morning,” she said softly.

One eyebrow rose as he brought her hand to his lips. “I would very much like to continue this conversation upstairs, Mrs.

James. Are you ready to retire for the evening?"

Waiting for her cheeks to cool, Jesse looked across the room at her grandmother. "Grammy, Gabriel and I are going to bed—upstairs," she said quickly. "We might, um, read for a while."

Gabriel stood and held out a hand to Jesse. Turning to her grandmother, he said, "Jesse and I are retiring for the evening, Florence. Can we get you anything before we turn in?"

Her grandmother lifted the remote to turn the television off. "No, thank you. I'm about ready to turn in myself."

As they started up the stairs, Gabriel laughed softly. "I'm not sure you convinced Florence that you have reading on your mind."

She smiled and pushed his arm. "I said we might read for a while. Might, that means we may or may not."

Closing the door, Gabriel crossed the room to take her in his arms. After a long kiss, he smiled down at her. "Do you have reading on your mind, Jesse?"

Beyond any pretense at banter, she shook her head. "No, I don't."

In the kitchen the next morning, Jesse leaned her arms on the sink to stare out the window. Why did all of this have to be happening now? If only she could spend time with Gabriel and her grandmother without worrying. The world seemed stuck in a downward spiral—economic crisis, wars, natural disasters, violence and now an alien. No, not an alien, she reminded herself, Arakiel was a fallen angel. What would Arakiel say? Would he say God doesn't exist? Would he say Uronians created humans and transplanted them to Earth?

"It's about to start," Gabriel said, coming through the

kitchen door. As his arms came around her, she relaxed back against him to rest her forehead in the curve of his neck. “I love you, Gabriel. No matter what happens, I’m thankful for the time we’ve had together.”

“It’s okay to be frightened, Jesse,” he said softly.

“You’re not? Frightened, I mean. Aren’t you worried by any of this?”

“No, Jesse. I don’t fear the future. I’ve read the book and I know how it ends, who wins. I think this is a wonderful and exciting time to be alive.” He fell silent before saying, “I guess I do worry sometimes, about the people I love. I don’t like seeing them upset.”

She knew he was talking about her. Why couldn’t she be strong like him? Would she always be fainthearted, needing someone to protect and reassure her? She closed her eyes, searching for the answer within herself. Could she be strong? Yes. She could stand on God’s promises on her own. Turning, she met his gaze. “The enemy is clever but victory will go to the Lord.”

He watched her, his face lifting in a slow smile before offering an escorting arm. “The lioness awakes,” he said, leading her from the room.

In the living room, Jesse took a seat next to her grandmother to see Nick point at the television. “There he is,” Nick said.

Arakiel and the Secretary of State stepped from the black limousine to be met with a roar of applause. He took his time, acknowledging crowds across the street behind ropes. The white, Roman-style tunic Arakiel wore sparkled in the sunlight. Metallic threads woven through the fabric matched the wide gold band around his chest. Making his way to the building’s entrance, he continued to smile and wave as security cleared a path to the door.

With Arakiel inside the building, the news cut back to a

well-known journalist speaking from the desk he sat behind. “Just days ago the world was shaken as an unidentified flying object surpassed the world’s most sophisticated detection and defense system to enter airspace over the nation’s capital. That day changed our lives, forcing us to reexamine our beliefs and ideologies. Today, on the East Side of Manhattan, human history is again being made as members of the United Nations’ Security Council gather in the UN headquarters to hear the message brought from another galaxy. What will that message be? We will soon find out as we go live to the UN headquarters.”

Arakiel’s stride was confident as he walked to the opening of an enormous circular table where world leaders sat watching him. As the camera scanned the waiting circle, Jesse could see the President of the United States near the table’s opening where Arakiel stood. “I see the President is there,” she said.

Gabriel nodded without taking his eyes off the television. “Yes. I wasn’t surprised to hear he planned to attend.”

She cast a questioning glance at Gabriel. She didn't remember hearing that the President would attend on the news. She started to ask how he knew but seeing his concentration on the television, she filed the question away for later.

Watching Arakiel, Jesse again wondered at the strange markings embroidered along the borders of the ultra white tunic he wore. Was it a language? Did the markings mean anything? He seemed to radiate light as he stood before the room, the world, with an air of self-assurance that would elude the most confident of men.

Arakiel slowly scanned the room of faces before flashing a dazzling smile that compelled a response. “Greetings,” he said in a smooth, masculine voice. “My name is Arakiel, ambassador from Uron, a planet in the distant galaxy of Trionica. I am honored to be in your presence this day. Thank you for the privilege of addressing this planet’s leaders and all inhabitants of Earth. I assure you, the information I bring is vital and worthy of

such a hearing.”

Jesse looked around the living room to see eyes riveted on the television. She imagined the same look of fascination on every face watching around the globe. Looking back at the television, she watched Arakiel approach the US Secretary of State. “I should like to thank Madam Secretary of State for escorting me these last days,” he said, offering a smile that was almost tender. “She is truly a delight and has been more than kind.”

Turning back to address the room, Arakiel said, “If you please, I will speak the English language unless requested otherwise. At the end of my discourse, members may ask questions. When doing so, please, feel free to speak in your native language. I am more than proficient in all forms of human communication.”

Arakiel clasped his hands behind his back as he started around the inner circle to make eye contact with each representative and say, “Many here today have honored me with tours of their country and invited me into their homes. Traveling your remarkable planet has been a great pleasure. The splendor of your lands is only surpassed by the exceptionality and charm of your people.”

Appearing to consider the places he visited, he sighed with a look of contentment. “Your planet is truly extraordinary. Other than certain differences in size and atmospheric makeup, Earth is structured much like Uron, also a spectacular planet. On Uron, we, too, have beautiful, swelling rivers and small seas, but the surface of our planet is not covered with oceans.”

“Yes,” he said, moving within the circled area, “Uronians and Earth dwellers have much in common. Not only are our planets similar, but, as you can see, we also share a physical resemblance. While humans and Uronians have many similarities, we do have differences. Unlike humans, gender does not play a role in the Uronian identity. Although each Uronian is unique in

appearance, we would all appear male to you. Over six billion Uronians came into existence long ago with the same composition,” he said, gesturing down at his body with both hands, “the same form, that we enjoy today.” In response to questioning expressions, the edges of his mouth tipped upward slightly to say, “Uronians do not die.”

Some jaws went slack with surprise amid murmurings around the table but Arakiel seemed unaffected as he continued. “The integrity of the Uronian structure, our physical composition, does not change. On Uron, we do not struggle with limited natural resources, famine or disease. Uronians exist in unity. We do not know crime, murder or war. We do not experience entropy or decomposition.”

“His imaginary planet sounds like paradise,” Gabriel said.

Jesse nodded absently, preoccupied with her own thoughts. She had to admit, Arakiel’s presence was stunning, magnetic. His voice was deep, almost mesmerizing and his words flowed effortlessly as if he were telling the truth.

She watched Arakiel turn slowly as he spoke to the room. “As the Uronian ambassador, I have come to relay a message of goodwill and offer Uronian assistance to the inhabitants of Earth. The offer is not to be taken lightly as your response will ultimately determine this planet’s destiny.”

Walking slowly, as if taking a stroll to ponder an important matter, Arakiel said, “I fear the hearts and minds of many may struggle with the message I bring. Reality conflicts with many of your traditions, religions and diverse cultures. Nevertheless, my purpose for coming to Earth is to unveil the truth. Since the dawn of mankind, conflict over differing theories of knowledge, traditions and religions, along with a general affinity to reap without sufficiently sowing, to amass without adequately sharing, has led your planet to its current state of discomposure, to the very brink of destruction.”

A few council members shifted uneasily in their seats while others stared at Arakiel in stony silence. Arakiel's expression remained solemn as he stood rigidly facing his audience. "What I am about to tell you about your history, your conception as humans, may be difficult for some to accept. The truth contradicts a number of predominant theories spawned by human imagination in an attempt to explain the origin of the human race. While all life forms advance and adapt, the human race did not evolve into a life form." His chin rose slightly to say, "You are a created race."

Dumbfounded, Jesse's head tilted in confusion. "Why would he say that?" she asked before glancing at Gabriel. He had not heard her question.

Around the table in Manhattan, men and women stared at Arakiel in stunned silence. Seconds passed with no movement before a voice was heard shouting in the background. The shouted words were unintelligible to viewers watching television but a few council members pulled their eyes from Arakiel to look toward the distraction.

During the interruption, Arakiel stood silently with an impassive face until a council member bent toward his microphone to offer an apology and ask him to continue. Arakiel's head dipped in consent. "Your scientists theorize what Uronians learned long ago. We learned that all matter and energy that makes up the universe was contained at one point before time began. Your scientists call this point a singularity."

Touching Gabriel's arm, Jesse asked, "What's he talking about?"

"The point scientists say the universe expanded from," Gabriel said. "The point the big bang started from. They call it a singularity."

"Oh," she said, nodding.

Arakiel went on to educate the world with the certainty of

a teacher stating two plus two equals four. “Your scientist’s premise on the origins of the universe is both correct and incorrect. The theory that time and space had a beginning and that beginning corresponds to the origin of matter and energy is correct. The theory that the universe came from one unique source is also correct. The premise that the source cannot be known is incorrect.”

Surprised, Nick looked around the room. “It sounds like he’s going to say there’s a god.”

“Yes,” the Pastor said. “I’m sure he’ll soon tell us all about his god.”

Arakiel moved slowly around the circle, reminding Jesse of a lecturing professor deep in thought while speaking to his class. “As many in your world accept, the universe did come into existence in an instant. Creation came about with extraordinary precision and design by an all-powerful force, a force not limited by the space-time continuum. Before time and space, there was only the one, the supreme force. Over 13 billion years ago, a calculated, deliberate, accelerated expansion began with inconceivable energy that inflated and cooled to the size and temperature of our current universe.”

Gabriel shook his head. “Supreme force,” he muttered under his breath.

Arakiel paused to scan the circle of faces. “What many on your planet call God does exist. The human concept of God and the Uronian concept of the creative force are one and the same.”

As the camera moved in on Arakiel’s face, Jesse drifted forward to study his features. At first, his eyes appeared blue before turning slate gray. Shaking off the chill that ran up her arms, she heard Arakiel say, “The supreme force created the universe and all that is contained within the universe. He created the living and the nonliving, the animate and the inanimate.” His next words were spoken slowly, deliberately. “The creative force

is and can be whatever he chooses. He may manifest himself in any form, capable of entering his own creation.”

“Entering his own creation,” Gabriel repeated softly.

“What does that mean?” Jesse asked.

“I think he just laid the groundwork to introduce the antichrist. Jesus came to Earth as God incarnate, God in human form. The antichrist will be a man claiming to be god, claiming to be the Messiah. Arakiel just planted the idea that his god could come to Earth in human form.”

Hearing their conversation, the Pastor nodded. “Yes. I suspect Arakiel may be the forerunner of the man he will claim to be the Messiah.”

Jesse followed the Pastor’s gaze back to the television to hear Arakiel say, “Your age old question, are we alone in the universe has, of course, been answered by Uronian presence on this planet. Until now, I have declined to answer the predictable follow up question. You want to know if other intelligent life, besides humans and Uronians, exist in the universe.”

Everyone in the room with Arakiel went deathly still as they waited for him to answer the question posed. His voice was quiet, somber, when he said, “I will answer the question now. Yes. One other advanced life form does exist.” The long pause added to the sense of danger relayed in the softly spoken word when Arakiel said, “Hevelians.”

“Hevelians,” Jesse whispered the name, swallowing nervously.

Arakiel’s eyes hardened as he looked around the room to say, “Hevelians bear a resemblance to Uronians in the physical sense and yet we are very different. Dominus, the Hevelian leader, openly defies the true authority of the universe. He is arrogant, even insolent toward the supreme force. Not so long ago, Hevelians discovered new methods to search for life outside

their solar system. During the course of their exploration, they discovered planet Earth. Hevelians presently search for a viable pathway through space-time to your planet.”

“No,” Jesse breathed the word too softly to be heard. She knew Arakiel was lying but his grave expression and ominous tone brought her to the edge of her seat. Was he lying?

“Eventually,” Arakiel said in a lowering tone, “Hevelians will come. They will find an exploitable route to your planet. When they come, they will not offer peace or assistance as Uronians do. Dominus seeks to conquer, to be worshipped as god. He will accept nothing less. Without Uronian assistance, death will come to your planet—death of the human spirit through servitude or physical death.”

Seeing the stunned expressions of several council members, Arakiel’s expression softened and his tone turned almost soothing. “Uronians understand the human spirit, a spirit that would never allow the Earth-born knee to bend before a counterfeit god. When Dominus comes, the human spirit will rise up for battle. Uronians are prepared to unite with Earth, to stand at your side in the coming conflict. That is the Uronian offer, an offer you may accept or decline. Like you, Uronians celebrate freewill. We recognize humans as a self-governing race. Uronians will not come unless invited.”

“Do you think that’s true?” Jesse asked. “Do you think they won’t come unless invited?”

“True or not, they’ll be invited,” Gabriel, said. “Unless the truth comes out in some undeniable way, people will never believe Arakiel is a fallen angel sent to deceive the world.”

Gabriel's right, no one would believe it, Jesse thought. She turned back to the television to hear Arakiel say, “Uronian travel to Earth is no simple matter. Travel must be timed precisely through a wormhole linking our planets within fixed inter-galactic cycles. Your decision must be made before the new moon.”

The council members sat with dazed expressions. When Arakiel invited questions, no one in the room moved for several seconds. Finally, the Prime Minister of France bent toward his microphone. “Mr. Arakiel,” the Prime Minister began before Arakiel stopped him.

Lifting a hand, Arakiel said, “The name, Arakiel, is sufficient, if you please.”

The Prime Minister acknowledged the preference before beginning again. “Arakiel, you seem well informed on human affairs. How did you gain such knowledge?”

Arakiel moved to stand in front of the Prime Minister. “Uronians have long been interested in Earth. We have observed your planet for thousands of years and are well aware of your history.” His expression turned pensive before saying, “Humans are a fascinating race. Only Uronian reluctance to interfere with your planet’s natural development has kept us from making contact. Even now, Uronians are unwilling to make revelations that might impact humanity’s natural development.”

Arakiel’s eyes moved around the circle as he waited for the next question that came from the President of Russia. “By what means, what technologies have Uronians monitored our planet?”

A fleeting glint of amusement sparked in Arakiel’s eyes as he approached the Russian President. “Uronians have utilized probes and droids to monitor Earth’s development. For centuries, Uronian crafts have entered and exited your airspace, generally without detection. Regrettably, on rare occasion the Uronian vessel has fallen to the Earth’s surface.” Ignoring the low hum in the room, Arakiel said, “For some time, several decades, certain governments have known that life exists beyond your planet. For reasons of their own, these same governments have kept the evidence concealed. Many of your UFO sightings have been Uronian shuttles piloted by highly technical droids collecting data.”

Once the room fell silent, the President of the United States leaned forward. “You say Hevelians from another galaxy recently discovered Earth and are determined to find a way to our planet. How do you know this to be the case? Do you have any physical evidence?”

This time, Arakiel did not move to stand in front of the person he was addressing. From the center of his encircled arena, he held the President’s gaze. “Uronians do not have access to the Hevelian planet. Hevelian technology is highly advanced but does not exceed our own. Just as Hevelians could never enter Uron’s atmosphere without immediate detection, we cannot enter theirs. We know of the Hevelian objective through communication with the supreme force. The Uronian offer to assist Earth comes through divine decree.”

The President’s face registered surprise before he quickly collected himself to call out, “Arakiel, if you please. I do have one other question.”

Arakiel turned back to the President. My apology, Mr. President, please, do go on.”

The President held his tie as he leaned forward to speak into the microphone. “The Uronian condition for Israel to relinquish control of a region does raise some concern. Can you tell us more about how the region might be used, for how long and why Israeli presence would be prohibited? Perhaps an alternate site might be located to better meet Uronian needs.”

Arakiel walked forward to stand in front of the President. “Your concern is well noted, Mr. President. Human conflict surrounding the land called Israel is unfortunate but unrelated to Uronian terms. Long ago, Uronians conducted a meticulous assessment of the Earth’s surface in search of areas allowing optimum communication and transmission between our planets. Only one such area was discovered. Well over 3,000 years ago, Uronians left a marker that humans have since named Gilgal Refaim. The monument marks the area that serves as a beacon for

this planet that is instrumental to Uronian travel and operations. Should the Uronian offer be accepted, we will require full access and unrestricted control of the area.”

The President sat back in his chair with a troubled expression as Arakiel turned to accept the next question. The President from India was the first woman to speak. Her English was slightly stilted when she said, “The world is undoubtedly astounded by what we hear. On Earth, we have many cultures, many religions. Do you have proof of the god you declare?”

Arakiel’s voice was almost gentle when he responded. Jesse wondered if the change in his demeanor was owed to the nature of the question or the fact that he was addressing a female. “Madam President, proof of a creative force sits in front of me. As evidence of god’s existence, I would simply point to you, Madam President, an exquisite and complicated life form residing in a marvelously ordered universe with the intelligence and insight to contemplate such matters. Proving god’s existence is a foreign concept to Uronians. Uronians are connected to god in such a way that our very nature reflects god’s nature. To be one with god is to become an expression of god.”

Sighing, Arakiel’s said, “The distress plaguing your race has led many to seek god through the energy of mental focus, what you might call prayer, like no other time in your planet’s history. Your people call upon the supreme force in the name of Allah, Krishna, Jehovah, Yahweh and Jah, just to name a few. A name does not connect humans to the supreme force. The connection is made through mental processes and meditating upon a personal awareness of god.”

Looking around the circle, Arakiel smiled. “Humans have such unrealized potential. A small number of men and women have reached the transcendental state of enlightenment, a separation of body and self, unfettered by experience and human senses. A few exceptional men and women have connected with god on a level rarely achieved by humans. These extraordinary

people are often called prophets and awakened teachers. Perhaps, one day more humans will choose to know god.”

The German Minister of Defense looked mildly agitated. “Since god is troubled over the state of human affairs, perchance he will intervene personally on our behalf.”

Arakiel moved to stand in front of the German Minister. His face was a mask void of emotion when he said, “Please understand that I have not been sent to satisfy humanity’s insatiable curiosity or solve mysteries eluding this planet’s greatest minds. Although a source of frustration for many, there is much humans aspire to know that must remain concealed until the proper time.”

Moving around the circle, Arakiel made eye contact with each council member as he talked. “The message I bring is distressing, and yet, forewarning and knowledge are necessary for planning a defense. Uronians are confident that your people will rise to the challenge. You are a proud race, known to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds in times of great adversity. Uronians do not underestimate the human will. The human race has the capacity to move beyond differences and unite.” Pausing, he looked directly at the President of the United States to say, “You must come together for your own survival.”

At the table’s opening, Arakiel turned to face the circle of representatives. “My deepest gratitude for your time,” he said, inclining his head in a slow nod before walking from the room.

Jesse looked over to see her grandmother lift the remote. Everyone sat staring at the blank television screen in silence until her grandmother said, “We need to pray and seek God’s guidance.”

The Pastor nodded solemnly. “We will ask people at the shelter to join us in prayer.” Turning to Nick, he said, “I would like to speak at the shelter within the hour if arrangements can be made.” [Chapter list](#) or scroll down for next chapter.

Chapter 13

Humbling herself before the Lord, Jesse became acutely aware of her position as a sinner approaching the perfect creator of the universe. Her study of God's characteristics and names had given her a renewed sense of reverence for the God she was desperate to reach. She whispered the name that came to mind, "El-Elyon, Lord Most High."

When the Pastor and Olivia joined them in prayer a few hours later, Jesse didn't look up. A sense of urgency kept them on their knees throughout the night and it was early morning before the Pastor rose to his feet to say, "We are to tell the world that Satan is deceiving the nations. God's saints are confused and lifting up frantic prayers, asking for answers and direction."

Jesse's eyes fixed on the sofa across the room. She couldn't remember ever feeling more tired than she was right then. On the sofa, she blinked, trying to focus blurry eyes on the Pastor who was walking the floor mumbling.

The Pastor stopped and shook his head with a sigh. "Many have compromised God's word."

Sitting down next to Jesse, Gabriel leaned in to ask, "Jesse, are you okay?"

"Yes," she answered, trying to focus on the Pastor as he began to pace again.

The Pastor picked up the Bible to flip through pages. "Daniel," he said, running his finger down a page.

"Maybe we should get some rest, Jonas," Gabriel suggested.

The Pastor didn't respond but kept reading before he looked up with widening eyes. "When Daniel interprets King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he says different sections of the statue represent different kingdoms and eras. I should have seen this

before. The feet of clay mixed with iron represent the last age, this age.

Lines around her grandmother's eyes were more pronounced than usual. She sounded tired when she said, "Different people interpret those verses differently."

The Pastor sat down across the room with the Bible resting on his lap. He lifted his hand when he found the passage in the book of Daniel he wanted to read. "And whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men."

"They," Gabriel said. "Do you think they could be fallen angels posing as aliens?"

The Pastor nodded. "Yes. Clay represents man but we're not told who or what they are. Those passages have always been interpreted a different way, but I think the iron that mixes with clay speaks of fallen angels. They, fallen angels, will somehow try to mingle with the seed of humans again. I don't know if they will try to live with women, use cloning or some other type of genetic engineering."

"You may be right, Jonas, but we already know the aliens are fallen angels," Gabriel said.

"Yes, we do," the Pastor said, "but we must present the case to the world. The evidence must come from God's Word." Sighing, he looked across the room with weary eyes. "Passages I thought I understood are taking on new meaning. The Lord said we are to take the message to the world but the means was not given."

Sitting back, Gabriel rubbed his chin, thinking. "The Bible says Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light so I'm not surprised that Arakiel seems charming and self-assured. He has certainly captivated the world. I have to wonder how many people will believe our message. Still, the truth must be broadcast for those who might listen. Broadcast..." he repeated the word,

thinking, before saying, “television would reach the most people.”

The Pastor shook his head. “No. Television would be too expensive.”

“I know a man,” Gabriel said, not responding to the Pastor’s comment, “a media buyer with experience in direct marketing. He can give us information on production companies.” Getting to his feet, he held out a hand to Jesse. “We can discuss this later, Jonas,” he said, helping Jesse to her feet.

In their bedroom, Jesse curled into the window seat. The sound of running water in the next room grew distant as she lifted a finger to the windowpane. The sun blazed in the morning sky but the scene outside seemed dull, remote. She felt drained, as if she had been unplugged.

Gabriel helped her from the seat. “A warm bath and then to bed with you, Mrs. James.” She was too exhausted to protest being treated like a child.

Tucking her in bed, Gabriel kissed her forehead. “I’m going to talk to Jonas.”

“Okay,” she sighed sleepily before her eyes drifted closed.

Jesse opened her eyes to look at the clock’s display before sitting up with a start. “Gabriel, it’s late,” she said, turning to the empty pillow at her side. Dressing quickly, she pulled her hair into a ponytail as she hurried downstairs. Her grandmother looked up when Jesse entered the living room. “Grammy, have you seen Gabriel?”

She muted the news. “Gabriel and Jonas left hours ago to meet a man in Lincoln County.”

“Lincoln County,” she repeated, staring at her grandmother. “That’s hours away. Did Gabriel say why he left without waking me?”

“He said you were exhausted and he’d call later.”

Jesse was dialing Gabriel’s number before her grandmother finished the sentence. His answering service activated on the first ring. “He must be out of range,” she said, replacing the receiver.

At her grandmother’s comment, “We sometimes waste time worrying about things we can’t control,” Jesse bit her lip to keep from replying rashly.

“I know you’re right, Grammy. It’s just unusual, that’s all.” *Highly unusual*, she thought, forcing herself to sit down instead continuing to pace the floor. She couldn’t imagine why Gabriel would leave without waking her. What could he have possibly been thinking?

Later that evening, Jesse set a glass of tea on the kitchen table in front of Olivia. “Did you know Jonas and Gabriel were leaving?”

Olivia shook her head. “No,” she said gloomily. “I was asleep. Jonas left a note on the nightstand.”

“Don’t you think it strange, Olivia, that we were both asleep when they left without telling us?”

She shrugged without looking up. “If we had been awake, we would have insisted on going.”

“Yes, we would have,” Jesse, agreed. “We should have gone with them.”

“No,” Olivia said, shaking her head. “We weren’t supposed to go. We would have been in the way.”

Jesse started to argue but stopped and sank into a chair. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. Maybe we weren’t supposed to go.”

Later that night, the ringing telephone brought Jesse and

Olivia to their feet at the same time. Jesse pulled the handset from its base. "Hello," she said quickly before releasing a slow breath. "It's Gabriel," she mouthed the words to her grandmother and Olivia before walking into the kitchen.

Gabriel started to explain why he had left without waking her but she interrupted to say, "I understand, Gabriel. You don't have to explain. Olivia has convinced me that we weren't supposed to go."

She could hear the relief in his voice when he said, "I thought you might be upset."

"I guess you don't always know what I'm thinking," she said, smiling at the laughter she heard on the other end.

After talking to Gabriel a few minutes, Jesse took the telephone into the living room and handed the handset to Olivia. "Jonas wants to talk to you."

While Gabriel and the Pastor were away, Nick divided his days between the shelter and the house, spending nights in Gabriel's old room. Jesse suspected Gabriel had asked him to keep a close watch on the house. With Nick around so often, Jesse paid little attention when his truck pulled into the drive. Sweeping leaves over the edge of the porch, she called hello as Nick came up the steps.

"I just need to grab my work boots," he said, crossing the porch and going into the house.

Picking up the welcome mat, Jesse stopped at the edge of the porch. Rachel was in the passenger side of Nick's truck. Rachel didn't look her way and Jesse fought the impulse to go into the house before she did. Deciding she couldn't be rude, Jesse dropped the mat and started down the steps toward the truck. She forced a smile and concentrated on sounding cheerful. "Hi, Rachel. Would you like to come in and have some tea?"

Turning her head slowly, Rachel looked back at Jesse as if she had been invited to drink poison. “Are you for real? Seriously, are you for real?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Jesse said.

Rachel stared at her a few seconds before her face began to relax. “You are for real,” she said, starting to laugh. “I thought you had won the game but I don’t think you were even playing.”

“The game? I don’t understand,” Jesse said, looking as baffled as she felt.

“Of course you don’t,” Rachel said, still laughing softly. Her face lit up before asking, “Did you think I was in love with Gabriel?” Seeing Jesse’s surprised look, she said, “You did. Silly girl. Chess players don’t fall in love with the pawns, Jesse. They’re in love with the game.”

“So, you were never in love with Gabriel?” Jesse asked.

Rachel shook her head as if disappointed by Jesse’s stupidity. “You really don’t get it, do you? Gabriel is just a side game I amuse myself with when I’m in town. Here’s a news flash for you, Jesse. There’s no shortage of men in the world. I know plenty of men who are just as rich and handsome as Gabriel. Men who wouldn’t bore a woman to death.”

The question fell out of Jesse’s mouth. “Why were you so angry then?”

Rachel rolled her eyes with a sigh before answering, “No cat will give up their mouse without a fight. I thought you were a scheming—” She stopped, catching herself. “Well, let’s just say I thought you were trying to steal my toy.” Her face tightened at the memory before saying, “I was furious when Gabriel took me out for the talk.” Her voice deepened to mock Gabriel when she said, “I’m in love with her. Be nice to her. Yeah, I was angry. I played the helpless card and thought you had trumped with innocent.” She smiled before saying, “Innocent had been played from my

hand years ago.”

Without thinking, Jesse said, “I’ve always loved him.”

Rachel’s head fell back with a throaty laugh. “That’s just what he said about you.” She crossed her arms in the truck window and watched Jesse a few seconds before saying, “Look, Jesse. Gabriel flipped out when you went missing and ordered me to the shelter. I was really ticked at first, but I’m not the type of girl to hold a grudge.” One shoulder lifted in a flippant shrug to say, “I’ll let bygones be bygones and we can call a truce. When things get back to normal, I’ll be more than happy to go back out to my playground, but right now this is the safest place.” Her eyes moved past Jesse and her voice lowered to say, “Gabriel did me a favor, really.”

Looking over her shoulder, Jesse saw Nick coming down the steps. She looked back at Rachel to say, “You and Nick?”

“Why not? That man loves to play games.” Her voice rose to make sure Nick overheard her next comment. “Maybe some other time, Jesse,” she said before flashing an alluring smile at Nick as he approached. “Jesse asked me in for tea, but I told her I don’t want to hold you up, Nicky. I told her we might come to supper sometime.”

Rounding the truck, Nick dropped his boots into the back. “Supper sounds good. Just let us know when.” As the truck started, Rachel turned to Jesse with an impish smile before scooting across the seat next to Nick.

“We’ll take you up on that offer soon,” Nick called before backing out of the drive.

Jesse walked into the living room to stare at her grandmother. “Did you know Rachel and Nick are dating?”

“No,” she answered, not looking surprised, “but I figured they’d get around to it eventually. Don’t you think they make a good couple?”

“It’s not that, Grammy. It’s just that Nick is Gabriel’s friend. I’m sure Gabriel wouldn’t want to see him get hurt.”

“Oh, I doubt that’ll happen,” her grandmother said, chuckling. “I wouldn’t worry about Nick if I were you. Rachel will have her hands full with that man.” Patting the cushion next to her, she said, “The Pope is about to speak. Sit down and watch.”

Pushing Rachel and Nick from her mind, Jesse accepted her grandmother’s offer. The news had exploded with debate and open argument over statements made by Arakiel. Worldwide, people were eager to voice their opinion but no prominent political or religious figure had stepped forward to make an official statement.

The camera panned the waiting mass before moving to the Pope who was prepared to speak. Blue eyes looked out across the sea of people before he thanked them for their warm greeting and offered a hand in friendship to each one. The Pope had a lot to say. He talked about the Christian message being an integral part of many cultures. He talked about truth, justice, mercy, charity and characteristics shared by all humanity.”

Jesse’s eyes were beginning to glaze over when the Pope finally said something that caught her attention. “The time has come for monotheistic religions across the world to focus on commonalities rather than differences.” Jesse’s eyes shifted to the right to see her grandmother’s lips tighten as the Pope went on to credit differences in many religions to nothing more than linguistics and tradition. When the Pope encouraged the world to come together in response to God’s revelations through Arakiel, her grandmother lifted the remote. Jesse thought she was going to adjust the volume but instead the Pope’s face disappeared from the screen.

Turning to her grandmother, Jesse asked, “Aren’t you going to watch the rest of the Pope’s speech?”

Her grandmother didn't answer right away, when she did, her voice was tightly controlled. "I think I heard enough to know the Pope's opinion on the matter, but if you want to watch I'll turn it back on."

Jesse had to admit, her grandmother was practicing the advice she had often given about not speaking when angry. Without a doubt, her grandmother was angry. "No, Grammy," she said, getting up from the sofa. "I believe I heard enough myself."

Later that evening, Jesse started up the stairs when she heard her grandmother calling to her from the living room. "Did you want something, Grammy?" Jesse asked from the doorway.

"Anthony Evans is going to talk about the Pope's comments," she said, crossing her arms with a nod as if waiting on her favorite sports team to take on a top rival. "I thought you might want to watch. This should be interesting."

Sitting down next to her grandmother, Jesse studied the two men in dark suits facing each other in upholstered armchairs. Her grandmother thought she knew who Anthony Evans was, but she didn't, so she asked, "Who is Anthony Evans?"

"He's a well known Evangelical leader. The older man with the blue tie."

After introducing the Evangelical, the young host asked Mr. Evans if he agrees with the Pope's assertion that Muslims and Christians are more alike than different.

Mr. Evans couldn't hide his disdain when he said, "Absolutely not. Christians and Muslims agree on one thing, that God exists. That's where the similarity ends," he said, starting to list fundamental differences between the two religions. "Muslims deny the very foundation of Christian theology by rejecting the truth that Jesus came to Earth as God in self-revelation. Christians believe that Jesus came to Earth to bridge the divide created by sin separating humanity from God," he explained in a self-assured tone.

Relaxing back, the host crossed one leg over the other. “What do you say to Arakiel’s claim that Jesus was a human who performed miracles by unleashing mental processes?”

Mr. Evans forced a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Arakiel’s claim contradicts the Bible that I and millions of other Christians adhere to as the inspired Word of God.”

The host looked innocently puzzled. “Don’t most religions have their own Bible?” He picked up a piece of paper from a nearby table to read down the list. “Christians have the Bible, Muslims the Quran, Jews the Torah, Hindus the Rig, Buddhists the Dhammapada—”

Mr. Evans’ eyes widened. “Yes, yes, but—”

He didn’t finish the sentence before the younger man interrupted. “Followers of every faith believe their religion is the one true religion. Every religion has its own version of truth and some type of scripture, all written by men. Why should the world think Christianity is better than Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, or any other religion for that matter?”

“Because Christianity is the true religion,” Mr. Evans answered gruffly. “Jesus said He is the way, the truth and the life.”

The host waved his hand dismissively. “Jesus says, Buddha says, Muhammad says. Every religion has some major figure. Tell me, Mr. Evans. If Arakiel is not what and who he says he is, then who is he? And if he is who and what he says he is, shouldn’t we believe what he says?”

Mr. Evan’s eyes flashed angrily in his scarlet face. “I don’t know what or who Arakiel is, but Christians will not believe his lies.”

The reporter’s expression was clearly mocking when he said, “That sounds rather dogmatic, Mr. Evans. We have no reason to doubt Arakiel’s claims. He came to Earth peacefully to

make an offer of assistance we are free to accept or decline.”

As the interview progressed, the host nettled the older man and succeeded in painting him as angry and intolerant. Jesse patted her grandmother’s arm. “The world seems eager to believe Arakiel.”

Sighing, her grandmother’s shoulders slumped forward. Jesse sighed as well. She wondered if the interview was a preview of the world’s response to the Pastor’s message.

Jesse turned in early that night. Hugging Gabriel’s pillow, she breathed deeply to inhale his scent. Her mind floated dreamily along before her eyes jerked open. Racing down the hall to the Glory room, she fell to her knees in front of the cross as images of Gabriel fighting to maintain control of the Jeep filled her mind. Her heart pounded in her chest. She could see and hear everything as if she were there—a narrow road, tires screeching over pavement, the sound of crunching metal.

Two vehicles raced down a winding mountain road. The black SUV rammed the back of Gabriel’s Jeep causing it to skid to the edge of the pavement before swerving away from the vertical drop. “Oh, God, please, help them,” Jesse begged. She covered her face as the scenario continued to play out. As the terrain flattened, the Jeep began to pull away from the SUV on the straightening road. At an intersection, Gabriel turned quickly to the right but the SUV stopped completely before turning left.

Holding onto the banister, Jesse made it downstairs on quivering legs. Gabriel had to come home. He would come home if her grandmother told him to. On her way to her grandmother’s room, she stopped. She stared at the telephone before pulling the handset from its base to punch in numbers with shaking fingers. She needed to hear Gabriel’s voice, to know he was all right. He would listen to her. He had to. On the third attempt at dialing the number, his phone was ringing. His answering service picked up

on the first ring. “He’s out of range,” she said, latching on to the explanation she wanted to believe.

Sitting on the sofa, Jesse’s dropped her face into her hands, trying to make sense of what she’d seen. She didn’t know if she had experienced a waking nightmare or some kind of vision, but the images had been real. At the sound of footsteps, she looked up to see her grandmother.

She sat down next to Jesse to ask, “What’s wrong, Jesse?”

“Gabriel and Jonas are in danger, Grammy.”

“Yes, they are,” she said, sighing. “Satan is trying to stop them. Fierce battles are being fought in the physical and spiritual realm, but Gabriel and Jonas walk under the ordered protection of angels.”

Jesse’s eyes begged her grandmother to understand. “I saw something—someone trying to push them off the road over the side of a mountain. I know they’re not safe, Grammy. They could be killed. Call Gabriel and tell them to come home.”

“No, Jesse. I can’t do that. They must finish what they set out to do.”

Jesse’s voice was strained with emotion. “I’ll ask Gabriel to come home. He’ll listen to me. You have to understand, Grammy. If something happened to him, it would kill me.”

Her grandmother stared ahead and seconds slipped by before she spoke. “There’s no doubt that Gabriel loves you, Jesse, but he also loves God. Will you ask him to choose?”

“No, Grammy. I would never ask that. I just need him to...” Her voice trailed off as she realized what she was saying. Everything she said had been about her and what she wants, what she needs. Her concern for Gabriel was real but at the core of the matter was something else, selfishness. She hadn’t thought about what God wants or what Gabriel wants. She was only thinking of

herself. Would she only put God first when it was easy?

Sighing, her grandmother said, “I know what it’s like to love a man that much, Jesse. It’s a wonderful blessing, but it can also be an awful curse.”

“Yes, Grammy, it can be,” Jesse said, turning to wipe tears away and pick up the handset. She pressed redial before hanging up the phone. “He’s still out of range.”

Thirty minutes later, Jesse answered the telephone on the first ring. Before she could speak, Gabriel asked, “Is everyone okay?”

Jesse's accurate description of the car chase down the winding mountain road forced Gabriel, although reluctantly, to admit they were having problems. He seemed unwilling to offer details and Jesse fought the desire to ask questions. Covering the mouthpiece, she took a steadying breath. “You and Jonas will find a way to finish the project,” she said, trying to sound optimistic.

“Jesse, I know what you want to say. Thank you, for not putting me in that position,” Gabriel said.

Her hand tightened on the handset. “Please, just be careful, Gabriel. I love you.”

Jesse absently drummed her fingers on the coffee table before stopping to look at her watch. Releasing a long breath, she looked over to see Olivia staring at the front window, oblivious to the open Bible on her lap. “They should be home soon,” Jesse said, getting up to look out the window. Pacing the floor, she checked her watch again. Only fifteen minutes had passed since the last time she checked. How could time move so slowly? She felt like they were stuck in a time warp or suspended animation.

Hearing her name, Jesse turned. “I’m sorry, Grammy. Did you say something?”

“I asked if Gabriel said he and Jonas are pleased with the final results.”

Glad to have something to occupy her mind, Jesse thought back to phone calls with Gabriel over the last few days. “He said once production got underway everything went well. The production managers edited very little.” Her eyes lifted, thinking, trying to remember what else he’d said. “Oh, he also said a media buyer is getting clearance to air the program nationally.”

Her grandmother shook her head. “Well, no wonder it took so long. That all sounds complicated.”

The flash of headlights through the front window caught Jesse’s attention. “They’re home,” she said, hurrying to the front door.

As Gabriel stepped onto the porch, Jesse fell into his open arm. “I didn’t know it was possible to miss someone so much,” he said. Setting her back onto her feet, he bent close to her ear to say, “I think Jonas missed Olivia, too.”

Jesse turned to see the Pastor and Olivia sharing an ardent kiss. Her fingertips came up to press against a smile. “I think you’re right.”

Although making the comment to Jesse, Gabriel’s voice was loud enough for the Pastor to hear when he said, “I guess we should go in and talk to Florence.”

The Pastor stepped back with a sheepish grin to take Olivia’s hand to lead her inside.

“Thank God you made it back safe,” her grandmother, said, giving Gabriel and then the Pastor a hug. “I heard you two had some problems while you were away.”

A veiled look passed between Gabriel and the Pastor. “Nothing we didn’t survive,” Gabriel said before changing the subject to say the Pastor had received a revelation while they

were away.

Gathering around the kitchen table, everyone but Jesse focused on the Pastor. Resting her chin on her hand, she gazed contentedly at Gabriel's face, noting the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. He looked back at her before his eyes darted to the side, signaling her to look down the table. When she did, heat filled her cheeks. Three amused faces were watching her. Gabriel reached out to cover her hand before turning to the Pastor. "Tell them about the revelation, Jonas," he said, squeezing Jesse's hand.

Leaning forward with his elbows on the table, the Pastor looked around at expectant faces before saying, "We know Arakiel claims the Golan Heights is very important to the Uronian mission. While we were away, I did some research on the marker called Gilgal Refaim that Arakiel claims Uronians built. In ancient days, the monument was probably used for tribal gatherings and pagan worship of idols and maybe even fallen angels. It's interesting that the same root of the word Refaim is the word used in the Hebrew Bible referring to Nephilim."

Jesse turned to Gabriel. "I never heard of Gilgal Refaim before it was mentioned by Arakiel. Had you heard of it before?"

"No," he said. "I don't think many people in the West had. Gilgal Refaim is located about ten miles east of the Sea of Galilee. From the air, it looks like a huge bull's-eye, circles within circles. It looks like a combination of a crop circle and Stonehenge. The construction is dated around 3000 BC—some say as early as 5000 BC. Just one stone can weigh as much as twenty tons and the total structure is estimated to weigh over 37,000 tons."

Shaking her head, Jesse said, "Wow. Thirty seven thousand tons. How could humans possibly move rocks that big without machines?"

"Humans couldn't," Gabriel said, "but giants with

superhuman strength and fallen angels might. According to legend, Refaim was a race of giants who lived in the area back then. Jonas and I talked about reasons the structure might have been built and why Arakiel may be saying it's so important now."

"That's right," the Pastor said. "Arakiel may be saying Uronians built the circle thousands of years ago to give credibility to the story that Uronians are Earth's watchers. It also implies Uronians have a right to the area. Then there's location—the structure is situated in the Golan Heights, an area that has been used for artillery attacks against Israel in the past. The region could be used to give Israel's enemy a strategic advantage."

"Yes," Gabriel said, "and if Israel refuses to cooperate and give up the area, the world may use that as an excuse to turn on the nation more than they already have."

The room fell silent before Olivia touched her husband's hand. "Jonas, you said the Lord revealed something to you."

"Yes, that's right," he said, nodding. "He did, and I'll never forget it. Late one night, I was praying in my room when I heard a voice like a rushing winds call my name. I don't know how I got to my feet but suddenly I was standing before a brilliant light. The light was so bright that it should have blinded me, but it didn't. It was—beautiful, soothing. The voice said I was to tell the people that truth will be tried through much opposition in these coming days. A strong delusion will fill the Earth and many will heed seducing spirits and the doctrine of devils to bring about great apostasy. My watchmen are to warn those who will listen."

When the Pastor fell silent, Olivia touched his hand. "What else, Jonas?"

"God will destroy the Circle of the Refaim in seven days," he said.

Amazed, Jesse stared at the Pastor. "You—you mean the big rocks that weigh thousands of tons? Did you say that on the video?"

“Yes, I did,” the Pastor, said, nodding. “This will be the last warning to those who will listen.”

Jesse’s face lit up. “People will know the truth then. When people hear the Pastor accurately forecast God’s destruction of the monument, they’ll believe.”

“No, Jesse,” Gabriel said. “Many won’t believe. If fulfilled prophecy were enough to convince people, the Bible would be enough. The Bible records all kinds of prophecies made hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years before being fulfilled down to the letter. Just think about the prophecies made about Jesus. The odds of any man fulfilling just eight prophecies made about Jesus are one in 100 trillion. Fulfilling forty-eight of the prophecies made would be the same odds of randomly picking one particular electron from the entire mass of our universe. And yet Jesus fulfilled over 300 prophecies.”

“I’m afraid Gabriel’s right,” the Pastor said. “Destruction of the monument will be a sign to those who will accept the truth. It may plant seeds of doubt about Arakiel’s real identity in others, but most people will believe any excuse given. People believe what they choose to believe. The truth has to be told, but the telecast may not have the results we hope for.”

“Some people will be angry when they see the telecast,” Gabriel said.

Jesse stared at him. “Angry? Why?”

“Because Satan’s followers want to keep the truth hidden,” he said.

“Yes,” the Pastor said, nodding. “They tried to keep us from making the telecast. I could feel demonic forces all around us while we were away.” Looking to Olivia, he said, “I was thankful that you and Jesse stayed home. Satan sent high ranking authorities to stop us.”

Jesse leaned forward to ask, “How did you know they

were high ranking authorities?”

The Pastor hesitated, looking uncertain. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell this, but then again, maybe I should. I guess we should try to understand the enemy’s capabilities. Paul warns us not to be ignorant of Satan’s devices.”

Hearing a soft sigh, Jesse looked over to see Gabriel shaking his head. Wanting the Pastor to continue, she said, “You’re right, Pastor. I think we should know.”

“I agree,” the Pastor said. “That’s why I’ll tell you that strange things happened while we were away. We faced some dangerous situations.” Gabriel exhaled audibly and Jesse turned to see his look of disapproval aimed at the Pastor. When he realized she was watching him, he lowered his eyes. She looked back to the Pastor, glad he had missed Gabriel’s unspoken message.

The Pastor stared at the table, recalling the evening he was about to describe before saying; “One night as we left the studio, I felt uneasy. The closer we got to the hotel, the more uncomfortable I became. I’m sure Gabriel thought I was out of my mind when I insisted we go to a different hotel for the night. The next morning we returned to our rooms to find they had been ransacked.”

Jesse’s hand lifted to her throat. “Gabriel,” she whispered, horrified by the thought, “you could have been kidnapped.” His lips tightened before shooting the Pastor a look.

Seeming oblivious to Gabriel’s disapproval, the Pastor continued. “I believe those sent to stop us were high ranking authorities because of the level of magic or sorcery used. Around noon one day, Gabriel and I left the studio for lunch. As we neared the Jeep parked just outside the building, Gabriel turned off the alarm. Just as I reached for the door handle, Gabriel called for me to stop.”

When the Pastor went silent, Olivia leaned forward to ask,

“What was it, Jonas?”

“Snakes,” the Pastor said. “Deadly snakes, the kind that can kill an adult man in less than ten minutes.”

Jesse sat frozen in her chair until a shudder ran up her spine. She turned to Gabriel to ask, “How did they get in the Jeep?”

“I don’t know,” he said, rubbing a hand across his forehead. “The security system is state of the art, guaranteed to defeat the latest code grabbing equipment. I’ve given it a lot of thought and there are only two possibilities. Either the code to the security system was intercepted, which I seriously doubt, or...”

“Or the snakes were transported with demonic help,” the Pastor said.

Shocked at the very idea, Jesse said, “What? No—that’s not possible.”

“According to the Bible, it may well be possible,” the Pastor, said. “The book of Exodus talks about secret arts the Egyptians used. When Pharaoh demanded Moses and Aaron show a miracle, Aaron threw down his staff and it became a serpent. Then we read that Pharaoh called for the Egyptian magicians who did the same thing through secret arts. I don’t think Satan can create a living snake, but transporting somehow, maybe.”

“Secret arts,” her grandmother said almost to herself. “I wonder what that means? Was it magic, witchcraft or some kind of illusion?”

Jesse’s eyes widened before turning to Gabriel. “The kidnapers. Remember—I told you what they said about watching us.”

“I know,” he said. “I also thought about the bird that followed you. To be quite honest, I’m not sure what Satan is capable of. There are some events recorded in the Bible that

suggest he may be able to perform some paranormal feats. When trying to tempt Jesus, Satan showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. How? I also think about the storm Jesus rebuked that terrified experienced seamen and the winds that killed Job’s children.”

The Pastor sat back, considering Gabriel’s comments before saying, “The book of Matthew says false Christs will rise up and show great signs and wonders that would even deceive the elect if it were possible. Signs and wonders may increase on both sides during these last days.”

Rising, Gabriel said, “I don’t know what part Satan played in those events or what happened while we were away. I don’t know how the snakes got into the vehicle. I don’t know many things, but one thing I do know. Satan will never be as powerful as God.”

“Amen,” the Pastor said. “We can all sleep good tonight knowing Christians have authority over all powers of the enemy through Jesus.” Standing, he held out a hand to Olivia. “Speaking of sleep, it’s getting late.”

Jesse thought about the telecast and how people might react to the Pastor’s prediction. Surely, people would believe. She touched Gabriel’s arm to ask, “When will the telecast be aired?”

“In three days,” he answered.

She counted off the days. “That’s three days before the circle is destroyed and seven days before an answer has to be given to Arakiel. I can’t help but think people will be convinced by the Pastor’s prediction.”

Smiling, Gabriel put an arm around Jesse’s shoulder as they left the room. He shook his head, chuckling. “What a pair we make—the incurable romantic and the eternal optimist.”

[Chapter list](#) *or scroll down for next chapter.*

Chapter 14

During the night, a high-pitched beeping noise crept into Jesse's consciousness before she heard Gabriel say, "Hello—Phillip." She sat up in bed to see the bedroom door close before realizing Gabriel had received a call in the middle of the night.

Pulling on her robe, she hurried quietly downstairs. She stopped to listen before hearing Gabriel's voice coming from the kitchen. He sat at the table with his head cradled in his hand listening to his cell phone. "Is everyone okay," he asked, sliding agitated fingers across his forehead.

Jesse slipped into a chair at the table to watch Gabriel's face. She knew without being told that he was hearing bad news. At the end of the short conversation, he snapped his cell phone shut and sat back in his chair without speaking. His face was tense and Jesse stayed quiet, giving him time to come to terms with whatever he had just heard. The crack of Gabriel's open hand coming down against the table sounded like a gunshot in the room. Jesse stared at him wide-eyed until his chair scraped back.

Turning in her chair, she watched him pace the floor. After a few moments, he stopped to look at her. His controlled, quiet tone relayed his anger and frustration more than a raised voice ever could have. "That was Phillip Harbinger. The telecast has been destroyed along with the production company."

Her heart sank. Before she could ask, he said, "Fire."

She closed her eyes to open them quickly. "Maybe the video wasn't destroyed."

"It was," he said. "The building, the contents, everything was lost."

Gabriel was still pacing the floor when a movement at the kitchen door caught Jesse's attention. Her head tilted sideways until she saw the Pastor's head easing around the opening. When

they saw each other, they both breathed a sigh of relief.

Stepping into the room, the Pastor stopped to watch Gabriel a few seconds before taking a seat.

Lacing his hands behind his head, Gabriel stared at the ceiling before looking back at the Pastor. “There was a fire at the production company.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

Gabriel shook his head. “No.”

“Thank God for that,” the Pastor said before confirming what he already knew. “The telecast has been destroyed.”

Jesse’s stomach tied in knots at the sound of a ringing cell phone. Answering the phone, Gabriel listened a few seconds before his face darkened with anger. “What? What disk?” Jesse watched the blood drain from his face before he stepped forward to place one hand on the table while holding the cell phone to his ear with the other. His stricken expression sent Jesse’s already quickened heartbeat to pounding against her ribcage.

She hurried to pull a chair out for him and ask, “Gabriel, what’s wrong?”

He didn’t respond but spoke into the phone. “I’ll meet you at the worship center.” His voice was curt when he said, “No, the worship center.” Closing the phone, he stared at her in silence before sitting down slowly to look from her to the Pastor. “They want the disk of the telecast or the people at the shelter will be fired upon at sunrise.”

Jesse stared ahead in shock. She knew the Pastor was speaking but his words didn’t register. “Jesse,” he repeated slowly, “please go wake up Florence and Olivia.” A few seconds passed before his words pierced her fog of disbelief. When it did, she moved quickly, racing up the stairs.

Pounding on Olivia’s door, she shouted, “Olivia, wake

up!”

Olivia jerked the door open with a panicked look.
“Where’s Jonas?”

“He’s okay. He wants you to come downstairs.” Without waiting for a response, Jesse hurried downstairs to her grandmother’s room. “Grammy, wake up. It’s an emergency!” Her grandmother opened the door with her housecoat hanging off one arm. Helping her get into her robe, Jesse quickly explained what happened before hurrying back to the kitchen where Gabriel sat bent over tying his shoes. She looked around before asking, “Where’s the Pastor?”

Without looking up, he said, “Gone to get the disk.”

“Are they coming here?”

“No. I’m meeting them at the worship center.”

She dropped to her knees in front of him. “No, Gabriel. No, you can’t do that.” When he refused to look at her, she gripped his arms. “Gabriel, please, listen to me.” He didn’t answer and her hands tightened on his forearms. “Gabriel, talk to me,” she cried before her head fell to his lap to roll from side to side. “Gabriel, I’m begging. I’m begging you. Please don’t do this.”

His hand touched the back of her head. “The instructions were plain, Jesse. I have to be the one to deliver the disk.”

“No. Please don’t,” she pleaded with him. “They want to murder you. You know that, Gabriel. Please—don’t leave me. Don’t do this.”

Watching her, his expression softened. “I’m sorry, Jesse, but those people are under my protection.”

The voice coming from the doorway commanded attention. “Are they, Gabriel? Are they under your protection?”

Looking over Gabriel's shoulder, Jesse saw the Pastor standing in the doorway with Olivia and her grandmother behind him. Gabriel's face stiffened with resolve as he stared straight ahead. "I will not allow innocent people to die," he said.

As the Pastor came into the room, Jesse looked up to see Gabriel's eyes harden with determination. Her hand came up to stifle a sob before running to her grandmother.

The Pastor faced Gabriel to ask, "Are the people at the shelter under your protection or are they under God's protection, Gabriel?" When Gabriel didn't answer, the Pastor asked a different question. "Are the people demanding the disk the same people who kidnapped Jesse?"

"You know they are," Gabriel snapped.

The Pastor watched Gabriel a few seconds before saying, "And when Jesse was kidnapped, what did you do, Gabriel? You stormed out of the house without seeking God's guidance only to find you were helpless. You couldn't save the woman you love."

Springing to his feet, Gabriel's fist crashed against the table. "I would have torn them to pieces!" Trembling, Jesse clung to her grandmother. She had never seen Gabriel in such a rage.

The Pastor nodded slowly. "Yes, my friend, I do believe you would have. I know you would have."

Gabriel straightened but his frame remained rigid. "When Jesse was kidnapped, I wasn't thinking. I was out of my mind then, but this is different. I have to go."

The Pastor tapped a forefinger against his lips, thinking. After a few seconds, he said, "I can see how you might think that, Gabriel, but this isn't different. You have to decide. Will you trust God or will you put your trust in yourself? God saved Jesse, Gabriel. When you accepted your limitations as a man and submitted to the Lord, He heard your plea and intervened. Men fall short, but God never does. God saved Jesse."

Tortured seconds ticked by before Gabriel slumped forward with his hands on the back of a chair. His voice was quiet when he said, “God’s grace is sufficient. His power is made perfect in my weakness. I will put my trust in the living God.”

“Yes,” the Pastor said, stepping forward to place a hand on Gabriel’s shoulder. “We will pray and seek God’s guidance.”

Gabriel's regret was evident when he turned to see Jesse’s tear-stained face. For a fleeting second, the fearless man became an uncertain teenager as he held out a hand to her. Without hesitating, she rushed into his arms to hear him whisper, “I’m sorry, Jesse.”

With four hours remaining before sunrise, they gathered in the Glory room. They had not been praying long when her grandmother rose to her feet. “Thus saith the Lord, stand still and know that I am God.” Turning to Gabriel, she said, “We will give the people the choice to leave but there is no need to evacuate the shelter. Every adult at the shelter must be humbled in prayer when we meet with these people.” She held up a hand as Gabriel stepped forward to protest. “Yes, Gabriel, I said, we. We must go together. Like fingers of a hand, we each have our role, strengths and talents.” Turning, she said again, “We must go together.”

When her grandmother came to stand in front of her, Jesse watched her curiously. Taking her hands, she said, “Jesse, you exemplify love and mercy. You have a great compassion and love for others. Is love not the greatest virtue?” She smiled softly to say, “Jesse, God blesses you.”

Olivia looked down shyly when her grandmother took her hands. “Olivia, the pure of heart, the humble. In your innocence, you do not know what it is to be mean or selfish. Blessed is the pure of heart for they shall see God.” She touched Olivia’s cheek. “Olivia, God blesses you.”

Smiling, her grandmother took Gabriel’s hands. “Gabriel, the protector,” she said with a fond nod. “You embody strength

and valor. You are strong in heart and virtue. You bow before no man and stand upright before God. Gabriel, God blesses you.”

Taking the Pastor’s hands, she studied his face. “Jonas, like King David, you are a man after God’s own heart. You are a seeker of truth. You have been diligent in presenting yourself as an approved workman. God is no respecter of age or person and it has pleased God to reward your diligence with wisdom and insight into his Holy Word. Jonas, God blesses you.” Turning to meet each of their eyes, she said, “God loves you and I love you.”

Jesse stepped forward. “Grammy, what about you?”

Her grandmother looked surprised but before she could answer, Gabriel moved to take her grandmother’s hands. “Florence, your life is a testimony of the virtues you reflect. You have been the salt of the earth and light of the world for many years. You reflect the love of Christ, our Lord’s humility, His strength and wisdom. You reflect all of these, but none more than faith and perseverance.” He considered the face of the woman he loved and respected. “Florence, the faithful, God blesses you,” he said, kissing her cheek. “And we love you, too.”

Jesse nodded. Yes, faithful. Her grandmother was faithful.

Flustered by the strong emotion in the room, her grandmother went to open the door. “We have work to do,” she said, motioning them out. As Jesse started through the door, her grandmother stopped her. “I need to speak with you, Jesse.”

Gabriel touched Jesse’s shoulder to say, “I’m going to the shelter and warn the people while you get dressed.”

“Come with me,” her grandmother said, taking Jesse’s hand to lead her downstairs to her bedroom.

Jesse stared at the small envelope her grandmother held out to her. “Jonas gave it to me in the kitchen before he went to talk to Gabriel. It’s the disk being demanded. God said you would know what to do with it.”

Jesse took the silver disk out of envelope to turn it over in her hand. “I don’t know what to—” She stopped and looked back at her grandmother. “I do know, Grammy. I do know what I’m supposed to do.”

Two hours later, Jesse heard Gabriel calling her name. She hurried downstairs to give the disk back to her grandmother before going to meet the others. Inside the kitchen door, she hesitated. The Pastor, Olivia and Gabriel waited by the back door with grim faces. Releasing a slow breath, she steadied herself before crossing the room to take Gabriel’s hand.

Coming through the kitchen door, her grandmother called to Gabriel. “Did everyone understand the instructions?”

“Yes, Florence, they understand, but none chose to leave. The children are inside the shelter and every adult is praying with their face to the ground just like you said.”

Her grandmother nodded solemnly. “Everyone must be praying.”

They were about to leave when there was a loud knock at the front door. Jesse looked up to see Gabriel lift a finger to his lips, warning them to be silent. By the sound of Gabriel’s voice in the next room, they could tell he was talking to someone he knew.

Dressed in a black military type outfit, Matthew Sanders stood with his hands on his hips talking to Gabriel.

As they entered the room, Jesse overheard Gabriel say, “I told you at the shelter, I don’t want the security team involved.”

Looking agitated, Matthew said, “You hired me to train a team and that’s what I’ve done. You have men equipped and ready to deal with this situation.” Casting a glance at Jesse, he lowered his voice to say, “You know what that monster is capable of. The coward attacked a woman and then vanished, but I guarantee you he won’t get away this time.”

“No, Matthew. We must meet them alone,” Gabriel said.

Matthew blew out an agitated breath. “No sensible man would take women and children to a gun fight.”

Before Gabriel could respond, the Pastor stepped forward to say, “Don't worry, Matthew. God is with us.”

Steely eyes swung on the Pastor. “You're just a kid. You don't know this man.”

Matthew started across the floor but Gabriel cut him off. “You're angry, Matthew. Don't say things you'll regret.”

Matthew's lips drew into a rigid line as the two men faced each other. “Let me do my job, Gabriel. The man you're going up against is a vicious murderer. He's the type of element I'm trained to deal with. We both know I'm the best at what I do.”

“Yes,” Gabriel said, nodding. “You are the best, a true warrior. No man can match you in physical combat, but this battle isn't with flesh and blood. This is spiritual warfare. You say we don't know what we're dealing with, but we do. We're going up against powers of darkness, evil forces from a different realm. Bullets are useless in this fight.

Sighing, Matthew shook his head. “You really want to go alone?”

“Yes, Matthew. We have to go alone. God promised to protect my heart with his own hand and I choose to believe Him.”

Stepping back, Matthew said, “You're the boss.”

Gabriel held out his hand. “I'm also your friend.”

“Yes, you are,” Matthew said, taking Gabriel's hand to pull him forward into a quick embrace. Releasing Gabriel, he turned and left the house.

At the back door, Gabriel handed the Pastor and her grandmother a flashlight. “They'll be expecting me to pull up in a

vehicle. If we take the path, we'll have a better chance of getting inside the worship center without being stopped."

Jesse wondered why it was important to get inside the worship center but she didn't ask. She was too nervous to have any semblance of a rational conversation at that point.

"Everyone must be praying," her grandmother said again.

At her grandmother's insistence, they circled by the shelter. The walk was made in complete silence. As they neared the shelter, Jesse looked around at countless human forms bowed low to the ground. The only sounds heard were the soft whispering of prayers. As they made their way through the camp, not one person looked up or stopped praying.

As they neared the worship center, Jesse felt her stomach lifting into her throat and her breath coming in shallow gasps. She tightened her grip on Gabriel's hand, forcing herself to keep up with his quickened pace. Stepping from the tree line, she could see a group of men standing at the side of the worship center facing the road with their backs to them. Gabriel was right. They expected him to pull up in a vehicle.

Jesse focused on the light shining from the open door of the worship center as they walked quickly, quietly across the clearing. As they started up the steps of the worship center, a man's voice called Gabriel's name. Without slowing, they continued up the steps and into the building. Stopping in front of the cross, Jesse looked up at the purple fabric. "King of kings," she whispered.

"Gabriel," a voice called loudly behind them.

They turned around to see Mark Banner walking slowly up the aisles as armed men filed in through the open door behind him. Mark Banner pulled his left hand across the top of each pew he passed as he walked up the aisle. "I'm surprised at your lack of judgment, Mr. James. One would expect a genius Harvard graduate to be smart enough to keep his wife and friends tucked

somewhere out of harm's way. After all, you never know what evil lurks about on such a night as this."

Jesse cast a quick glance at Gabriel before looking back to see a knowing smile curl Mr. Banner's lips. "You give yourself away, dear. A woman trained to read body language should have more control of her own. Please dispel my curiosity, dear, Jesse. Are you just now hearing that your splendid Mr. James is a Harvard man or that he is touted as a genius?" He laughed softly before saying, "Ah, you knew neither." He continued to watch Jesse as his hands closed on the lapels of his dark suite. "My, my, Jesse. Aren't you the venturesome one, marrying a man you obviously know so little about."

He stepped forward to stand in front of Gabriel. "Mr. James...Mr. James, what an anomaly you are, sir. You, Mr. James, present a case study that rather intrigues my very analytical mind. I have often asked myself why a man with such enviable wealth would bury himself in a hick town and keep such peculiar company."

Mr. Banner began to pace slowly before his eyes darted back to Gabriel. "I hope you understand, Mr. James. My work is never personal. In my opinion, this Bible code nonsense is merely a waste of time. Unfortunately, for you, some people in very high places take it quite seriously. They tell me your name comes up in some provocative code matrixes." His eyes rolled up, thinking, before saying, "Gabriel Michael James, your parents did you a great disservice with that name."

The derisive laugh echoed in the room as Mr. Banner turned back to study Gabriel. "I could be offended, Mr. James. You don't seem flattered by my presence. I'm rather high up the organizational ladder, you know. Yet, here I am, just for you. I really don't think you appreciate the effort that has gone into swaying you from this path, Mr. James." His eyes snapped to Jesse before shaking his head slowly. "Oh, if I had only known about you, Jesse. I could have saved myself a lot of time and

trouble. The death of Gabriel's parents didn't break him, but your death, oh, now, that would have. I know that now."

Jesse looked back at the vile man to see his lips protrude slightly. "Alas, such a tragedy, the death of Gabriel's parents," he said, mimicking sympathy before his eyes rounded innocently. "It should have ended there. One might have reasonably expected our Mr. James to lose faith, to veer from the course that has us standing here today. Any ordinary man might have turned to women, drink or drugs," he said, licking his lips at the thought. "So many delightful vices to choose from, but Mr. James didn't succumb. Not Mr. James," he said, barely masking anger with a sneering smile. "No, not our reverent Mr. James. I must confess, sir. I am rather annoyed at being pulled to this hole in the wall. But, I guess it's true. If you want a job done right, sometimes you just have to do it yourself."

With his focus moving to Jesse, Mr. Banner said, "I have traveled a long way, Mr. James. Surely, someone so generous would offer a man some refreshment." Running an index finger over his lower lip, his eyes moved slowly up Jesse's body. "I am rather intrigued by your fascination with this woman. Do you find her refreshing, Mr. James? She is quite stunning."

Jesse's hand tightened around Gabriel's opening fingers and she silently begged, please, no, before her grandmother called out. "Be still, Gabriel."

Mr. Banner's head fell back with an amused chuckle. "Yes, Granny. Do keep the lion on a leash."

The woman striding through the door shouted angrily. "Mark, we don't have time for this—" Seeing Jesse, she stopped in her tracks with a look of surprise before continuing up the aisle. "What the—"

"Marissa!" Mr. Banner called before smiling slyly. "You wouldn't dare in front of Granny."

Shooting him a sharp look, Marissa said, "Don't tell me

what I would or wouldn't dare, Mark."

Smiling, Mr. Banner turned to her grandmother. "She can be rather uncouth, Granny, but her total lack of conscience is a real asset in my line of business."

Ignoring the remark, Marissa scanned the group in front of her. "So you managed to get the old woman and the loud mouth preacher." Noticing Olivia, she smiled. "Even the pet mouse has joined the party." She slid a sideways glance at Mr. Banner before grudgingly admitting, "I'm almost impressed, Mark."

Mr. Banner crossed his arms to study Gabriel suspiciously. "As much as I crave your admiration, dear, Marissa, I must confess, I didn't do it. Our Mr. James brought them without an invitation."

"Maybe the princess has another trick up her sleeve," Marissa said, moving to stand in front of Jesse. "Tell me, Princess. How did you manage to escape?" Jesse looked back at the woman without answering. "You seem to have a real problem with questions, huh, princess. You ask questions when you shouldn't. You don't answer questions when you should."

Holding the woman's stare, Jesse straightened her shoulders. "Why don't you ask your god? Doesn't he see everything?"

Marissa's face went slack with surprise for a split second before recovering. "Wrong answer," she said, drawing back to step into a punch meant for Jesse's face.

Before she knew what happened, Jesse felt herself swept behind Gabriel as he caught Marissa's fist in his hand. Jerking back from Gabriel's grasp, Marissa eyed him cautiously. "Fast," she said, a knife appearing from nowhere for each hand. Moving into a boxing pose, she flipped the knives to hold the blades outward in raised fists. "Let's see how fast you are," she said, slicing forward with her left hand followed by the right.

The look of surprise was still on Marissa's face when Gabriel spun her around with her hands pinned behind her back. The knives clanked against the floor before she was thrust forward. The foot flying through the air grazed Gabriel's cheek as his upper body arched back to avoid the full blow. Even before her foot touched the ground, Marissa spun around with a switchblade. Her eyes narrowed on Gabriel's face as she prepared to attack.

"Enough!" The word exploded from Mr. Banner.

Marissa's lips tightened without relaxing her stance. Stepping to her side, Mr. Banner growled at her ear, "I said, enough."

Picking up the dropped knives, Marissa walked past Mr. Banner without making eye contact to fall onto the first pew.

Mr. Banner blew out a breath before turning to Marissa. "Sorry to ruin your fun, darling, but you know I hate the sight of blood." He watched her stare broodingly at her fingertips before saying, "Ah, I see. You want the honor of killing the celebrated Christian hero." Her averted gaze told him he was right. "Women," he muttered under his breath, "such mysterious creatures." His voice turned soothing to say, "Don't be angry, darling. You can kill him right here and hang him on that big cross for all I care. I'm just suggesting the use of a bullet. Bullets are much more efficient."

Gabriel pulled his hand away from Jesse's grasp to step forward. "You dare insult the living God inside His house of worship."

Mr. Banner's eyes flashed with angry fire before icing over with cool contempt. "Understand this, Mr. James. I do not fear you and I do not fear your God." His tone was mocking when he said, "Gabriel, the one who stands in the presence of God."

Without thinking, Jesse moved to take Gabriel's hand. "Don't," she whispered.

The sneer on Mr. Banner's face relaxed into a smirk before saying, "Your little show of courage was rather inspiring. In fact, I'm inspired to share a secret that may distress and disappoint you, Mr. James. The telecast you risked your life to film is useless. As we speak, Arakiel is warning leaders around the world that the Circle of Refaim is at risk of being destroyed. Rest assured, Mr. James. The explanation will be credible, even among scientists. A complex theory linking seismic waves, released energy, yada, yada," he said, flicking his hand to show boredom with the topic. "The world will believe the explanation and Uronians will be invited to Earth."

Marissa moved to Mr. Banner's side. "Let's just do this and go."

Ignoring Marissa, Mr. Banner kept talking. "Yes, it will be very convincing. Even if your dire prediction does come true and the monument is destroyed, Arakiel will persuade the world that the area in Israel is essential to Uronians." Shaking his head, he repeated the word, "Uronians," amused by the contrived name. Hardening eyes fixed on Gabriel before saying, "But let's stop wasting time, Mr. James. We both know why I'm here. I have come to pluck the festering thorn from our side." Like slow moving window shades, Mr. Banner's eyelids fell. When they opened, all emotion was gone. His voice was cold and lethally quiet when he said, "I have come for you, Mr. James."

Even in her state of terror, Jesse became aware of a change in the air, a light breeze. Her eyes closed as a calming presence began to fill her. When she opened her eyes, all fear was gone and she wasn't surprised to see Olivia moving to stand in front of them.

Olivia's words sailed across the room as if carried on supernatural waves. "My God is pure and holy. He came to Earth in human form as a man named Jesus. He humbled Himself as a servant to walk among us. My God loves us so much that He died for us. That is the God I serve, humble and pure, the Lord of hope

and salvation.” Everyone in the room stood mesmerized as Olivia moved to kneel in front of the cross.

Jesse turned back to see the Pastor standing in front of them. His voice resonated in the room. “My God is all-knowing. He is perfect and His Word is truth. The word of God is alive and active, sharper than any sword. Those who know the truth have been set free. No one comes to the Father except through the Son. Jesus, He is my God, the Lord of wisdom and understanding.”

Somehow, Jesse was not surprised to feel herself moving forward into the Pastor’s invisible footprints. Her mind was quiet, serene. On some level, she was aware that Mr. Banner was yelling instructions, but no one moved. With a sense of detachment, she watched the men drop their weapons with a look of terror before turning to run for the doors that slammed shut before they could reach them. Her words poured out in a voice she hardly recognized. “My God is love. He is kind and patient. God’s love and mercy are immeasurable, marvelous and endure forever. That is the God I serve, the Lord of love and mercy.”

Kneeling at the cross, Jesse heard Gabriel’s resounding voice in the room. “My God is all-powerful, the sovereign ruler of the universe. He is the lion of the Tribe of Judah before whom none can stand. His roar is like thunder, striking fear into the heart of His foe. To Jesus belong the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. That is the God I serve, the Lord of honor and power.”

Just as Gabriel knelt at her side, Jesse heard her grandmother proclaim, “My God is faithful, certain to keep His Word. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. God is long-suffering, not wanting any to perish, but He is coming. Heed the warning and repent.” The air swept through the room and Jesse felt her hair lifting as her grandmother’s voice rose to blend with the sounds of the wind. “And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse and He that sat upon him is called Faithful and True and in righteousness, He doth judge and make war. That is the God I serve, the Alpha and Omega, the Self Existing One.”

Silence fell like a weight and her grandmother's next words were spoken with frightful clarity. "Surely, He comes quickly. Prepare to meet thy God."

When her grandmother joined them at the cross, they bowed their faces to the floor before a gust of wind ripped through the building. Jesse squeezed her eyes tightly shut and began to pray as the sounds in the room rose to a deafening level. What she heard defied expression. The rumbling of a freight train, a tornado, an accelerating jet engine and multiple claps of thunder could not have captured the intensity. The power of God was all around them and she knew she was not to look up. This was the Lord's battle.

When the room grew quiet, Jesse felt a hand touch her back. She lifted her eyes to see Gabriel crouched down at her side. He helped her to her feet before she turned around in the room with a blank stare. Mark Banner, Marissa, the men, they were all gone. The pews, the podium, the equipment, nothing was out of place.

"Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" The Pastor's shouts split the air before he began to dance and praise God.

Olivia stared at her husband and her face broke into a smile before spinning around happily to ask, "Who is like our God?"

Jesse's eyes fixed on the cross. "Thank you, Jesus," she whispered. At her side, Gabriel put an arm around her. Without taking her eyes off the cross, she asked, "Did you doubt, Gabriel?"

"Yes," he said, "I did, until Jonas reminded me of the lesson I learned. When you were kidnapped, I couldn't save you, Jesse. From the ashes of my broken pride, I cried out to God and He saved you. If not for that experience, I would have come here alone."

Just before sunrise, they made their way back to the

shelter. Unable to find the flashlights they had dropped earlier, they picked their way along the path following Gabriel who walked a few feet in front. Through the treetops, Jesse could see the sky beginning to turn orange in the twilight. She knew the rising Sun outlining the distant mountains would be a spectacular sight from the top of the ridge. When Gabriel neared the summit, he stopped. In the twilight, they could see his shadowy form standing motionless a little distance up the path. When he moved forward, they followed.

Reaching the top, Jesse stared in awe. Hundreds of glowing forms stood along the ridge encircling the valley. They were much taller than men. Their bodies glowed like polished metal radiating light and each held a flaming sword. “God sent angels,” Olivia said.

Speechless, Jesse nodded as clouds rolled together to form stairs lowering from the sky. The angels moved, glided along the ridge toward the staircase before rising into heaven. As the last two lifted out of sight, the staircase rolled up and disappeared.

Mist hung in the air over the mountains. A new morning dawned with them gazing up into the heavens. The Pastor’s voice pulled Jesse from her stupor. “They’re still praying,” he said, looking down into the valley. Jesse looked down to see the people still bowed to the ground.

The Pastor’s voice echoed through the mountains when he shouted, “Praise God!” The people below began to stir, rising to their feet. The Pastor held up his arms in victory to shout again, “Praise God!”

The sound of celebration, at first low, gained volume from the valley below. As they made their way down the slope, the sound of rejoicing grew louder. People thronged them on all sides as they entered the camp but instead of joining in, Gabriel held tightly to Jesse’s hand as they moved quickly toward the path leading home.

Before she could ask where they were going, he sprinted up the incline along the path. The distance that normally took more than thirty minutes to walk was covered in half the time.

In the kitchen, Jesse dropped into a chair. “What’s the— what’s the rush,” she asked, trying to catch her breath. He handed her an opened bottle of water. Taking a long drink, she set the bottle aside to ask, “What’s the hurry?”

“I have to go see Phillip Harbinger and give him the disk.”

As he passed her chair, Jesse caught his hand. “Hold on,” she said before leading him to the living room. She dialed Amber’s number. “Amber, how did it go?”

Impatient, Gabriel lifted his arm to look at his watch but Jesse held up a finger, signaling him to wait as she repeated Amber’s words. “The telecast has been viewed over 200,000 times within the last few hours and a few segments are being picked up by the news.”

Gabriel was still staring at her when she hung up the telephone. She had never seen him look more surprised. She started to explain, “When you went to talk to the people at the shelter, Grammy gave me the disk. She said I would know what to do with it. At first, I just stared at it, clueless. Then it dawned on me. Millions of people view videos on the Internet every day.”

“You sent the telecast to Amber?” he said.

“Yes, after she walked me through the process of splitting and compressing.”

He shook his head. “Internet. I never thought of that. But couldn’t that be blocked or intercepted?”

“I’m sure it could be,” she said, smiling as she recalled asking Amber the same question. “The computer whiz kid informed me that she could get around anything in cyberspace. She left my counseling brain in the dust with talk of proxy

servers, file transfer protocols and such.”

He pulled an envelope from his shirt pocket. “Will you send this to Amber?”

Taking the disk he handed her, she looked back at him curiously. “I already sent it.”

“You didn’t send this one. The worship center is equipped with video cameras.”

“The worship center is...” Her voice trailed off as she realized what he was saying. “You—you mean everything that happened at the worship center is on this disk?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

She sat down slowly on the sofa. “It’s over then,” she said, staring across the room. “The world will know the truth and things will go back to normal. It’s really over.”

“No, Jesse,” he said softly.

She didn’t hear him. Her thoughts were on the future, imagining a better world, a safe world where people were kind and cared for one another. “It’s finally over,” she whispered, tears gathering in her eyes.

Gabriel sat down next to her, letting her cry against his shoulder. “Maybe we’ll have more time now,” he said gently. “Have you read the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation?”

She pulled back, laughing through tears she wiped away. “No, not yet, but I will. You’re right, Gabriel. We’ll have time now. When people see what happened, Arakiel won’t be invited. He’ll go away and people will change. The world will change. We’ll have time to do things married people do, ordinary things. We can have children and go on family vacations, whatever we want. We have the rest of our lives to figure it out.”

“Jesse, the Book of Revelation is very important,” he said.

She stared at him, puzzled, before shaking her head and starting to smile. “Imagine that. I was the one always scared and worried, never you. When I was having meltdowns, you were always calm. Now that it’s over, you look worried.”

He looked back at her, eyes sparkling in a face flushed with happiness. “Yes,” he said, pulling her into his arms, “imagine that.” He couldn’t tell her, not right then. One day, soon, they would read the Book of Revelation together ____ *The end.*



Like, dislike the work? Comments welcomed.

[Leave the author a note](#)

Help move rating of book up and increase visibility at:

<http://www.free-ebooks.net/ebook/End-of-the-Age-Final-Deception>

Thank you so much for reading.

Angela Kay