

THE ROGUE PROPHET

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RON HOUSTON THE ROGUE PROPHET

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THE ROGUE PROPHET

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Rogue - adj. no longer obedient, belonging, or accepted and hence not controllable or answerable; deviating, renegade.—**The New Webster Dictionary**

Just When You Thought It Was Safe To Believe . . . Question Everything.

CHAPTER 1

“Hell no! You waltz your raggedy-ass in here wanting out? It ain’t that easy. Fact is, I ain’t done with you yet. Yeah I’m filthy rich, but there’s a whole lot more to get, and you’re gonna get it for me. As for your brother, I ain’t helping his punk-ass either. This is your fault. You wasn’t shit until I came along. You took your gift for granted. I turned you into the Prophet and you fucked up.

“Now, since I’m a man of the cloth, I’m gonna rebuild what you tore down. But you need to know this; if you walk out on me . . . you’re dead! Plain and simple. You getting mad now? Look at you swelling all up. I’m hard on you cause I love ya boy. You’re like an old hound-dog that you got to kick sometimes just to show him you care. Otherwise he’ll just lie around licking his balls, which serves no purpose. I built this empire from the sweat of my balls, Lawrence, your purpose is to lick my balls. So you see how important you are?

“In the meantime, you need to pull your raggedy-ass together, get in that pulpit, and realize whose thumb you’re under. Don’t try and skip out on me. You can’t go nowhere that I can’t find you. And when I do, you’ll take that eternal dirt-nap. Me and the Lord work in mysterious ways. Now get out! Oh, one more thing . . . Welcome back to the ministry.”

In shame and silence, I turned and walked toward the door. Before leaving Bishop Barnes’ chamber, I stopped. *Do it*, I thought. I reached inside of my wrinkled suit coat for the gun tucked in my belt.

“Hey!” shouted the bishop. “Remember you’re the Prophet. This is a big night. Great wealth is gonna come from this, so get your shit together. Get into character, and never forget who your family is.”

That did it, I grimaced and went for my gun. My intentions were halted as young Julius walked in.

“Mr. Garnier,” his voice was soft. “Thanks for trying. I won’t need your help anymore.”

I stared intently into Julius’ eyes. The boy did not blink. I tried to smile but couldn’t. *Wow, what a kid*, I thought. He tried to let me off the hook, but his eyes told me what I already knew. I let him down. That’s what I’ve always done, let everybody down. My eyes were filled with tears. I dropped my head and walked to the nearby restroom.

I ran water into the sink and splashed my face three times before I looked into the mirror. I didn’t recognize myself. My once dark complexion was now ash-gray. Tears sped down my weathered cheeks like water off a crocodile’s back. My once strong six-two frame seemed unstable and weighted with heavy burdens. Dressed in an unkempt maroon suit with gold pin stripes I looked like the ringmaster of a failed circus. But it was the face that peered back at me that frightened me the most. My lips were swollen and blistered. They screamed for moisture. I was gaunt with sunken eyes. I looked sixty-one instead of thirty-one.

“You’ve failed again Lawrence,” I muttered. “You should have ended it right there inside the bishop’s chamber.”

What I needed to do would never make things right again, but it could keep things from getting worse for a small few. The Honorable Bishop Ezekiel Barnes was evil incarnate and needed to be stopped. But I couldn’t stop him, not here, not tonight . . . but soon. More tears fell. “Dear God, I’ve got to escape,” I whispered. I could hear the choir as they began to sing, *‘I Ain’t No Ways Tired.’* Not me. I was tired. Tired of all that had transpired. And what about Rachel?

“What did I do to you, Rachel?”

She didn’t deserve any of this. It was my fault. The scriptures say that the truth shall set you free. I knew that I would never be free. Even if I escaped the bishop, I would still be in bondage. Two searing questions have haunted me a lifetime. First, did I turn my back on family? Second,

did I see it? All that I have suffered was due to the gift. It was the gift that led me to the bishop and to this night. I am Lawrence Garnier, and I'm cursed with a gift.

The gift is the power to see the future. The immediate future. It has a range of exactly one week. When I get a flash, it's sure to happen the next minute or any time within seven complete days. I can only see the immediate future of a person in my presence. The only future I can't see is my own.

One can only wonder about the outcome of a special child with a peculiar gift. What if both were nurtured properly? I pondered that very question as I stood before the strange unrecognizable image in the mirror. If only I could've had a small glimpse of my own future, maybe I could have done things differently. All I had now were the hows and whys. How was it all going to end? Why couldn't a flash of my future be just as easy as a reflection of my past?

A past that started in this very bathroom, in this very church . . . The Church of Advancing Light. It was four years back, on the day of my brother's wedding. I had been at this very same sink, looking in this very same mirror. The reflection back then was much fresher, younger and totally different. I was admiring how well I looked in my black tuxedo, when my brother Mitchell walked in.

"Man, I'm really nervous," said Mitchell. "What's with all your primping? You'd think you were the one getting married today."

"No big brother, I'm much too fine and too hung over to jump the broom."

"Yeah, well Rachel is gonna hit you in the head with a broom for not coming home after the bachelor party last night."

"Now Mitch, you know I love to sow my wild oats."

"Lawrence, you've been in Cincinnati for twenty-four hours now and haven't yet met your new sister-in-law."

"I promise we'll get along famously. Besides this whole wedding and marriage thing seems to be happening really fast."

"Well, I'm not getting any younger, Lawrence. I'm thirty-seven. I think it's time for me to settle down."

"I'm just saying, it's a little abrupt, that's all."

"Now you're sounding like sis."

"Don't say that, Mitch. Virginia wouldn't come to the wedding no matter what,"

"Yeah, she'll never change."

"But that's not me, Mitch. I'm here to stand beside you. I'm here to stand beside both Rachel and you. Even though you forgot my birthday two weeks ago."

"Oh, that's right! you're twenty-seven now. Damn time does fly. Did Virginia do anything for you?"

"Yeah, she had a few of the women from the mission decorate the lunchroom and cook a birthday dinner. You know she wasn't gonna come off any money. She's still a tightwad."

"Yeah, but a few of the mission girls invited me to their rooms and gave me some great presents."

"I bet. Are you always gonna be a whore?"

"Hey, sometimes I get tired. Besides, I'd stay broke if it wasn't for those lost ladies' contributions."

"Well anyway, consider that first-class plane ticket, your birthday gift. Man, I can't get over the fact that my little brother is twenty-seven. Do you still think about Lyle?"

"Everyday. And in my mind, the half-hour difference in our births, is the only distance between us."

"Do you still get the headaches?"

"Yeah, when I get flashes."

"He's been gone a long time," Mitchell said sadly.

"Yes, he has . . . but I'm here. For my brother's wedding."

"Thanks man. I love you."

As we embraced, I felt a dull pain in my head. Visions flashed of Mitchell holding an infant girl. I broke away from my brother.

“What?” asked Mitchell.

“So, that’s why you rushed a marriage?”

“Come on now. I love Rachel and I’m not getting any younger. She comes from a very affluent family. Don’t judge me, Lawrence.”

“I want the best for you, Mitch.”

“She is. Come stand by me . . . by us.”

CHAPTER 2 THE WEDDING

The main auditorium of the church was large, with seating for five hundred, though it never came close to capacity. Three wide aisles separated the pews and dead-ended in front of a large stage. Stairs on both the left and right side gave access to the stage. To the far left of the stage was the bandstand, which included an elaborate Wurlitzer organ, drums, and two guitars. To the far right were stairs that accessed an additional bleacher-type stage where the church choir stretched across the entire width of the stage. Just below the choir stand at center stage was a grandiose pulpit where the Honorable Bishop Ezekiel Barnes stood.

Bishop Barnes was a strong looking man of great presence. He looked younger than his fifty-five years. He was handsome with his light skin and hazel eyes. His grooming was impeccable from his well-manicured nails, his pencil mustache, and his fine grade of half-black hair combed back. His hair was white to the right of his center-parted hairline and black on the left. This gave him a sinister look rather than distinguished. He strongly resembled a pompous Cab Calloway as he stood in the pulpit with his arms crossed clutching the Bible.

As Mitchell and I walked down the center aisle, the bishop’s trance-like gaze disturbed me. The groom and I positioned ourselves in front of the stage below the pulpit. We faced the rear of the church, and the procession began. The maid of honor walked down first. Next three groomsmen escorted three bridesmaids down the aisle. Once everyone was in position, the music changed to the traditional, *Wedding March*.

Escorted by her father, the bride proceeded down the aisle. I had only spoken to Rachel a few times over the phone. I felt bad that I didn’t come home after the bachelor party. I felt even worse that a stripper and a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black would keep me from doing what I should have done. I wondered why my brother rushed to marry, until I saw her. The bride was a veiled apparition that seemed to float with every step.

Mitchell and I were very close. Partly because of the death of our brother, my twin, but mostly because of what our father put us through. I knew Mitchell well, and I remembered the promise that we both made to our older sister Virginia while we were very young. Never marry. Mitchell had many girlfriends before he left New Orleans to come to Cincinnati to teach in the public school system. Mitchell would make it a point to bring me around them all for a regular check. But what was it that made him so sure about Rachel? What type of woman could make a man break his vow of singleness. A man that had so much of his father in him?

Bishop Barnes began once everyone was in position. “We’re having a cleaving this afternoon!” his voice was thunderous. “I’m so happy to do the Lord’s work, especially when two of his servants choose to join in holy matrimony. It makes my heart leap with joy! I’m joyful because the spirit is strong when ever two or more of his servants gather together.

“With all the friends, family and church members here this afternoon, the spirit is definitely strong.

But for Mitchell and Rachel the spirit is now going to be stronger in their household because of cleaving two into one flesh. But marriage, just like everything else comes with instructions. Now I've met with these two in private and went over, in detail, their prospective roles in this marriage. I've counseled Rachel from the book of Proverbs on how to be a capable wife. I've counseled Mitchell from the book of Ephesians on loving his wife the same way Christ loved the congregation. This couple has been advised in the direction in which the Lord wants their marriage to go. I will continue to be an adviser to this couple and will continue to admonish them for many years to come.

"It's just like a fine automobile. Now everyone who knows me knows my love for the Mercedes Benz. It's a truly wonderful vehicle, but I needed to learn how to drive before I ever got behind the wheel. I also needed to know how to service this fine vehicle to keep it in proper operational order. Rachel is a fine woman who needs the proper servicing, the proper up-keep and the proper direction to be the capable wife in a successful marriage. Mitchell you are the head of your wife, the navigator of your marriage. God has placed you in the driver's seat. So drive carefully.

"Now someone very dear to this couple will pray on their behalf before we deliver the vows. Mitchell's brother and best man here today is also a holy servant of God. Ladies and gentlemen, Minister Lawrence Garnier."

I stepped to the front of the stage just below the pulpit. "Heavenly Father, in your house this afternoon, a marvelous union is being strengthened with your bond of unity. This union of love is being witnessed by your servants, your children. All of who wish the best for Mitchell and Rachel. But I want to ask a very unusual favor of you today. Please, if by chance you only hear one prayer today, please hear mine? Lord, it's not out of selfishness that I ask this of you; it's out of pure love . . ."

[As Lawrence prayed, the bishop surveyed the whole wedding assembly. He saw the bowed heads of his members, friends and families of the couple. He gazed at the Father of the bride, Mr. Ralph Draper. Mr. Draper was a very influential and wealthy politician. Bishop Barnes was glad Mr. Draper was a baptized member of The Church of Advancing Light. It was only on the merit and ample donations of Mr. Draper that the bishop would even consider opening up his church to the unbaptized for a wedding. So providing the church's dining hall for the reception showed everyone his ever-so-holy self-sacrificing spirit. Finally, he watched Lawrence. He admired his eloquent speech as he prayed. Lawrence continued.]

"And love for the woman that my brother chose to spend the rest of his life with. Father I want the very best for these two. Though I'm sure everyone here shares the same well-wishes that I do, I pray that if you, by some unusual circumstance, only have room to answer one more prayer, let it be mine. Amen."

As everyone uttered amen in unison and raised their heads, Bishop Barnes took a brief moment and stared at me as he stepped back into position.

"Will the bride and groom please approach the microphone?" said the bishop.

As the vows were exchanged, I took note of Rachel's happiness. I felt the innocent goodness of the woman my brother had chosen. I felt shame for not returning from the bachelor party to meet face to face with my future sister-in-law. Shame came honestly to the Garnier brothers.

We had too much of our father in us, and we both hated that fact. We hated our father, maybe not as much as our older sister Virginia did, but we did hate him. My brother and I promised our sister that we would end the cycle of our father's evil ways, by never marrying. I remember when the three of us were young. When the soundtrack of our life consisted only of screams and shattering glass. Huddled together under the basement steps, the oldest child, Virginia, comforted her younger siblings.

"It'll be over soon," she'd say. "I won't let him hurt you." Along with the comfort, the girl, who was only a child herself would release a ferocious growl. As the violence crashed down upon us, young Virginia swore never to let any man beat her that way. She swore never to marry. Then she'd looked down at us two frightened boys with our faces buried in her lap. "Promise me, both of you right now. Promise me you'll never marry. There's too much of daddy in you."

“I promise, Ginny,” my reply was instant.

“You too, Mitchell,” she demanded.

“I promise,” he said.

“We’re family and ain’t nothing more important,” she said.

Now, Rachel was family. I prayed for Rachel’s sake that Mitchell had her best interest in mind. I prayed that my brother’s love for his new bride was true.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell Garnier.”

The wedding party emptied in the main lobby in order to greet the guests and allow photo opportunity of the whole party. As soon as I got through the door, my new sister-in-law pounced.

“Finally, I get to hug my new brother-in-law!”

“Oh, you’re squeezing all the air out of me Rachel,” I said.

A sharp headache pierced my mind as it flashed visions of new life growing inside her.

“I should bean you in the head for making me wait all this time to see you,” she said.

I gazed at Rachel through tearful eyes.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m just proud to have you in the family,” I said.

“I wish Virginia was,” she said.

“I’m sure she’ll come around.” I lied.

“You know, Lawrence, I’ve been talking you up around here. Bishop Barnes could use you here in the church. It would be great for Mitch to have you around all the time.”

“Well, I -”

“Mitch and I aren’t baptized at this church yet. We wanted to be married and get baptized together. So we certainly want you with us,” she said. I felt her sincerity.

Just then Mitchell walked up. “Rachel, you told him the surprise?”

“No, not really,” she said. “I’m going to tell him now. Your brother and I, along with my father, spoke to Bishop Barnes and he’s willing to let you pursue your ministry from this church.”

I stayed silent but glared at my brother.

“Do you know what this means?” asked Mitchell. “You can finally get away from Virginia and get paid for your work.”

“Rachel excuse us,” I said as I pulled my brother into the restroom.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you, Mitch?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I had a flash when Rachel hugged me. She’s pregnant, or she will be seven days from now.”

“Wow that’s soon, but it’s still good.”

“I had a flash when you hugged me too. Within a week you’re gonna be a father to a little girl.”

“Lawrence, the one has nothing to do with the other.”

“Does Rachel know?”

“No. Not till she can handle it.”

“Why did you marry her with this hanging over you. You shouldn’t have married at all.”

“You sound like sis now.”

“You promised, you”

“We were kids, Lawrence! You can’t expect childhood pacts to hold.”

“Look what we went through as kids. Or did you forget who your father was. I guess Virginia was right, you’re just like dad.”

Mitchell started to throw a punch at me when Bishop Barnes walked in the restroom.

“Hey, I hit the jackpot finding the groom and the best man. The photographer wants some shots before the reception.”

“Thanks, bishop, I was just leaving,” Mitchell said as he walked out.

Bishop Barnes approached me. “Welcome to The Church of Advancing Light, where saints are

welcomed but sinners are all we get. That was a very impressive prayer, son. We need to talk. I think your talents will fit well within my ministry.”

“We’ll talk, but I’d better catch up with the wedding party.”

I watched the events of the past in the reflective eyes of my weathered image. In this very bathroom, time has come full circle. This is where the nightmare started and now it has to end. I kept telling myself that I did it for Rachel. Now, what I have to do is for me. I got the gun and every imaginable reason to end my own life. My ruined life has to be laid to rest once and for all. But I’ve got to suffer through it a little longer. I’ll have plenty of time to take my own life after I kill the bishop.

During the reception Mitchell and I never spoke to each other. Between photo sessions and well wishes made by many, Rachel never noticed that fact. I noticed how intently the bishop watched the bride and groom.

“Rachel, I think I’m gonna turn in early,” I said.

“Aren’t you feeling well?” she asked.

“I’m really tired. I guess staying up all night caught up with me.”

“Well, you know where my car is. Mitchell and I will see you here tomorrow for church. Everything is ready for you at the house. I even got your peanuts, crackers and Underwood deviled ham.”

“Thanks, Rachel.”

“And Lawrence, don’t drink so much tonight that you don’t make it to church tomorrow.”

I smiled, “I expect you not to be too tired to show up either.”

“Oh shut up,” laughed Rachel, “the real honeymoon starts when we get to Hawaii.”

That evening, while Mitchell and Rachel enjoyed their wedding night in the Westin Hotel’s bridal suite, I enjoyed a hot shower at the newlywed’s home in Hyde Park. Wrapped in a towel, I poured another whiskey from the half-empty Johnnie Walker Black bottle. I was already full from my snack. Planter’s peanuts and Underwood deviled ham on Ritz crackers, my favorite since childhood. I poured another drink. Another favorite of mine was Marvin Gaye.

The few fond memories of my childhood were with mother as we listened to her favorite singer Marvin Gaye. I popped in the *After the Dance* CD. Clad in only a towel, I settled in bed with a rocks glass of fresh ice and my bottle of Johnnie Walker. Thoughts of mother danced through my mind like smoke. Tearful eyes rolled back into my head as the music and drink took me to a higher level of warmth. I poured another drink, my last of the night. I could’ve easily finished the bottle, but chose not to, after all, tomorrow was Sunday and I had to go to church in the morning.

CHAPTER 3

The marquee outside of the church announced the Sunday sermon entitled, **“Y’all Are Going To Hell Without Me.”**

The Sunday morning service was at nine. Bishop Barnes left his chambers to greet incoming members promptly at eight. He was immaculate in his tan Armani suit. His tan and cream gators complemented his shirt and tie smartly. His 14-carat gold Rolex and three gold rings all with diamond settings finished his prosperous look.

As usual, the members began to enter the grand foyer of The Church of Advancing Light met by the open arms of Bishop Barnes.

“Praise God for another glorious day of life, my children.”

“God bless you, bishop,” greeted Thelma Billups, “Girls?”

“Good morning, Bishop Barnes,” chanted two little girls.

Doreen and Debra Billups were twelve and nine. They were adorable in their over-done Sunday dresses. Adorable was not the case with their stepmother Thelma. She was a barren woman and certainly had no use for two young stepdaughters. Thelma was homely and realized that the two bothersome girls attached to her, were her only chance of getting her husband, Ed Billups.

Ed was an alcoholic, who was once a hard worker, who acquired some wealth in his lifetime. He became unraveled over the death of his daughters' mother, the much younger Emily. Ed loved his daughters, but knew that they needed a mother. So he succumbed to the constant pressure of the bishop and Thelma.

The two were married a year later. Thelma vowed to raise Ed's girls in the way of the Lord, for exchange of financial security and the prestige of being a properly married woman. After all, he wouldn't live forever and the girls wouldn't be around long after that. She was simply buying time to invest in her comfort.

"That's a lovely hat, sister Billups," said the bishop.

"I made it myself, Bishop. The girls' dresses also."

"Praise the Lord for your talents."

"Bishop, whenever you need a seamstress remember I'm quite capable. A single man as fine as yourself should always count on the mature women of the church in times of need. What with all of this modern looseness these young women display, it's shameful."

"Well, sister Billups, I'll keep that in mind if I ever get desperate... for a seamstress that is. Enjoy the service today. God bless you."

When I entered the foyer, the bishop's face lit up as I approached him and extended my hand.

"Lawrence, my boy, I'm glad you're here this morning."

"Hello bishop," I had a flash and a headache as we shook hands.

"Can you hang around after the service to meet with me in my chamber today?"

"Sure."

"Lawrence!" Rachel had just walked in alone.

"Hey Rachel."

We embraced, and then the bishop stepped in.

"Sister Rachel, Lord have mercy, you look ravishing this morning. Where's the proud husband?"

"Well, he got an early phone call and had to take care of some last minute school business before we leave for Hawaii."

I dropped my head.

"Amen on the honeymoon. When you guys get back I want to talk to the both of you about getting baptized. We don't want everyday life to crowd out what we need to do for the Lord," said the bishop.

At that moment a man in a black suit came from the back. He was a thick muscular giant. His facial expression was one of disdain for life itself. It was Deacon Stone. "Excuse me bishop, the communion preparations have been made," he said.

"Thank you, deacon. Have you met sister Rachel's brother-in-law, Lawrence Garnier?"

"Pleased to meet you," I extended my hand; *he never shook it.*

"It is my pleasure. Sister Rachel, congratulations on such a beautiful wedding. If you will excuse me I have much to attend to."

He totally ignored me. Deacon Stone's exit was just as disconcerting as his approach.

"Please forgive Deacon Stone's lack of personality," said the bishop. "He's a mortician so it ain't a lot of folks to talk to in his line of work."

"Creepy," I said.

"Let's take our seats," said Rachel.

CHAPTER 4

Inside the auditorium was like a greenhouse full of flowering hats of various colors, sizes and angles. My head began to swim with flashes of the church members jumping, falling out, yelling and crying. The service started promptly at nine. The choir was in place as well as the band. Deacon Stone approached the pulpit.

“Welcome, brothers and sisters, blessings to all who gather in the Lord,” his manner was deadpan. “We have some announcements this morning...”

Rachel saw me rubbing my head. “Are you feeling alright?” she whispered.

“Just a small headache.”

“On a very sad note,” Deacon Stone continued, “we must keep sister Campbell and her son Julius in our prayers. As you all know, she lost her eldest son Nathan this week. It was a true tragedy indeed, but her strength resides here in the house of the Lord. So we will be collecting donations for Ms. Campbell and Julius. The funeral will be here Tuesday at seven pm.”

Rachel again whispered to me, “That was so sad.”

“What happened?”

“Nathan had AIDS. He was really depressed so he shot himself inside of his car in the hospital garage. He contracted the disease from a dirty needle. He was a heroin addict. He really put his mother through it. She hasn’t been herself for a couple of years now. And poor Julius, that’s him in the choir stand, third row, fourth from the right.”

I looked at the choir just as they stood to sing.

“He’s young,” I said. “His mom must be fairly young.”

“Julius is thirteen, she’s probably forty,” said Rachel, “she’s a very pretty woman. She’s not here of course, but Julius never misses.”

The alter call was next. Deacon Stone walked down the steps in front of the stage next to a table cart that supported an enormous gold bowl. With microphone in hand, he called all who have received recent blessings to give a blessing back to the Lord.

“I gotta get in line and give thanks for my husband,” said Rachel as she got in line.

My eyes watered at the sincerity Rachel displayed for his brother. The choir continued to sing as lines proceeded past the golden bowl dropping monetary gifts inside. I watched Rachel move happily through the procession. *Mitchell didn’t deserve such a gift as Rachel, I thought. But in God’s house I swear he will do right by her... I’ll see to that.*

Rachel made it back to her seat.

“You truly love my brother don’t you?”

“Can’t you see it, Lawrence. Can’t you see the love?”

Her question scared me. Of course I could.

When everyone was back in their seats, Deacon Stone carted the golden bowl full of money behind the stage where the bishop stood in a long purple and gold robe. He peeked into the bowl then winked at the deacon as he went by. Bishop Barnes walked to the front of the stage. He surveyed the audience in silence.

Deacon Stone rolled a chrome waiter’s cart in front of the pulpit. On the cart was an elaborate gold plate and matching goblet. The bishop opened one drawer on the back of the cart and took out a pair of white gloves, which he put on. Then from another compartment in the cart he removed a serving tray, which held flat unleavened bread. He began to carefully break the cakes into half inch by half inch pieces and placed them on the gold plate.

“At this time we request all baptized church members to the front for communion” he said.

Deacon Stone picked up the gold plate with the pieces of unleavened bread that the bishop just broke and carried it up the steps. The head nurse Willa Stafford followed him. The two ascended the choir stand and passed the pieces to the baptized choir members only. The deacon made sure nurse

Stafford and the band members partook also.

A line of baptized members formed to the far right aisle of the auditorium and passed in front of the bishop. He broke perfect half inch pieces of the flat bread and placed it on their tongues, "And the Lord said this is my body, do this in remembrance of me," said the bishop.

"Aren't you going up?" I asked Rachel.

"I'm not baptized yet; the bishop said you have to be of an approved age, which I am. Baptized, which I'm not, in order to partake."

The same ritual was done for the wine as well. "This is my blood so says the Lord," continued the bishop as he held the goblet of wine to the lips of the partakers.

After communion the choir sang as the bishop slowly climbed the stairs to the pulpit. He slowly shook his head and snorted in disgust. This cued Deacon Stone to take his position backstage next to the thermostat on the wall.

The bishop began to speak. "I can't do this much longer," he said. Whispers could be heard throughout the church. "I can't do this alone. Y'all are going straight to Hell! I tried but I can't stop y'all I was up all night begging the Lord in behalf of this church. MY CHURCH! See, your connection to God's mercy is through me. Let me clarify that by saying this. I am a conduit through which the spirit moves throughout this church. So the burden is on me to keep this spirit flowing to you despite whatever hurdles to block it. What I'm saying is YA'LL GOT BACK PROBLEMS!"

At that moment, Deacon Stone turned off the air conditioning and turned on the heat. The bishop continued, "That's right, y'all are back-sliding, back-biting and back stabbing!" Throughout the church the paper fans began to wave. Some had small battery operated fans. Still others had the fancy flair fan with colorful flowers and oriental pictures painted on them.

The bishop's head shook, "Oh I see the fans going now. It's funny how folks sweat when the truth is being told. 'BUT I'M GOING TO TELL THE TRUTH NO MATTER HOW HOT IT GETS UP IN HERE!'"

The church members rose from their seats and cheered. The bishop continued "I know y'all been talking against each other. I know y'all ain't been doing right. I know cause God knows and he told me I had better correct these back problems or he'll take away my anointing. So you know why I was up all night."

I looked around and saw many who were crying with their hands in the air.

The sermon continued, "Some of y'all may not remember, but a lot of you old-timers will. Y'all remember Reverend Robbie?" Many began to clap. "I loved Reverend Robbie. He was my mentor. I remember how downhearted he had gotten over this church. Now Reverend Robbie was getting old and a few of the deacons, me included, were bending his ear to take over the church. I was the youngest and it seemed that none of the other deacons accepted the fact that Reverend Robbie took me under his wings.

"They talked behind my back. They never liked any of my ideas about the direction the church should take. But Reverend Robbie took me aside and said he took this church as far as he could. He felt that the spirit was gone. He said his church became a "Rock and Nod" church. No matter how hard he preached folks would just rock in their seats and nod in agreement. That hurt him because he wanted more for the church. HIS CHURCH! So he told me to take the church farther that he could. He said he could see the Promised Land but I needed to get them in. He told me to make the church STAND AND SHOUT!"

The church roared with thunderous shouting and clapping.

The bishop continued, "Unfortunately, Reverend Robbie, old as he was, met an untimely demise in a fatal car accident. But just before he died, he crafted a letter to the church naming Ezekiel Barnes as his successor. So many left the church the day that letter was read. All the deacons left. Six years later. This church has suffered much, but we've also been blessed. Deacon Stone joined on to back me up. I don't need to fear being stabbed in the back by some handkerchief wearing negroes when Deacon Stone

and the Lord has my back!”

I was amazed at the cheers, tears and moans that flowed throughout the church.

The bishop continued. “We're Blessed! We now have our own senior citizens' assisted living ministry at The Advancing Light Senior Home. We now have The Advancing Light Funeral Home headed by our own licensed mortician, Deacon Stone. In the end, when it's time to leap into the bosom of our Lord, what better launching pad is there than, The Advancing Light Funeral Home!

“This church has been blessed with good families such as our brother Ralph Draper. We campaigned for him in this very church and got him on city council. His talents in zoning and building codes will help our church to grow.

“Last year our beautiful organ got stolen from the church and y'all got discouraged. Lot of y'all said y'all didn't want to belong to a church that didn't have a grand organ to praise with. Look what we got now! This beautiful Wurlitzer thanks to the Lord blessing our financial efforts!”

The crowd danced and shouted as Jimmy Swan played the elaborate organ. People began to cry and yell. Some even passed out in the aisles.

“So what I'm telling you is, I'm still the same person I was before all the blessings. Before my Mercedes, I had a Pinto and still trusted my God. Before I had all the fine suit's and robes, I loved and trusted my God.

“My God told me I had to do something or my church was going to hell. I said please Lord; you can have my suit's, ha! You can have my fine car, ha! You can have my money, ha! You can have ALL I got. But PLEASE, PLEASE LORD!!! DON'T TAKE MY ANOINTING! PLEASE, PLEASE LORD! DON'T TAKE MY CHURCH! I SAID PLEASE, PLEASE LORD! DON'T SEND MY CHURCH TO HELL, CAUSE YOU'LL HAVE TO SEND IT WITHOUT ME! CAUSE I'LL NEVER LEAVE YOU! THIS CHURCH MAY NEVER SHOUT AGAIN, BUT I'LL SHOUT! THIS CHURCH MAY NEVER JUMP FOR JOY, BUT I'LL JUMP!”

The whole church was on their feet. The choir was singing while the organ played. Bishop Barnes snatched the microphone and ran into the aisle.

“LORD, DON'T TAKE YOUR SPIRIT! LORD, DON'T TAKE YOUR PROTECTION! LAWD! LAWD! DON'T TAKE THE ANOINTING! BECAUSE I'LL NEVER LEAVE YOU LORD! MY CHURCH WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU LORD. WE'LL LAY DOWN OUR LIFE FOR YOU LORD! WE'LL GIVE YOU ALL OUR MONEY LORD! TAKE WHAT WE GOT LORD! WE DON'T WANT IT IF YOU DON'T WANT US! WE OPEN UP OUR WALLETS AND PURSES TO YOU LORD!”

People ran to the front of the stage throwing money into two golden bowls that Deacon Stone put into place. As the bowls overflowed they threw money on the floor, the church was frenzied.

“Does this always happen like this?” I asked.

“Every Sunday,” Rachel replied.

Finally the bishop ran back to the pulpit. “CHURCH MEMBERS! I just want to say to anyone who is visiting today, you must be connected. I mean don't leave here today without signing up to talk to me so you can become a member of the church. You will not gain salvation unless you are connected to a place of worship.”

After the service, members in the foyer surrounded the bishop. He waved to me to hang around.

“I guess it's gonna be a while, the bishop wants to talk to me,” I said.

Rachel turned to me, “You really need to consider his offer. Your brother misses you.”

“He has you now.”

“He needs his brother. Oh well, call when you're done. Mitchell or I will pick you up. Please don't make it a late night. We need to be at the airport early.”

“I won't be late, sis.” I kissed Rachel's cheek, then she left.

As I waited for the bishop, I noticed a few of the female members watching me, whispering and smiling. I wondered what they looked like without their Sunday church dresses. *Did they wear thongs under their modest clothing or no panties at all? How many had shaved muffins or who had the furriest*

bush? A hand on my shoulder interrupted my thoughts.

“Join me in my chamber son,” said the bishop. “But before we go inside, tell me are the lights on or off?”

“What?”

“Just kidding, son.”

CHAPTER 5

It was lavish inside the bishop’s chamber. I saw my reflection in the polished marble floor. A cherry wood bookcase stretched to the ceiling. It was stocked full of books on theology as well as bibles in various languages. He had books on psychology. Books about Alexander the Great, Napoleon and Genghis Khan.

In front of the great bookcase was an enormous cherry wood desk. On the desk was a computer with two monitors. One was a normal computer monitor; the other was a screen that was divided into four viewpoints of the church. The views were of the parking lot, inside the auditorium, the back lot behind the church. The four views stayed on screen for fifteen minutes then changed to four more viewpoints. The other viewpoints were the long hallway outside of the bishop’s chamber, the front door of the church, the church kitchen and a room that looked like a lab. This room had a sanitized counter, cabinet and several rows of baker’s racks, with Deacon Stone off to the side using a money-counting machine.

As we approached the huge desk, I stared awe-struck at the sight of a grand stained glass window from floor to ceiling depicting Abraham being stopped by an angel just before sacrificing his son Isaac. The afternoon sunlight beamed into the center of the office through the colorful window as spears of glowing hues. The effect gave the room a cathedral-like atmosphere. What I noticed most was the deafening absence of sound. As the bishop entered the spears of light he stopped and turned toward me.

“Can’t you just feel the presence of the Holy Spirit?”

I didn’t reply; I was shaking off another flash headache.

“Have a seat son. Can I get you a drink?”

“Sure, do you have Johnnie Walker Black?”

“You tell me,” he laughed.

I sat in one of two plush chairs in front of the desk. The bishop opened a cabinet in the bookcase to reveal a full bar.

“Let me tell you a little about myself,” said the bishop. “I grew up in Chicago. I ran the streets trying to be hard. I never knew my father. I gave my mother a rough time. So she decided we’d move in with my grandparents, leaving the bad elements of Chicago behind.

“I met Stoney, I mean Deacon Stone during the Vietnam War. We had both been hustlers, so we had a lot in common. He was gonna take over his family funeral business. He had already finished half of his schooling before he was drafted. He actually got his mortician’s degree in the military. Anyway, I received the higher calling after the war.

“Life was chaotic, jobs for veterans were slim. Reverend Robbie was my grandparent’s minister, so he took me under his wing early on. The rest is basically history. This ministry has been mine for about seven years now. We came a long way since the good reverend... rest his soul.”

The bishop handed me a drink and sat at his desk. He pulled out a legal pad and pen.

“Now,” he said. “What about you? When did you get the calling?”

I gulped my drink. “Well, I guess it was my sister who got the calling. I just kinda helped her out.”

“Your prayer at the wedding was that of a preacher . . . not a helper. Don’t you preach at your sister’s church?”

“I have. I just meant that my sister sort of chose my path. I’m very well versed in the scriptures. I preached a few Sundays at the mission. My sister is rather forceful with me and my brother. He decided to leave, I stayed and I helped my sister in her ministry. Can I have another drink?”

“Sure. . . I see you enjoy indulging.”

“It’s a controlled vice of mine.”

“Heh, heh. A controlled vice. I like that, heh, heh.” The bishop got my drink and sat back down. “Are you ordained as a minister?”

“What?”

“Ordained. Licensed. Are you a card-carrier?”

“No.”

“I’m gonna change that. I’ll train you and get you ordained quickly. You make a lot of money at the mission?”

“No, I’m taken care of. Virginia doesn’t handle her ministry that way. She . . .”

“She’s taking advantage of you boy. She gets her money up front from the state. She also gets tithes, and contributions from reformed grateful women. You got a gift but you’re broke.”

“You make it sound like a business.”

“Ain’t nothing free, not even Heaven. The path of righteousness is paved with contributions. . . it’s business. It’s the business of saving souls. I want you to preach here. In my ministry you’ll grow and you’ll see God’s rewards in every aspect of your life, even financially.”

“But my sister . . .”

“Your sister is exploiting you. You’ve got a gift son. Most ministries use gimmicks to get the word to people, but you’re the real deal.”

“Listen, I’m sure my brother blew my ability way out of proportion. It’s so limited that it’s really no big deal.”

“Can you tell what’s in my desk right now?”

“I’m not a psychic.”

“Do you know who shot Tupac?”

“No.”

“But 9/11 . . . I know you saw that coming.”

“What I saw seven days ahead was people in front of their TV’s, mouths were dropped, people had shocked looks on their faces. I thought it was Michael Jackson giving another stellar performance, you know, like his Motown Billy Jean moonwalk thing.”

“Why did you think that?”

“Michael Jackson’s 30 year tribute show was on September 10. There were promotions about the show a week ahead. I was sleeping off a hangover when the plane hit the first tower. I got up and saw everyone in the mission glued to the TV that’s when I knew what I saw seven days earlier was the attack.”

The bishop clapped his hands and laughed. “Ha, ha, that’s it son! You still saw it first. That’s a hell of a gift.”

“Why would you call something that has given me so much pain a gift? It’s more like a curse. I’ve never been able to see what was gonna happen to me . . . ever. As a kid, when I was with my brother, I’d tell him to duck, but I’d be the one getting busted in the face with a snowball. I’d pull Mitchell out of harms way then I’d step right into a pile of shit.”

“Can you tell me what I had for dinner last night? Or how much money we pulled in tonight?”

“No, that’s the past. I find that out the same as everyone . . . after the fact.”

“Have you ever searched for lost kids?”

“No I have to be in the presence of the person or touch them for a flash.”

“Have you ever got a flash from a dead person? Do clothes or objects give you flashes? Have you ever saved a life?”

I dropped my head. “No. Some gift huh? I lost so much with this raw deal.”

“What did you lose?”

“My twin brother Lyle. He was run over by a car outside of our house. He was two.”

“Damn son, where were your parents?”

“I’m not sure. I was told that they didn’t know he was outside until I screamed. I cried non-stop for a week. All types of doctors ran all types of tests, but found nothing wrong with me. After that, they noticed things that I said would come true no more than a week later.”

The bishop wrote intently, making notes and checking off questions as they were answered. He occasionally lifted his head from his notes only to utter words like “Amazing” or “Praise the Lord.”

“My father would say to me, 'Law, you're a special child', but I didn’t feel special. Most of the time I saw things that I never wanted to see.”

“Like what?”

“Like...” I stopped. “Listen bishop, I really need to be heading out. we need to get to the airport pretty early and ...”

“Don’t pass your gift off lightly son,” the bishop interrupted, “this ain’t some cute parlor trick. You must use what God gives you. I want you to work with me here in my ministry. I’ll give you the direction you need.”

“I think I’ll just stay with my sister’s mission.”

“Don’t run away from your calling. The prophet Jonah tried to run and was swallowed up by a great fish. Don’t get swallowed up Lawrence. I’m sure you’re familiar with the parable of the talents. It would be an act of unfaithfulness to bury what God gave you instead of trying to increase it. He who is faithful with least will be faithful in much.”

“But you’re talking wealth. The scriptures also say as you receive freely, so should you give freely.”

The bishop glared at me. “Don’t ever question or condemn the wealth of my ministry. God has blessed me. I welcome his blessings. I came from the streets. I hustled to eat. But I loved the voice of my Father and unlike you I answered his call. You’re right, you do need to go. I was wrong about you. You don’t have a gift. It’s only a parlor trick. Good afternoon, Mr. Garnier.”

I smiled, rubbed my head and headed for the door. I stopped and turned. The bishop leaned back in his fine leather chair.

“Speaking of parlor tricks, bishop, it would be in your best interest to leave your keys in your unlocked car for a week. Good afternoon.”

CHAPTER 6

Outside the church, I was shocked to see Mitchell waiting. It was quiet for most of the ride home, until Mitchell spoke.

“How did it go?”

“He talked, I listened and that was it.” I wanted the bishop out of my head so I changed the subject. “Congratulations on the birth of my niece.”

“She’s beautiful, Law.”

“I know.”

“Her mother hadn’t picked out a name yet.”

I smiled. “It’s Kimberly.”

“Kimberly?” Mitchell thought for a moment. “Wow, I like that, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

There was another uncomfortable moment of silence that lasted the rest of the way home. Before

we went inside Mitchell spoke again.

“Listen Lawrence, I love Rachel. I’ll do right by her, I promise.”

I wanted to smile but I couldn’t. I wanted to believe Mitchell but I simply couldn’t see that far.

Rachel heard Mitchell’s car as it pulled into the garage. She rushed to put the rolls in the oven then ran to the front door. She wanted to hear the results of Lawrence’s meeting with the bishop.

“So Lawrence, how did it go?”

I shrugged my shoulders, “I think the bishop has the wrong impression of me.”

“I don’t understand. He couldn’t wait to speak with you. He really wants you to be a part of the ministry.”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” I headed to my room.

Mitchell followed and closed the door behind.

“Listen Law, you’ve got to get your act together, that was rude to breeze past Rachel that way. She only wanted...”

I interrupted, “How much does she know about me Mitch?”

“What?”

“Does she know about the flashes? Tell the truth for once when you answer!”

“Hold on boy. What’s your problem?”

“The bishop didn’t care about my preaching abilities. He knew about the flashes. It was all about my gift.”

“I talked to the bishop in detail, yes, but Rachel doesn’t know about the second sight.”

“You put a title to it like it’s a normal thing.”

“Normal or not, it’s what you do. If it can help you, use it to your advantage.”

“It hasn’t helped me. It hurts me everyday.”

“It saved my life didn’t it? Don’t keep blaming yourself for dad’s death. You probably didn’t see it coming... I mean, you were young. I know you couldn’t see everything.”

I stayed silent.

“We need to go eat.” Mitchell put his hand on my shoulder. “Listen Law, I owe you my life, but you owe yourself a better life. You need to seriously consider the bishop’s offer.”

CHAPTER 7

In the bishop’s chamber, after all the money had been counted and divided, the deacon and Bishop Barnes sipped brandy and discussed Lawrence Garnier.

“What do you think he meant by that, Zeke?” asked the deacon.

“I don’t know, Stoney. It wasn’t what he said that bothered me... but how he said it. It was almost like a curse.”

“You believe in that kind of stuff now?”

“I’ve seen a lot of things, ya know. Half my hair ain’t white for nothing. This kid sees the future.”

“So you do believe his gimmick?”

“Gimmicks I know, Stoney. I believe this kid has something. Something I can use. And if he’s the real deal, we’ll be rich.”

“We are rich now.”

“You know what I mean, rich in power. Empires have been won based on power.”

“And you think this guy can give it to us?”

“You didn’t hear how it worked, Stoney. I mean it made sense. But he has limit’s. He can only see seven days out.”

“So did he see this conversation?”

The bishop hesitated, "I – I don't know."

Both men started looking up and around as if they'd see someone watching them.

The bishop shook his head to clear it. "Let's not get crazy over this," he said. "But just to play it safe, we'll limit your exposure to him. It seems that he has to be near or touch people in order to see their future. Wait a minute, he can't see his own future."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I wrote that down. If all that he says is true."

"Well, I guess we'll know in about seven days...if we figure out what he meant about your keys."

"I guess you're right. At least we can discuss him without him knowing, since it's about him. What about communion? How are we with our supply of loaves?"

"At least a two-week supply."

"Good, if we can get him, Cottontail will need to resume that duty. We'll have to limit their exposure."

The bishop looked at his notes.

"Hey Stoney, how much did we pull in today?"

"Sixty-eight hundred."

"I asked Lawrence the same question and he had no idea. He can't see the past either. We can handle him."

"But is he worth all the trouble, Zeke?"

"If he's the real deal, we'll handle him and he'll be worth it."

"And if he is not, you know I will embalm him."

"Speaking of embalming, is Cottontail's son ready for Tuesday?"

"He has been ready. The morgue did all the work. When I picked the boy up, he was already sealed in a bio-hazard body bag. He is at home in the freezer."

The bishop hesitated for a second. After years of knowing Stoney, his stoic manner still disturbed him.

"Was Cottontail at the morgue when you picked up the body?" asked the bishop.

"Yes, she signed the release papers. Of course she refused to speak to me."

"She hates you, Stoney."

"Indeed. She is too warm-blooded for my taste anyway."

"That's sick."

"You are simply unaware of the benefit's, Zeke. Well, another day in the Lords service is over, so I shall be on my way."

"We're gonna take this church to the next level Stoney. The attack on the World Trade Center may have been the best thing for religion but Lawrence Garnier will get us to the next level. I just have to convince him... and I will."

"I hope you are correct. So what about his view of your future?"

"I guess for the next week I'll keep my keys inside my unlocked car."

CHAPTER 8

Sunday dinner was always a solemn occasion at the Billups' home.

"Ladies did we enjoy the bishop's sermon today?" asked Thelma.

"Yes ma'am," answered the young girls in unison.

"Have you been memorizing your bible books?"

The girls reluctantly answered, "Yes."

"Debbie, you go first."

"I know mine all the way to Ecclesiastes!" yelled Doreen.

"I asked your little sister to go first. Please don't interrupt." Thelma never took her eyes off the younger of the two girls.

"But I..."

"Silence! Ed please correct your daughter."

"Please, just let Debbie try first," Ed was more interested in the meal.

"Debra," said Thelma, "recite the first ten books of the Bible."

Debbie looked around the table. Her father never made eye contact with her. Her sister bit her lip nervously. Debbie began slowly.

"Genesis... Exodus... Le-vi-ti-cus." Doreen was mouthing the books along with her little sister.

Debbie continued, "Numbers... Deut," Debbie hesitated, "Deut... Deut-onomy."

"Wrong!" shouted Thelma. "Again."

"Deutonomy."

"I meant from the beginning!"

"Thelma, let the child enjoy dinner," said Ed.

"No, she had two weeks to practice the first ten books," said Thelma, "and she can't even give me five."

"She's nine Thelma. They're hard to pronounce."

"When the good bishop is sitting at our table these girls will make a good impression," Thelma struck the table with her fist. "Now Debra, give me ten!"

The little girl began to cry. Ed got up from the table and grabbed a brown bag from the cupboard.

"I had enough of this," he said as he left the house.

Thelma and the two girls were alone at the table.

"Doreen go to your room," Thelma tried to subdue her anger.

"Ma'am," whispered Doreen, "don't you want me to recite?"

"Your room Doreen."

"Yes ma'am," Doreen left for upstairs. She stopped to look at her little sister.

"Doreen!"

The young girl ran upstairs.

Thelma stared at the crying nine-year-old.

"Debra, six months ago a terrible event took place in New York. Do you know what that terrible thing was?"

"Yes ma'am, it was 9/11."

"Do you know why it happened? Why men and women and little boys and girls died on that day? Why children in planes died on that terrible day? It was because these people who died didn't love God. Do you want a plane to hit this house?"

"No ma'am," the little girl started to tremble. "Do you want something terrible to happen to your father or sister?"

"No ma'am," Debbie collapsed into tears. Thelma walked toward little Debbie. She stroked the beautiful black hair of the little girl as the child buried her face on the table. "Shh, it's alright, dear. I know you don't want to die like your first mother did. I know you love God. You do love God, don't you?"

"Y-Yes ma'am."

Thelma leaned down as if to kiss Debbie. She whispered into the child's ear, "If you love God and don't want to die.... give me ten."

Later that evening, I packed my belongings for my trip home. I skipped dinner and snacked in my room. Underwood deviled ham on crackers and Planters' peanuts. I had already consumed a half bottle of Johnnie Walker Black when I put in my Marvin Gaye CD. As the music played I sipped my way into numbness. In this state I didn't worry about my future and it clouded the guilt from my past.

CHAPTER 9

The hearse passed two stone lions and proceeded up the long driveway. The grounds around the funeral home had not been tended for quite a while. The Advancing Light of Eternal Rest Funeral Home had not hosted many funerals since most were held at the church. But it was a very active home for the dead. Deacon Stone was very proficient in the field of Mortuary Science.

He drove to the back of the home, but didn't bother to park inside the large garage, which already housed four vintage hearses. He walked across the gravel driveway to the rear delivery access that led to the basement. Deacon Stone loved coming home to a quiet house. He especially loved a house full of dead silence.

Inside to the immediate right was an enormous walk-in freezer. Beyond that point the basement opened up into a wet lab, full of stainless steel sinks and drains in the floor. Slabs, which were stainless steel tables on wheels, as well as, several porcelain slab tables in the center of the lab, with berms and draining tubes that lead to the sinks. The lab was clinically clean. The air was heavy with the aroma formaldehyde and disinfectant.

In the center of the lab was a rolling crane-like contraption with four broad woven straps used for lifting and lowering corpses. The counter tops looked almost surgical with utensils such as bone saws, various forceps and scalpels. The overhead cabinets housed cosmetics to hide the pain of the dead, as well as, spools of thread made from catguts and blocks of paraffin wax.

There were four chamber-like recesses that out-lined the walls of the lab. These alcoves were wide and deep intended for the reception of caskets. Three of these were the spots that launched the body and casket to the three slumber rooms on the first floor for viewing by the grieving funeral attendees. On the wall were signs marked slumber room one through three next to what looked like elevator buttons labeled up and down. But the fourth alcove was not numbered at all and stopped, not on the first floor but on the second floor where the deacon's living quarters were.

Deacon Stone entered the walk-in freezer. He passed the remains of what was left of Nathan Campbell and retrieved a stainless steel rolling slab holding a body covered with a white sheet. He rolled the slab out of the freezer and over to the fourth numberless alcove. Next he positions a vertical heat lamp several feet from the body. Then he pulled the sheet away to reveal a nude body of a woman. Her age was twenty-something yet there was a mysteriously obvious white streak in her hair.

The deacon knew the facts surrounding the woman just like he knew the facts surrounding Nate Campbell. In fact, there were very few bodies that he embalmed that he didn't know the facts surrounding why they were in his charge. He left the body of the woman to warm by the lamp while he took the stairs to the second floor.

In his bedroom he removed his suit coat and tie. Then he went in to his kitchen and took out a bottle of white wine from the fridge. On a silver serving tray he placed the bottle of wine along with two wine glasses and returned to this bedroom. There he opened the wine and poured two glasses. He walked over to the recess on the far wall and pushed the up button. There was a low hum as the stainless steel slab rose to the second floor.

Deacon Stone closed the door to his bedroom just as the hum stopped. If there had been any other living thing around, the deacon's greeting would not have been lost, "Good evening my dear. Will you join me in a drink?"

I was unable to sleep. My head pounded from all my thoughts. I turned the radio on but kept the volume low so not to disturb my brother and Rachel. I took a deep drink from my bottle. Tomorrow I would be back home with my sister. I wondered if I would get any sleep with her around. I took another

deep drink because I already knew she wouldn't let me.

CHAPTER 10

Monday morning found the bishop enjoying coffee in his dining room. He resembled an aristocrat in his silk pajamas and smoking jacket while examining his ledger of rental property. It was already the tenth and as usual Marie Harris was the only one of his tenants who hadn't paid her rent. He wasn't surprised since she hadn't paid rent in six years. He knew she was good for it.

For six years she had been very good to him in other ways. She had no choice, since her boyfriend, Def-con had been sent to prison for manslaughter. His real name was James Douglas Green but the streets knew him as Def-con among the drug circuit. Marie knew him as her escape from poverty. *Come to think of it, Marie wasn't at church yesterday. I'll pay here a late visit tonight,* thought the bishop. *I'll treat myself to some back rent.* The phone rang and Bishop Barnes looked to see which line the call was on. It was the church business line.

"This is Bishop Barnes."

"Hello Bishop, this is Ethan Cook. How are you this morning?"

"The Lord has blessed me with another glorious day."

"Amen, sir. My reason for calling is to accept your offer."

"Praise and glory to the Most High. That's wonderful news, son. This ministry is proud to have you aboard. You're in for a truly wonderful blessing."

"I know, bishop. Thanks for this opportunity. I'm wrapping up my business here in Chicago and should be ready to report to you in about a month. Is that acceptable?"

"That's fine, son. God bless you and I'll see you in a month. Stay Blessed."

"You too, bishop, good-bye."

Bishop Barnes smiled and opened the sliding glass doors from the dining room and strolled across the garden to the church. He entered his chamber. As he walked through the morning sun's rays coming through the grand stain glass window, the colors seemed to jump from his elegant smoking jacket like sparks of flame from forged steel.

At his desk, the bishop picked up one of two folders. It was a file on Ethan Cook. He smiled as he thumbed through the information compiled about the ambitious young faith healer from Chicago. The bishop was taking his ministry to a new level. He knew that he had to move now while the world's religious climate was hot. He knew he needed young members since the majority of his church was elderly. He knew that a young ambitious faith healer was easy to promote.

Ethan Cook would be a better draw than a bootlegged, half-hearted prophet with limited, if any, sight. The bishop picked up the second folder; it was Lawrence's information. He flipped through it. "This son of a bitch couldn't tell the difference between the World Trade Center attack and a Michael Jackson concert!" The bishop tossed Lawrence's file in the trash. "Michael Jackson, huh?... right."

"Don't wait too long between visit's Lawrence," said Rachel as she kissed me goodbye. My head ached as I saw visions of Rachel holding a palm-size crystal pineapple. "You've got an hour before your flight, don't dally around and miss it."

Mitchell embraced me, "I love you, and I love Rachel."

The pain in my head increased as I saw Mitchell holding the same crystal pineapple.

"We'll all be just fine," said Mitchell.

"Honey, we're boarding now," said Rachel. "Well, we're off to Hawaii," smiled Mitchell. "Try to kiss sis from me."

I watched as Rachel and Mitchell handed the agent their boarding pass. Rachel turned, "Call us."

I waved until they disappeared into the jet way. *Mitchell doesn't deserve such a good woman*, I thought. I needed a drink so I went to the bar. I had three Johnnie Walkers on the rocks. On my flight back home I had four.

The bishop spent most of his day running errands. He went to the grocery, picked suit's up at the cleaners and bought a new pair of shoes. At every stop he remembered what Lawrence said about his car keys. He left his keys inside his console and left his Mercedes unlocked.

At the mall he thought it to be a waste of time to even keep considering such a backwater bumpkin's cry for attention. He was not impressed with Lawrence's special gift and resented Mitchell for building him up to be something he wasn't. He'd never consider Lawrence for any job around the church and his car keys would stay with him. The rest of the day he prepared sermons then took a long nap before dinner. He planned to pray with Marie late into the night, so he needed his rest.

CHAPTER 11

The Mission seemed quiet as I entered the front door. The long hallway was absent of any voices. The huge doors to the chapel were open so I entered and saw several of the women mopping.

"Lawrence!" The voice came from behind the pulpit. Shelly hurried down the stairs and ran up the center aisle straight into my arms. I could hardly speak between the kisses.

"I'm glad you're back sweetie," she said.

"Not as glad as I am," said another woman.

"Dena," I said as I walked toward her.

"Shelly, you need to finish behind the stage," said Dena. Shelly looked to the floor and headed back down the aisle only after stealing one more kiss from me.

"How was the wedding, baby?" asked Dena.

"It was nice."

"Ours will be better."

"Where's Virginia?"

"She's in her office. First you need to come to my room. I have two surprises for you. Leave your bag here."

Dena led me out the back door of the Chapel to an annexed building that looked like a college dorm. Inside her room, Dena handed me a new bottle of Johnnie Walker.

"Dena, you shouldn't have liquor in here."

"That's your first present. Here's your second."

Dena placed both hands under my shirt. She trembled, as each muscle on my torso seemed to ripple effortlessly under her palms. She unbuckled my pants and reached inside my underwear to capture my erect snake. She pulled it out over my shorts just as she dropped to her knees. She put it in her mouth, my eyes rolled backwards. As I enjoyed her willing mouth I opened the bottle of whiskey and drank deeply from it. Neither of us noticed the door as it opened.

"Dena!"

Dena fell to the floor and I almost spilled my whiskey. . . but I didn't.

In the doorway of Dena's room stood a large statue of a woman with a bible in her hand and dressed in a crisp white blouse and gray suit. Her stern face looked almost handsome although there were hints of a once softer prettiness. With her hair pulled back she looked like a warden in a female prison. It was my sister.

"Dena, wipe your mouth and empty the trash cans in my office...after you dust it."

"Yes ma'am, Mother Virginia". Dena hurried out.

I smiled, "Hey Sis." She smiled as she approached. I opened my arms to hug her.

SLAP!

“You dare to disrespect me?” she said.

“Listen, Dena just...”

“It’s not about Dena or your eighty-proof breath. I allow you certain vices to keep you sane.”

“The wedding was beautiful Virginia and they’re happy.”

“I told you not to go. Their lives will be ruined because of who Mitchell is. I’ve tried to save us all. Mitchell’s on his own now but I will not lose you. Don’t ever go against my word again. Not if you know what’s best for you.”

“What is best for me, sis?”

“Put your dick back in your pants and go unpack.”

She left me where I stood. Aside from myself, Virginia was the only other person I could never get flashes on. What’s a gift without benefit’s? To me it’s a freakish parlor trick at best. It was bad enough to never see anything about your own future, but it was truly a curse to not be able to see the future of the one person holding you back in life.

Bishop Barnes pulled out of his garage and drove around to the front of the church to place the funeral schedule details in Stoney’s mailbox. His attire was dinner casual. His sports coat, no tie, tan slacks was accented with alligator shoes and finished off with a splendid straw hat. As he went to get back in the car a gust of wind lifted his hat from his head and floated it down the street. It danced and skipped just out of the bishop’s reach as he followed it across the street to the next corner.

A block further, at this time of the evening Ms. Meadow always let her cat Trixie out. Instead of the cat’s usual path, this particular moment Trixie choose to go left instead of right. A half block ahead of Trixie, Charles Hill was setting his evening trash out while Bull, his Great Dane, watched from the back porch.

Bull and Trixie had never met until this moment. As Bull cleared his back fence, Trixie shot off like a bullet. The chase led the two pets through yards. Dirt and water and smacked against the bishop. When the ruckus cleared the dapper bishop was in no shape to pray with anyone. Frustrated, he returned home and went to bed.

CHAPTER 12

Nate Campbell’s funeral was especially hard because of all of the tribulation that seemed to plague the Campbell family. Nate was a fine young man who had taken several wrong steps in life. His drug addiction and his contraction of AIDS sealed his fate. With the support of his mother he had endured the murder of his father and maintained a quiet existence through all of his trials. Out of nowhere, a love interest entered his miserable life. He seemed almost hopeful until he committed suicide after his girlfriend suffered a nervous breakdown.

Bishop Barnes was especially close to this family. The sheepish younger son Julius sang in the choir. The bishop wanted more young ones in his ministry. Angela Campbell, the mother, was a tortured soul who knew the bishop and Deacon Stone for many years. She assisted in many of the behind-the-scene duties of the church, such as preparing the communion loaves. This duty was now the obligation of the deacon since Angela’s recent church absence due to her son’s death.

There were oddities concerning Angela. The first was that, although she was plagued with woe, her appearance never showed it. She was the perfect picture of angelic beauty with the natural curved sultriness of a movie starlet of the fifties. Her chocolate brown skin was flawless, her dark hair and rich brown eyes were pure enchantment. Her lips dripped with seduction.

At the cemetery, as the bishop gave a final prayer on behalf of Nathan Evan Campbell, Angela’s

beautiful veiled face showed no emotion. Her tears would flow in private as they always have. At this moment, she had to be strong for Julius. She could not lose him. Julius was all she had left. In route to their vehicles, the crowd whispered their condolences to Angela. The lost mother and son stood motionless, staring at Nate's coffin. Thelma Billups, in her over-done black dress and gaudy hat, reached out to the grieving mother.

"Angela, my prayers are with you. Lord knows that boy put you through much sorrow. He's gone now and his bad deeds are gone with him. Sooner or later God always lifts a mother's burden."

Angela stood frozen in silence. The reddish hue of pressure formed in the whites of her eyes.

Thelma continued, "I'm waiting for God's grace to lift mine too". She placed her hand on Angela's shoulder before she walked away.

The bishop approached, "Julius may I have a word with mother alone please."

"Yes sir, Bishop Barnes". The boy walked up the hill and stood next to the hearse, while Deacon Stone sat stoically in the driver's seat.

The bishop stood beside Angela and gazed at the coffin for a moment. He put his arm around her and moved close to her ear. "How are you holding up, Cottontail?"

"Get your damn hands off me you slimy bastard."

"Come on now. I just wanted to tell you how lovely you look in black lace. I've missed you these last couple of months. I was hoping we could get together tonight, you know, for prayer."

The bishop tried to kiss Angela's cheek. She turned away from him. "I despise you", she hissed."

"I think you forgot the position you're in. You've got one boy in the box right now. It would be a waste to lose Julius too."

She looked over her shoulder and saw her son standing by the hearse. Deacon Stone was standing next to him with his huge arm around the boy.

The bishop continued, "He's a fine young man. I'm sure Stoney has room in the car for his final ride. Maybe you'd rather have another visit from you know who."

She started to tremble. "You fucking bastard!"

"Still with the attitude. Listen bitch, it's like this, do your grieving then get over it. You need to get back to your church duties. And as far as the attitude, I could forgive you but you need to lose it for Julius's sake. If I ever have to forgive you again, it will cost you his blood because without the shedding of blood there is no remission... Hebrews nine twenty-two."

Angela lifted her veil and tearfully gazed at him. "Eye for an eye, mother fucker... Deuteronomy nineteen, twenty-one and me. Julius, come here!"

The boy stood next to his mother. Bishop Barnes stared for a moment then smiled. "See you in church Julius, and take care of your mother."

"Yes sir, bishop."

The bishop walked up the hill while Angela held onto Julius for dear life.

CHAPTER 13

After Wednesday evening's bible service the bishop, being in a prayerful mood, pulled out of his garage on his way to see Marie. As he drove around to the front of the church the wind grew fierce. The bishop noticed that his car rocked as leaves and debris flew all around.

CRASH!

A huge branch mashed through the passenger side of the back window.

"Fuck Me!" he screamed as he tried to shield himself from the shower of broken glass. He jumped out of his car and staggered in the middle of the street. It was 10:30 and the street was strangely deserted. He walked around to the other side of his car. He saw the huge branch hanging halfway out of

his car. He shook his head and pulled the tree out of his car. Then he drove to see Deacon Stone.

The bishop didn't try to hide the fact that he was upset. It wouldn't have worked if he tried. Stoney knew the bishop well. He poured a glass of wine. The two sat in slumber room one to talk.

"I never noticed any strange high winds, Zeke. Not Monday night or tonight. Every thing's been quiet around here it always is." said the deacon.

"Something wss keeping me from leaving the church tonight. Something weird."

The deacon thought for a moment, he removed his large polyurethane apron and rolled down the sleeves of his white shirt. "Where have you been keeping your keys?"

"I keep them on my desk in my office, why?"

"Didn't Lawrence warn you about your keys?"

"He's a joke. He mumbled something about keeping my keys inside my unlocked car for a week. But that's my Mercedes. I'm not falling for that."

"Maybe he's not a joke. Just try it for a while and see if it stops your windstorms. I know it seems crazy, but you and I have seen things a lot crazier."

"He might try to steal my car."

"Maybe he was trying to earn your respect."

"If he's playing some kind of trick he'll have Hell to pay."

"We've paid it. He can too."

CHAPTER 14

I reclined in bed while working on Virginia's sermon for Sunday. I shoved another handful of Planter's peanuts in my mouth, and poured another shot. There was a knock on my door.

"Come in."

Dena walked in. She was in her nightgown.

"Are you finished working?" she asked.

"I am now. Come here." Dena removed her gown and got in bed. We kissed.

"I love you Lawrence."

"Do you?"

I ran my tongue from the nape of her neck down to her cleavage. I cupped one of her breast and gently licked her nipple.

"Mmm, that's so good," she sighed.

"I have something else good,"

I slid between her spread legs. I pulled down my sweatpants. She positioned herself for entry.

"Do you want it?" I asked.

"I want all you have to give." She closed her eyes and lifted her moist mound higher. "I want to be your wife, Lawrence."

She waited to be impaled. She waited then opened her eyes. "Lawrence?"

I was out of the bed pulling up my sweats.

"What's the matter baby?"

"Dena just go back to your room."

"No, I'm sorry Lawrence. I just got caught up."

"I know sweetie, I just need you to go."

"No, please listen. I understand. I won't say anything." She dropped to her knees and pulled my sweats back down.

"See I won't say anything else."

She swallowed me. My eyes rolled backwards as tears fell onto her back. I was in ecstasy and

agony at the same time.

Rachel and Mitchell displayed the picture of wedded bliss as they roamed the shops around Maui. In one exclusive shop they found a beautiful palm-size crystal pineapple by *Swarovski*.

“You think he’ll like it?” asked Rachel.

“I don’t know. I guess so.”

“For a keepsake from us it’ll be fine. What should we get for your sister?”

“Nothing!” She didn’t want us to marry.”

“That’s her problem not ours.”

“Trust me, she wouldn’t appreciate it. Let’s get the crystal for Lawrence and leave it at that.”

Rachel went to pay for Lawrence’s gift as Mitchell wandered outside the shop.

“Can you pack and ship direct from this store?” ask Rachel.

“Yes ma’am, that’s not a problem,” said the clerk.

“One minute please,” Rachel ran and picked up a beautiful hand-painted vented fan. “His sister will appreciate this”, she mumbled. “I’d like to ship both of these separately.”

“Would you like to add cards?”

“Yes, put from your brother and sister with love on both please.”

CHAPTER 15

All day Thursday, the bishop made sure to leave his key in his unlocked Mercedes. It was easy when he left his car for the window repair, but it was nerve-racking while he did his grocery shopping and trip to the cleaners. Still he followed through with his decision to test the Lawrence Garnier theory. After all, he trusted Stoney’s judgment. He even left the keys in his unlocked car when it was safe in his garage. He managed to pull Lawrence’s file from the trash.

When Friday evening rolled around, no dogs or cats had run a muck and there were no mysterious windstorms. The bishop, although leery, faced his heavy urge to pray with Marie. From the church to his rental property where she lived nothing weird occurred.

He thought for a moment then decided to continue following Stoney’s advice. He took Marie’s apartment key off his key chain and left the rest of his keys in his unlocked car. On the fifth floor, the bishop stood on the welcome mat in front of Marie’s door.

In his soft pale-yellow linen suit over a Carmel colored silk crew neck shirt that matched his gators perfectly, the bishop looked like he was going to a lawn party of the wealthy. His erection tested the limit's of his pants as he thought of how wildly Marie bucks whenever they prayed together.

He entered her apartment. Then he removed a suit hanger from her closet and went into her bathroom. He hung his clothes on the back of her bathroom door. Then walked into her room. She was asleep. He gently climbed in under the covers and softly kissed the back of her neck. She stirred slightly. He lifted her short nightgown and grabbed a handful of her luscious ass. He could feel the glad-water slide down his rock-hard shaft. He licked her shoulder then sucked her earlobe. She moaned.

“It’s time to pray baby,” he whispered.

“Umm, huh, Bishop! What are you doing?” she tried to contain her startled yell.

“I’m hard as Chinese math.”

“You’ve got to go now.”

“Why?”

“Douglass will be home any minute.”

“What? Douglass is in jail.”

“He was in jail. He got out this morning. He went out with some friends and he’ll be back any

minute.”

“He’s out?”

“Yeah and he was in for murder so get out now!”

The bishop jumped out of bed. Marie got up also.

“I was going to tell you first chance I got.”

Suddenly, they both heard the apartment door open.

“That’s him,” she whispered. “Get out.”

“The motherfucker got a key already? I got to get my clothes.”

“Baby it’s me,” Douglass called from the front.

“There ain’t time. Take the fire escape down.”

“Shit I’m naked.”

“He’s a murderer,” she pushed him to the window.

“Bitch, you owe me rent money.”

The butt-naked bishop scurried down the fire escape like a rat. He darted and stopped at every sound and tried to stay out of the light. He finally made his way to his car and was glad it was already unlocked. He was glad his keys weren’t on him or he really would’ve been in a bind. Then it hit him.

Oh my Lord... Lawrence Garnier.

Deacon Stone had just finished cleaning the lab when he heard the doorbell. The ringing doorbell quickly changed to frantic knocking by the time he got to the door. When he opened the door, the naked bishop ran inside.

“He’s the real deal, dammit!”

“Who? What? Why are you naked?”

The bishop went to sit in a large upholstered chair.

“Wait!” yelled the deacon.

“Sit on this.”

He laid a newspaper in the chair. “Now what are you babbling about? And why are you naked?”

“Lawrence Garnier can see the future!”

It took the bishop thirty minutes and three glasses of wine to explain the events of the week that caused him to be a true believer of Lawrence Garnier’s talent.

“So you are convinced that there is really something special about this him?”

“Stoney, I know it sounds crazy. Everything happened just like he said.”

“All he told you was where to store your keys. He did not say anything about windstorms and wild dogs and cats.”

“That’s why he’s so amazing. Each one of these things by themselves wouldn’t mean anything. They all happened within a seven day period and if I’d kept my keys with me and locked my car, I’d been a lost peanut in deep shit.”

“Umm hum, that is interesting and not crazy at all. Just one thing Zeke, why our ministry? If he’s really a gifted one you know what we need to do.”

“Why not our ministry? Look at what we can accomplish with him, the expansions and the power. He’s our prize bull.”

“But we have got to get close to that bull to get that ring in his nose.”

“I got his file and you need to go to Louisiana and get the scoop on what’s important to him. Stoney, this will set our ministry apart from everybody’s. Let’s get the ring in his nose.”

“Okay. We will get the ring in his nose and if he gets out of hand, we will lead him to the slaughterhouse. Wait a minute; do you think he saw this conversation ahead of time?”

“No, he never sees his own future, so if it’s about him he’ll never see us coming. You need to limit any contact with him. Stay out of sight. We’re okay on the communion offerings but we need to get Cottontail’s act together. We can do this Stoney.”

“I’ll leave for Louisiana tomorrow night.”

“Do you have anything I can wear home?”
“You can wear a burial suit but the back is out.”
“That’s a damn shame.”

CHAPTER 16

Saturday mornings at the mission were always busy. Everyone rose early for breakfast then bible study led by Virginia. Afterwards, all of the women took part in cleaning the mission inside and out. It went well in the community to see the hard-working women making positive steps to change their wayward lives. For this reason, Sunday services were always filled with visitors and walk-ins wondering if this mission was the answer to their prayers.

Lawrence was the exception. He always slept late on Saturdays and never participated in the massive cleaning chores. Friday nights always left him exhausted and hung-over. Virginia would normally disappear after the morning bible study. She rarely left the mission grounds but would retreat to her elaborate suite or in her inner office tending business matters.

Her doorbell rang. She thought it was Lawrence and wondered why he bothered ringing when he normally barged in juggling a plate stacked with food. It shocked her to see Dena at her door.

“Sorry to disturb you Sister Virginia, may I talk to you?”

“Sure Dena, let’s go into my office.”

“Sister Virginia, I just want to thank you for everything. I know I was a handful at times but you know I’ve always tried to be responsible.”

“You are a good person Dena.”

“I’m sure you know how I feel about Lawrence. I was…”

“Now Dena, you know I’ve turned a blind eye to the game you and my brother play.”

“That’s just it. It’s not a game. I love Lawrence and I feel the love he has for me, I really do. I want to marry him Sister Virginia.”

“Ha, don’t be silly girl. You know Lawrence is never going to marry you. You shouldn’t have gotten your emotions so involved.”

“I’m pregnant… two months.”

Virginia stopped laughing. “I gave you pills to take.”

“I’m sorry sister, I lied about taking them.” Dena began to cry. “I know we can be a family and things can be wonderful for us. I always wanted a family, Sister Virginia.”

“Does Lawrence know?” Virginia began to walk towards Dena.

“No ma’am. He won’t even talk to me about marriage.”

“Does anyone know?”

“You’re the only one I’ve told.”

Virginia smirked and stroked the young woman's hair. “You really love my brother don’t you?”

“More than anything.”

“So be it. He will do right by you and the baby. I will see to it,” she gave Dena a tender hug. “But if you really want to marry him you’ll have to let me handle it. Say nothing about any of this to anyone, especially Lawrence.”

“I promise I won’t talk to anyone about this. Thank you. Imagine it… we’ll be true sisters.”

“Won’t that be wonderful, Dena. So don’t mess things up and say anything about this. I’ll fix everything. Then we can plan a big wedding. Now run along, sweetie.”

Virginia thought for a moment. She knew she had to act quickly. Dena made great changes in her life. She didn’t need to be messed up because of her brother. She went into her office, unlocked a cabinet that held several bottles of whiskey. She took a bottle.

Next she grabbed papers from her desk. It was her sermon for Sunday. She left her inner office, then opened a narrow closet and grabbed a broom. She left her suite, stomped through the hallway and stormed into Lawrence's room.

"I rebuke you Satan!" she screamed.

WHAM!

"AHH! What the..."

WHAM! WHAM!

"Stop! ow! What'd I do?" I fell to the floor. I couldn't believe my sister was beating me.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

The blows were across my back as I tried to get to my knees.

"What'd I do?"

"By the power ordained in me I swear I will beat the devil out of you!" she raised the broom again.

"Don't hit me! Please!"

She threw her papers at me.

"You call that a sermon? After everything I do for you, this is the quality of work I get? I provide for your every need, yet I have to suffer because you went to your brother's wedding. Now you turn your back on the only person who cared for our mother while she was dying at the hands of our poor excuse for a father. You're just like daddy."

"No, don't say that."

Virginia watched me melt into tears. "I always ask myself why the wrong twin died."

"Oh God no! Don't say that, Ohhh!"

She sat a bottle of Johnnie Walker on my desk, "Here's a fresh bottle. I'm sure you'll find your answers in it." then she left. Virginia walked back to her room, she knew what she did was necessary. It was the only way she could handle the Dena situation without any interference from Lawrence.

CHAPTER 17

After the communion services at The Church of Advancing Light, the Sunday sermon that Bishop Barnes preached was fiery. He preached of how the sins of the flesh were taking its toll on the church. He spoke how God revealed to him all of the personal sins being committed among the congregation. He spoke of how the church was filled with liars and fornicators. He said the death of Nathan Campbell was a direct result of the spiritual condition of the church.

"I spoke to God through tears of pain all night long. I told him that no matter what's wrong with this church, the sacrificial blood of the lamb is what was right about the church. This ain't about me, I said. I'm praying for the least in this church. For the forgiveness that God promised based on the blood of his son. I told God that we may be the WORST FOLKS ON PLANET, but we're believers of the blood of the lamb, and we beg for his FORGIVENESS!"

The church was on their feet with shouts of "Amen!" and "We Believe!" There was stomping of feet, canes and clapping of hands.

Bishop Barnes continued, "Lord, our young are few and we don't want no old person from this church to die without a secured reservation to your blissful bosom!"

The church roared in unison.

"Then God spoke to me and told me that OUR SALVATION IS AT HAND! He told me to gird up my loins so as to lead The Church of Advancing Light to SALVATION! Brothers and sisters praise the Lord for our SALVATION IS AT HAND!"

The choir began to sing and the crowd shouted. Everyone was in frenzy. Money and envelopes with checks overflowed into the golden bowls. But Deacon Stone was not there; he was getting into a

cab leaving a hotel in New Orleans.

After the service Bishop Barnes seemed overjoyed about everything. He was overjoyed that Angela was back at her post in the church. He was overjoyed that the money flowed like wine. But he was most overjoyed for what the future held. He alone found the Locke Ness Monster, his very own freak of nature. He had found the missing link to spiritual wealth, Lawrence Garnier. The bishop sent out glorious farewells to his members spewing ‘Praise the Lord!’ and ‘hallelujah!’

Thelma Billups and her stepdaughters approached the bishop dressed in their unusual overdone fashion.

“Brilliant sermon, bishop,” said Thelma.

“Blessings to the lovely Billups ladies.”

Debbie, the youngest, seemed nervous. “Stop fidgeting,” said Doreen, she bumped her sister.

“You know Thelma. You’ve done a fine job with Ed’s girls. If you weren’t so young you could surely be a church mother.”

Thelma gasped and clutched her pearls. “Why Bishop Barnes, I – I don’t know what to say. I love these girls as if they were my own. Oh, but such an honor as a church mother... well that just leaves me speechless.”

“Now calm down. You got a ways to go before you get Mother Godbey’s age. You’re still a spring chicken with two darling little chicks I might add.”

Little Debbie couldn’t contain herself any longer. She had to make contact with The bishop.

“Bishop Barnes.”

“Yes Debbie?”

“I liked your sermon, and what you said about bringing more kids to the church.”

Debbie held out her arms so as to give the bishop a hug. The bishop got down on one knee and gave the little girl a big squeeze. Thelma glared at the child but couldn’t see that Debbie whispered in the bishop’s ear.

“I’d like to speak to you in private. I need your help. I don’t like my stepmother,” whispered the child.

The bishop looked puzzled as he stood up. He smiled, “Well ladies have a blessed day.”

“You as well, bishop,” said Thelma.

Debbie stared at the bishop. Doreen grabbed her by the arm. “Come on Debbie.”

CHAPTER 18

Virginia Garnier, also gave a rousing sermon about women rising above desperation to become motivators for change. She was impressed with Lawrence’s sermon writing even though she chose not to give him the credit. She knew he wouldn’t be in any condition to experience her delivery of what he wrote. She never noticed the large hulking figure that sat in the back of the mission’s church. Deacon Stone had an uncanny talent of not standing out despite his size. It was only after the service that he presented himself to Virginia while she conducted business in her office.

“Excellent service Reverend Garnier.”

“Thank you. Do I know you?”

“Who I am is of no consequence. I am here to represent the father of someone helped by the mission.”

“Please come in. Have a seat. We help lots of women. Whom in particular are we talking about?”

Virginia quickly removed the folder containing Dena Wilson’s personal information from her desk.

“Please forgive me for being so discreet,” said the large man. “I have a check made out to you for five thousand dollars. The gentleman I’m representing is very prominent and very appreciative of the

mission's work. He must remain anonymous. The young woman whom you helped, is back home and will not cause any further humiliation to her family's name."

"Well contributions are always welcome here at the mission. I'm glad God's mercy was passed to that family through us."

"Well, you were named personally by the woman to her father. She also mentioned your brother Lawrence. I have a check for the same amount for him as well."

"Oh! Well that's wonderful. I'll see that my brother gets it. He's not available right now."

"My orders are to deliver it to him personally. I'm prepared to wait for his availability."

Virginia sat silent for a minute. Without saying a word she rose from her desk and opened her office door. "Please follow me."

Virginia Garnier led the large man around the corner and down a long corridor. Deacon Stone hoped the bishop was right, in that, Lawrence had not seen this event earlier since it concerned his own future. As they approached a door, music could be heard. Virginia hesitated before she unlocked the door.

"I'd like to introduce you to my brother Lawrence."

She opened the door and there on the floor was a half-dressed, unconscious Lawrence. On the floor beside him was an empty bottle of whiskey. In his hand, which lay across his chest was another bottle less than half full. The room reeked of spilled booze and bad breath.

Deacon Stone's face showed no emotion. Virginia closed the door and silently walked the man back to her office.

"My brother is very effective in encouraging others, but when it comes to dealing with his own demons he's my cross to bear."

"What sort of demons?"

"My brother has seen a lot of violence. He seeks comfort in women and liquor. He actually witnessed his father's murder."

"You mean your father?"

"My mother married Mr. Garnier when I was seven. She insisted he give me his name if she was to take his. My brothers don't know any different. My mother insisted in treating us all the same. Family was everything, to her. She was God fearing and instilled the spirit in us. Life was good until... until the accident."

"I meant for this visit to be a pleasant one. Can you continue?"

Virginia wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. "I had three brothers. A car killed one. He was Lawrence's twin. So many things changed for the worst after that. Mr. Garnier blamed my mother for Lyle's death. They were always arguing. Mr. Garnier started drinking and gambling. He would be gone for days. He came home drunk one evening around supper time. It all happened so fast the screaming was so loud. I was helping my mother put the twins in their high chairs. She had Lawrence and I had Lyle. Mr. Garnier hit my mother.

"It was the first time that ever happened. I ran to help my mother before I got Lyle in his high chair. He hit me too. Mitchell was too small to help but he tried. Everything stopped when Lawrence let out the most horrible sound any of us had ever heard. It was a scream that pierced through us like frozen fire. The front door was left open.

"Lyle had wandered outside into the street. The car never even stopped. Lawrence screamed non-stop for seven days. It was as if he was in pain from broken bones. Every medical expert possible examined him. They all pronounced him physically healthy, mentally sound. He stopped screaming exactly seven days later and nothing in our lives were ever the same."

"Your mother?"

"The beatings became so frequent it almost seemed natural. My mother read the scriptures to us incessantly. She was preparing us. She eventually slipped into a coma. I stayed by her side, reading to her everyday from the Bible. I raised my brothers the best I could.

“When my beatings started I never let them know. I refused to accept them as natural. I started this mission to help all women, after the death of Mr. Garnier. I kept my promise to my mother to take care of my brothers. While I read to her, she awoke only once and told me to protect the boys so that nothing evil would overtake them like it did their father. Then she died. So you see there is no sense in waiting for Lawrence to become available. I am my brother’s keeper.”

“I see.”

Deacon Stone left Lawrence’s check for five thousand dollars with Virginia. He caught a cab back to his hotel where he called the bishop.

“Zeke, I have located our prize bull. And I even have the ring for his nose.”

CHAPTER 19

It was 10:30 pm. Sunday night when Virginia got the message from the mill. At 10:45 she made sure Lawrence’s door was still locked. By 11:00 pm she was in her car heading east on state route 190. She drove for over an hour in the direction of Lake Pontchartrain, but the lake was not her destination. She turned off the route and disappeared into a grid of hidden dirt roads amid foggy swamps.

What would have presented a dead-end to everyone else was a mere rusted gate with a chain and padlock for which Virginia had a key. After locking the gate behind her, she traveled twenty more minutes into the deep dark fog. She came upon two stone pillars that marked her destination. This once lavish plantation lay desolate until it became the Mill, a hidden farm of horrible secrets. Virginia used the large lion head knocker to announce her arrival.

The person who answered would have been considered large for a man, except it was a woman. She was shirtless with bib-overalls. Her massive breasts were hardly contained by the straps. Her muscular shoulders and arms looked like they belonged on a male weight lifter. She wore wading boots and on her head, a blue and white kerchief.

“Hello Randi,” greeted Virginia as she stepped inside.

“Hoaa ahh,” grunted the tongue-less woman.

Aside from Randi, Virginia and Faye were the only two people who knew why her tongue was surgically removed. Faye was waiting in the basement. As Virginia and Randi entered the makeshift surgery room in the basement of the main house, they saw Faye standing next to a porcelain slab, which contained the blood and dead body of Dena Wilson. Faye looked eerie, sweaty and wild-eyed in her yellow and orange sun dress and paratrooper boots. Her white hair so overwhelmed her dark skin and attractive face, that she wore it into a long ponytail.

“What happened Faye?” asked Virginia.

“Virginia, she just ran a muck,” Faye talked fast and chewed her words. “I had to sedate her cause Randi was havin’ a hell of a time tyin’ her down. They tussled for five minutes. She was shoutin’ and spoutin’ ‘bout gettin’ married and havin’ her baby. After the abortion she didn’t come to. Her heart stopped ‘bout an hour ago.”

Virginia stared at Dena’s body.

“Well, she had no roots in Louisiana. She had a grandmother somewhere up north. She was basically a Jane Doe. Have Randi use the chainsaw on her and feed her to the gators with the rest of the fetuses. I’ll erase what’s left of her on the computer.”

“Wish we could’ve used her as another hand around here,” said Faye.

“No,” said Virginia. “This is better. She was too mouthy.”

Virginia handed Faye three thousand dollars in cash.

“We had an unexpected windfall.”

Before Virginia got to her car she heard Randi with the chainsaw.

This was better, she thought. She was trouble.

CHAPTER 20

Monday's firefighter presentation at Parham Elementary School marked the kick-off of Fire Prevention Week. After school, Doreen waited at the flagpole for her little sister.

"Doreen, Doreen!" shouted Debbie. "I saw Sparky the fire dog?"

"Yeah?"

"I have to color this picture of Sparky helping this little girl get out of a burning house. Did you get one?"

"We don't do that in Junior High. Eighth-graders have to create escape routes for our homes."

"I'll help you when I finish coloring."

The Billups girls walked home happy. They weren't wearing flowery church dresses, and their stepmother was not around.

"I wonder what Ug-Moe is fixing for dinner?" said Debbie.

"Whatever Ug-Moe fixes, you eat."

"Why did daddy have to marry her?"

"He married her so she could take care of us. Do our hair and stuff like that."

"She's not our mother. Our mother's dead but we can take care of each other. And we both can take care of daddy."

"I know Debbie. I hate Ug-moe too. But daddy's not well enough to take care of us."

"Daddy just drinks too much cause Ug-moe is so ugly. I need a drink too."

"Let's just do what the ugly hag says. Maybe daddy will divorce her when he stops drinking."

Angela and Julius sat quietly at the dinner table. Did you get enough, son?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Good. I'll clear the table and you can get right on the dishes."

"Mom, can I try out for the football team this year?"

"Do you really want to?"

Suddenly the phone rang. "Wait a minute sweetheart. Let me get this. Hello?"

"Hello Cottontail, it's the bishop. I want you to get yourself together in the next couple of days. I have an assignment for you. You'll need to make some kind of arrangement for Julius because you'll be doing an overnight."

Angela was silent.

"Are you there? Have it your way. Just remember one son is dead because of you. Let's not lose Julius too. Listen he can even stay with me while you're gone. Do you hear me now?"

"I hear you, you bastard."

"Good. Now get your pretty little ass in gear. I'll be in touch."

Click.

Angela trembled in silence.

"So how bout it, Mom?"

"Huh? Oh, baby why don't you go and watch TV, I'll do the dishes."

"But what about football?"

"Julius! Just go! I'm sorry; we'll talk about football later."

After dinner Doreen and Debbie went to their room to do their homework. Thelma looked in to check on their progress. She stood over Debbie for a moment.

“What are you doing Debra?”

“Coloring my picture for fire-prevention week.”

“Learning your scriptures is more important than coloring, don’t you think? Put it away!”

“But it’s for a contest!”

“Put it away Debra and learn to recite your scriptures.”

The little girl fought back tears as she put her coloring away and opened her bible to the table of contents.

“This is for your soul Debbie. Stop, drop and roll won’t do you any good in Hell.”

CHAPTER 21

It was Tuesday around nine in the morning when the door to my room opened. I was clean, shaved and groggy. I staggered down the hall, down the stair and out of the building. I entered the building where Dena stayed. I knocked on the door then walked in. The room was neatly cleaned and impersonal. There was no sign of Dena anywhere in the room. In her bathroom there was nothing. In the closets and drawers there was nothing. I left the room and ran downstairs to the laundry room. There were a few women working the morning shift.

“Where’s Dena?”

“She’s gone,” one woman said.

“Where?”

“Don’t know. Sister Virginia and Shelly gathered all of Dena’s personal things. I was told to clean the room. That’s all I know.”

“Shelly. She’ll tell me what’s going on.”

“She’s gone too,” said the other woman. “I cleaned her room after Sunday’s service.”

I stormed off. Virginia had just gotten out of the shower when the banging on her door began. She answered the door in a terry-cloth robe and a towel on her head. I entered wild-eyed.

“Where are they?”

“Well aren’t you living proof of the resurrection?”

“Where are they?”

“Who Dena and Shelly?”

“Oh, they’re gone.”

“Where-When?”

“You’ve been out of it for a few days. Shelly left Saturday and Dena left last night.”

“Dena wouldn’t have left without saying good-bye.”

“It happens dear. It’s what we want. We put them back on their feet and they leave. I think the sermon you wrote for me really reached Dena. Maybe if you didn’t drink so much...”

“You gave me the liquor and the reason to drink!”

“Well what about you? Didn’t you see this coming? Or do you have selected foresight? Maybe that’s it? You only see what you want to see. Did you see your father’s murder? Or did you want him dead?”

“Stop it!”

“No I won’t stop it!” I made a promise to my mother to take care of you! Mitchell resented my help. He turned his back on you and me. All we have is each other. Law, you’ve got a gift but you are weak. It’s no telling where you’d be if I turned my back on you. We’re family and that means something to me.”

I began clapping. “Listen to you. You’re the master at turning this around to the family. When is it about the family when it comes to me?”

“I’m not going to continue this discussion. Virginia picked up a package and shoved it in my chest. “You want family? Here’s a package from your brother and the woman he married. Open it in your room.”

I took the package and started to leave. I stopped in the doorway. “You know, everyone says I have a gift. I wish it was. Whatever it is; it fails me every time I need to know what’s in my future and what you’re up to. Some gift.”

Back in my room, I opened his package. It was a crystal pineapple with a card, which read: **To our loving brother Lawrence from Rachel and Mitchell.**

CHAPTER 22

At the Church of Advancing Light, Bishop Barnes sat quietly in his chamber. He watched the colored lights from the large stained-glass window spill on the floor as he smoked a joint. He was glad he didn’t have to preach tonight since the church mothers were holding a tarry service. Deacon Stone walked in.

“Stoney! My man! Everything is in place. Cottontail got on a plane last night.”

“This venture is running into money, Zeke.”

“You’ve got to spend it to get it.”

“He didn’t look too impressive to me when I saw him. And his sister didn’t seem impressed either.”

“Stoney, he’s worth it, trust me. What happened to me was no fucking card trick. I mean my naked ass was out. If you hadn’t convinced me to keep my keys in my unlocked care for seven days, I would’ve been a lost ball in high grass. Either his sister doesn’t know what’s under her own nose or she’s trying to hide him.”

The deacon thought before he spoke next. “Or maybe she’s more like us then we think.”

I stayed in my room for most of the day. I was confused. I knew Virginia had been up to something, but what? *Why had I never had a flash from her? What happened to Shelly and Dena? Why would Dena leave without him knowing?* These thoughts plagued me for most of the day, while thoughts of my father plagued me the rest of the time. There was a knock on my door. I opened it and there stood the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

“Mr. Garnier?”

“Yes, please, call me Lawrence. Come in.”

The voluptuous dark skinned beauty slowly walked into the center of the room. She wore a simple form-fitting soft gray dress. On her head was a slight hat of the same color with a netted veil that added mystery across one side of her face. Both my mouth and my pants swelled with wet lust.

“Lawrence Garnier, the Lord directed me here to deliver a message. Your gifted spirit is needed. You are to go to The Church of Advancing Light in Cincinnati to further God’s will.”

The woman reached into her purse and handed me an envelope. “My Lord has chosen you. You must fulfill your anointing.”

She left my room without any further words. I followed her into the hallway.

“I didn’t get your name?”

Her sultry walk intoxicated me and as she rounded the corner, her name dripped off her lips. “Angela.”

I opened the envelope right where I stood. Inside was a one-way plane ticket to Cincinnati and five thousand dollars in cash.

CHAPTER 23

“No! No! I don’t want to wear that dress.” Debbie bounced up and down as she whined.

“Debra you have no choice. You will be begging for God’s spirit and this white satin dress is appropriate.”

“Ma’am, it’s ugly!”

“It’s what you will wear. Now stop yelling.”

Doreen walked into Debbie’s bedroom in a hideous white satin dress of her own.

“See, look how nice Doreen looks,” said Thelma.

“Now put this on.”

“No it’s ugly and Doreen’s dress is ugly too!”

“Don’t raise your voice in my house!”

Both girls jumped to attention.

“This is a godly home where young ladies do right by the Lord by honoring their parents.”

The three heard the door open downstairs.

“It’s daddy.” Debbie ran out of her room. She met her father at the foot of the stairs. She jumped into his arms. “Please daddy, don’t make me wear that ugly dress tonight.”

“My sweet little girl, you’ll make that dress a thing of beauty because you’re beautiful.”

Thelma stood quietly at the top of the stairs.

Ed continued. “I know it’s hard for you to understand because you’re young. Your stepmother is a good woman and little girls need a good woman to raise them. Now trust me and go ahead and wear the dress, just for tonight. You’ll be fine because I trust Thelma to do what’s best for you.”

“Don’t you trust me, daddy?”

“I love you Debbie, now get dressed.”

Debbie slowly walked back upstairs. She passed Thelma. “Have your sister fix your hair then get dressed.”

Doreen hugged her little sister and they both went to Debbie’s room.

Thelma went into the kitchen to fix her husband’s plate. Ed slowly followed and sat down at the table. She silently sat his dinner before him then sat at the table to drink her coffee.

“Whew,” sighed Thelma. “The scriptures state that the fruit of the belly is a blessing, but that child has proven to be nothing but a test for me.”

“She’s young, Thelma, and you ride her a little hard.”

“I do what I have to do to see that your daughters become proper God fearing ladies. You wanted a mother for your girls who would raise them right. Isn’t that why you married me?”

“Yes, but I just-”

“I know you didn’t marry me for my looks, there are prettier women at the church you could’ve chosen. You picked me because you wanted what was best for your girls. Your first wife was beautiful. You would sit so proudly by her side up in the church. But after she died, after you married me, you won’t sit in church.”

“I have driven the church bus and do jobs around the church sometimes.”

“That’s nothing but a handyman, that’s all. You don’t worship there with me. You just saw how devoted I was. You saw me as a good christian mother figure. So let me do my job, if I can’t save us as a family, at least let me see that these girls get to heaven.”

“I didn’t mean any-”

“Debbie needs special help. She was born from death. She needs the Lord’s special hand. Can’t you see that Ed?”

“If the doctors didn’t take the baby she wouldn’t be here. Debbie is not the reason her mother died.”

“Yes she is, Ed. It’s my job to raise her. You gave me that job when you married me. I’m taking her to the Tarry service for her sake not mine. I have God’s spirit. We’re on a sojourn tonight so that your girls become reborn in the spirit.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that you weren’t a good mother.”

“I love you Ed. I just want the credit due me in church and in this home.”

CHAPTER 24

Rachel had just put a load of laundry in when she overheard Mitchell on the phone.

“No, don’t be silly. You can stay here as long as you need. Brother this is great news. We’ll be waiting for your call. Yes, I’m sure. Good-bye”

“Who was that?”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Believe what?”

“That was Lawrence. He’s going to take Bishop Barnes’ offer to join his ministry.”

“That’s wonderful honey. Now your brother will be close.”

“Yeah, I just wonder how he’s going to tell Virginia.”

The bishop rolled a second joint and offered it to the deacon. No, I maintain control just fine without the use of Marijuana.”

“Loosen up, Stoney. This is weed not a communion wafer. Since I ain’t preaching tonight, I’m gonna finish this joint, take a shower and check my sick and shut-in list. I’m gonna pray with somebody if you know what I mean?”

At that moment the bishop’s phone rang. “Hello. You bet the offer is still on the table. Son, your talent is a perfect fit for this ministry. Well hurry up and let’s get this ball rolling heh, heh. I’ll see you when you get here. Hallelujah!”

“Lawrence Garnier?” asked the deacon.

“Stoney, we just hit pay-dirt.”

“Are you sure our agendas are secure from his gift of foresight?”

“If what he says about his gift is true, anything we discuss concerning him, won’t be noticed. We’ll use a calendar and always space our actions eight days out from any contact with him. We can do this, Stoney.”

“I will keep my contact with him at a minimum. That way I will be free to get things done and we will make sure Angela is properly utilized.”

“Yes, Cottontail will be of great use in controlling Mr. Garnier,” the bishop wrung his hands together in delight.

CHAPTER 25

Thelma and the girls arrived at the church. As the three walked across the parking lot, Debbie still hated her white satin as well as her sister’s dress and Thelma’s. She hated the white dresses of others who also walked into the church. Even the men who attended were in white.

“What kind of church service is this?” asked Debbie.

“You and your sister are going to pray and beg for the Lord’s spirit,” said Thelma. “Although you are too young to be baptized in the spirit, this night will truly be the most important spiritual awakening you’ll ever experience.”

“Is this gonna hurt?” asked Debbie.

“It better not,” said Doreen.

“It’s not going to hurt. Growing up as heathens is what hurts,” said Thelma.

Inside the church, little Debbie noticed Deacon Stone speaking with one of the church mothers. She nudged close to her sister as they passed the huge man.

“Debbie, you’re stepping all over me,” said Doreen.

The deacon gives me the heebie-jeebies,” she whispered.

While the church mothers chattered, the deacon slowly turned and made eye contact with the little girl. Debbie held her breath and never took her eyes off him.

In the main auditorium, in front of the pulpit stage, the Tarry service began at 7:00 pm The deacon opened the service with a prayer then passed the collection plate among the thirty people present. Then he turned the service over to the church mothers who formed a semi-circle and directed all of the people who wanted to receive the Lord’s spirit to stand before them.

Thelma prodded her stepdaughters to the front along with newcomers who needed spiritual healing. Older members who suffered from poor health and financial problems. There were unwed mothers looking for spiritual guidance and young men who were faced with the influences of the streets or seeking salvation. Thelma always encouraged Ed to attend these services, but was relieved when he regularly refused. It spared her the embarrassment of being the wife of an alcoholic, although it was no secret to anyone.

The senior church mother, Ms. Bell started the service.

“Lord, we beseech you for your spirit to rain down on these poor sinners. They seek your love and direction to overcome the devil’s hold.”

“Thank you Jesus!” shouted another church mother, Ms. Oates. She began to clap her hands and stomp her feet. Suddenly all of the church mothers began to clap wildly and stomp.

Thelma, clapping herself, got between the two girls. “Do it. Clap and chant, ‘Thank you Jesus,’” she said.

The two girls looked at each other. They wanted to laugh, not out of disrespect, but out of nervous fear. They began to clap and stomp. Then they joined the others in the chant.

“Thank you Jesus. Thank you Jesus.”

Little Debbie was amazed how the church mothers, old and fat as they were, could dance and jump around with ease. Even Thelma was bouncing around like a chicken.

Twenty minutes into the service, Deacon Stone wheeled out a cart carrying a gold contribution bowl. He also brought out paper fans with advertisements of his funeral home. He’d shout in between the chanting.

“It’s about the spirit!” he shouted.

“Thank you Jesus!” they continued.

“It ain’t about material things!”

“Thank you Jesus!”

“Take our money Lord, we don’t need it!”

“Thank you Jesus!”

“Just give us your spirit, Lord!”

“Thank you Jesus!”

Between the chanting and frenzy, money started to fly into the bowl. The deacon showed no emotion as the bowl filled with cash. After the collection round, the deacon left the group and sorted out the cash in a room behind the stage. He would place it in the automatic cash counter later. He then left the counting room and unlocked a door marked: **UTILITY-No Admittance.**

Inside the kitchen, the deacon turned on a monitor so that he could keep track of what was going on in the Tarry service. While he watched the service, he began to prepare more communion loaves. On a rolling baker's rack he removed a tray of six pancake sized, perfectly round, thin dough patties. They were five and a half inches in diameter. The dough was a mixture of flour, salt and water. There was no yeast. They were unleavened, so they would remain flat after baking.

The deacon took what looked like a pizza cutter with teeth that perforated the raw dough. He rolled about twelve forward lines with the perforating tool and about the same amount of lines sideways. He did this with all six dough patties. Next he placed the tray in the large oven and set the timer for ten minutes.

Meanwhile, at the Tarry service, the group was still clapping, jumping, chanting and praying. The auditorium was getting warm. Mertis and Jess Simmons were two of the oldest members. Mertis had been an active church member for twenty years.

Jess Simmons was known in the church as, 'Ole' Brother Jess'. Both Mertis and Jess had failing health. Mertis was plagued with arthritis and Jess had a bad heart. They always attended every Tarry service to supplicate the Lord for the Holy Spirit to maintain, if not improve their physical conditions. Their daughter, Clara Robinson was praying in behalf of her parents. They always attributed their longevity to their relationship with God. They also were confident in the tutelage of Bishop Barnes.

"We always feel a spiritual change whenever the bishop preaches" Mertis would claim.

Thirty minutes into the Tarry service Old' Brother Jess began speaking in tongues.

"Bleek Oro Ta Ta Sheba," yelled Jess.

"Oh, thank you Jesus! Daddy got the spirit!" shouted Clara.

"Roma, Roma, Dulass. Roma Roma!," shouted Mertis.

The crowd started to surround the old couple, as they continued to speak in tongues. Doreen and Debbie stopped chanting in order to watch the spectacle. Thelma broke their distraction.

"Don't stop ladies! The spirit is among us."

The deacon watched the old couple receive the spirit as usual. He immediately prepared a cart of water, iced tea and sodas to serve the couple. As he wheeled the cart toward the service he stopped at the thermostat and turned up the heat.

While Mertis and Jess enjoyed refreshments, the others continued and the room was getting warmer. Deacon Stone returned to his duties with the communion loaves, and replenished refreshments as needed. Doreen and Debbie mindlessly continued their process of urging the Lord to impart his spirit unto them under the watchful eye of their stepmother.

As the hours went on, the young Billups girls watched more of the Tarry service attendees receive the spirit. They heard folks speak gibberish and watched them be rewarded with refreshments.

Doreen became fed up, she was hot, tired and thirsty. She wanted the poking and prodding from her frenzied stepmother to stop. Doreen threw her arms straight into the air and shouted.

"Hey!"

The church mothers and Thelma stopped and stared at the young girl. Doreen began to tremble and speak in a strange manner.

"Beanie, bop bop, twix!"

"She's got the spirit!" shouted Thelma.

Doreen fell to the floor and began to shake.

"Thank you Jesus!" shouted one of the church mothers.

Thelma and several of the church mothers helped Doreen onto a chair. Doreen acted bewildered.

"What happened?" she asked.

"The Lord blessed you with the spirit," said Thelma.

"I'm so hot. Can I have a Pepsi?" Doreen asked.

Little Debbie watched as many tended to her sister. She watched Doreen get a cold can of Pepsi. Debbie watched her sister take a big long drink. She saw Doreen shoot her a wink and smile. What

little Debbie didn't see was the same thing the church mothers, Thelma, Mertis and Jess could not see. No one at the Tarry service knew that in the utility kitchen, Deacon Stone was doing something vile.

He had numerous trays of several communion loaves on a rolling bakers rack. He wheeled the rack to a large door marked '**Do Not Enter**'.

He unlocked the door that opened into what looked like a huge bakery. Inside were racks and racks of communion loaves. Hundreds of round perforated cakes that looked like saltine crackers. The deacon rolled in his fresh baked rack, but before he placed them in with the rest of the inventory, he stopped at a long counter with locked overhead cabinets. He placed the first tray on the counter and unlocked one cabinet door. He removed a vial of clear liquid, a hypodermic needle and syringe. From the vial, which was labeled d-lysergic acid diethyl amide (LSD), he withdrew 100 mcgs into the syringe.

Then he took what looked like a filter for a coffee maker and dropped three drips from the needle onto it. Then he put on a pair of latex gloves and swirled a Q-tip swab in the filter paper until the swab fibers were saturated. The deacon then proceeded to touch the Q-tip over each perforated section of each communion loaf on his rack.

Hot and confused, Debbie was drowning in the bewilderment of the moment. The clapping and chanting was taking it's toll. As her sister enjoyed soda, her stepmother poked and yelled in her ear to keep begging incessantly for the spirit. Doreen nodded to Debbie to go for it, to get it over with.

Then, as if a light went off inside of Debbie's head, she shouted.

"Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!"

Doreen sprayed Pepsi trying not to laugh.

Debbie continued, "Chitty-Bang-Bang, Chitty Chitty-Bang-Bang."

"The child has got the spirit," stated one of the church mothers.

"Praise God!" shouted Thelma as she dropped to her knees. "My girls have been blessed."

The sweaty little girl ran and hugged her older sister who had a cold Pepsi waiting. Debbie took a long drink then smiled to Doreen, as the church mothers rallied around Thelma with shouts of praise.

CHAPTER 26

"You ungrateful bastard!" shouted Virginia as she slapped my face. "After all I've done for you."

"Virginia, I love you... you're my sister."

"I've allowed you to share in my ministry. I mean, what about all of the sacrifices I've made for you?"

"Sacrifices? Virginia, you hardly acknowledged me as your brother most of the time."

"Who put these thoughts of grandeur in your head? Who told you you'd amount to anything special? Was it Mitchell? He's a fool and you are too, you and your supposed gift. You can't see your own future and you didn't even see your own father's death, or did you? You are so much like that loser you called daddy."

"He was your father too."

"He was never my father! And you're no longer my brother. You're nothing more than a blind man lost in the desert. You'll wander aimlessly only to be scorched by the hot sun."

"I can't believe I ever thought you loved me. My bags are packed, I got a taxi waiting and I'm gone. Even if I am blind and lost, I'll always know if I'm standing in the sun because I'll feel the warmth."

I left Virginia's room and picked up my bags that were outside. Virginia followed.

"What will you do Lawrence, when the smell of mint brings on the bad dreams? Who's gonna comfort you?"

I tried hard to ignore her.

“It won’t be your stupid-ass brother. You both are just like your daddy.”

I stopped, put down my bags and hugged my sister.

“Bye Sis.”

I held her tight. I wanted to get a flash from her, but as usual there was nothing. I picked up my bags again and started down the hall.

“You can’t come back once you leave! I’ll destroy this mission before you ever step foot here again! You got no home here! New Orleans will wash away into Lake Ponchartrain before you’ll ever call it home again. I promise you that!”

Outside the New Orleans Women’s Mission, I got into the waiting taxi.

Where to sir?”

“The airport.”

I tried not to let Virginia’s words get to me, but my trembling let me know they did. I knew if it truly was in her power, she would’ve made good on all of her threats. I pulled a small bottle of whiskey from my jacket. I took a long, deep drink. *Another family member lost.* I looked back at the mission one last time. As it vanished into the horizon, my heart sank because my sister... Virginia Katrina Garnier was no more.

CHAPTER 27

Thelma hummed her favorite gospel tune in between sips of coffee. Ed noticed his wife’s peculiar morning mood.

“We’re happy early this morning aren’t we?” he said.

“The Lord blessed both our girls last night.”

“Judging by the way they’re dragging ass this morning, the Lord didn’t know it was a school night.”

“Not even your blasphemy can bring me down this morning. We have been blessed. Girls! Come on and eat! Lets move it ladies!”

The girls lumbered down the stairs like zombies. Debbie, still holding her teddy bear, caved into her chair at the table.

“Eat your cereal and be quick, you don’t want to be late,” said Thelma. “Debbie, what’s the rule about toys at the table?”

“Yes ma’am,” mumbled Debbie as she handed the teddy bear to her stepmother.

“This home is getting a new start,” said Thelma. “A spiritual one. You too Ed, the time will come for you to stop blocking blessings for this family.”

“Don’t start preaching Thelma. I know I’ve got a lot of bad habit's I need to break... but that ain’t on my to do list today. Come on girls, I’ll drop you off on my way out.”

“Lord, give me strength,” whispered Thelma as she saw her family off for the day. Normally, a remark like that from Ed would boil her blood... but not today. Her hard work was paying off she could see it. Her stepdaughters were blessed last night and soon she would bring Ed back to God.

Then she would take her rightful place among the church mothers. She was a homely but godly woman. Godly women deserved prominence. She would never accept the destiny others expected of her position in life... an ugly old maid. “Never,” she stated. Thelma cleared the morning dishes then carried Debbie’s abandoned teddy bear back to her room.

“Lord have mercy, this is a messy child,” she sighed as she surveyed a disaster area of toys, clothes and movie DVD cases of Mary Poppins and Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang, Thelma’s mind threw her back to the when Debbie was touched by the

spirit at the Tarry service. She picked up the Mary Poppins' case and read the back.

"S-supercalifr... oh that fucking little blasphemer!"

The ache in my head at the Greater Cincinnati Airport brought flashes of Rachel laughing and setting a dinner table.

"Lawrence, we're so glad you're here with us now," said Rachel, then she hugged me a second time.

"Law, I'll tell you, I never thought you would stand up against your sister like that." Mitchell hugged me. My head stung with a flash of Mitchell changing the diaper of a baby girl.

"Lawrence, Lawrence?" said Mitchell.

"What?"

"I said it's a wonder that New Orleans is still standing after you told Virginia you were leaving."

"Oh yeah, she did say the city would wash into Lake Ponchartrain if I tried to come back home."

"Well our home is your home now and for as long as you want to stay," said Rachel.

"Thanks Rachel and thank you both for the beautiful crystal pineapple."

"Don't mention it man. Well, I gotta get going. Rachel will get you all settled in."

"Where are you going Mitch?" I asked.

"It's a school day. I gotta get to work. I'll see you tonight."

I just smiled as Mitchell left. *I'm glad to be away from Virginia, but was my brother any better? Mitchell was a lot like our father. I don't want to see this marriage shattered. Will life here be better? Did I make the right decision? If I could only see what the future held for me.*

CHAPTER 28

"Julius, do you have your books?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Do you have money for lunch?"

"Yes."

Angela Campbell kissed her son's cheek. "I love you, baby. Please be careful today."

Before Julius could leave for school, Angela gave him another hug. It was a tight, long hug.

"Mom, I'm gonna be late."

"Sorry, baby," she released her son.

"Mom, you look terrible. I mean tired, like you need sleep or to talk to a doctor. You just look tired. Maybe you should talk to Bishop Barnes and..."

"I'm alright son, really, and I will get some sleep. I just worry about us. But don't you worry we'll be fine. Have a good day at school."

As she watched her son leave, Angela wanted to believe that things would be right. She wanted sleep. She wanted both of her sons alive and well. But none of that would be the case. She hated the mornings almost as much as bedtime. Both times meant loneliness and fear. She had a beautiful house but she had to leave it before panic set in.

She walked into the dining room and opened the blinds. She wanted to get all of the glowing sun she could. On into the kitchen she poured another cup of coffee. She looked at the clock. She had been alone for five minutes. She had to get out into the public. She lit a cigarette then raced upstairs to her bathroom. She never even noticed the dark shroud, which blocked the sunlight in the dining room. In her bathroom she took off her robe and dropped her gown.

The forty-year old woman's body was amazing except for the mark. The snow-white hair that covered her vagina. For ten years she hated the spade-shaped patch of white hair. She hated the terror

that brought it on. She hated the man responsible. The man who taunted her about it by calling her Cottontail... Ezekiel Barnes.

She gazed at herself in the mirror. She didn't want to remember. She took another sip of coffee, and then she thought she heard something that sounded like a cinder block being dragged across concrete. She stopped because she knew that sound.

I don't want to remember, she thought.

She heard it again and began to tremble. She picked up her robe and put it on. She walked into the upstairs hallway then she heard that awful moan. Like a scared gazelle startled out of hiding by the lion's roar, she ran downstairs. She ran into the dining room and saw a sight that she hadn't seen in a year. She emptied her bladder on the floor. The whole window-side of the dining room was gone. It was engulfed in a dense, black, endless fog. She backed out of the dining room. The deep moan from within the fog became more audible.

"ANGELAAAHH!"

She ran back upstairs, back into the bathroom. She clamored in the linen closet and pulled out a vial of white powder. Wild-eyed, she cowered inside the shower and snorted the powder twice. She closed her eyes tight and drew her knees to her chest.

The Billups girls hustled up to their rooms after school. Each girl noticed that her own room had been cleaned. Debbie noticed that none of her DVDs were around.

"Ladies, it's time for dinner!"

The girls took their seat at the table, as Thelma moved between the dining room and kitchen.

"So did you tell Julius that you thought he was cute?" laughed Debbie.

"Shhh, be quiet," nodded Doreen.

"The girls giggled until Thelma sat down."

The three bowed their heads while Thelma said grace. "...Amen."

"Amen," followed the girls in unison.

"Doreen," Thelma's voice was calm, "how was school?"

Debbie blurted out "We had a puppet show and..."

"Silence!" thundered Thelma. "Don't you ever speak at this table, unless you are asked to."

The unholy glare on the otherwise homely face of Thelma Billups paralyzed the girls. She turned to Doreen and calm washed over her face. "Now Doreen, how was your day?"

CHAPTER 29

Julius opened the front door to greet Bishop Barnes and Deacon Stone. He called the bishop, as he had been instructed before. This time, he came home from school and found his mother in a state of shock. Julius never knew of the late night visit's that his mother had endured in the past. Nevertheless, the bishop greeted the boy with comfort while the deacon remained silent.

"Julius, my boy, you're truly a blessing to your mother. Don't worry I'll see that she gets through this. I'll go upstairs to check on her. With the Lord's help she'll be her old self by morning."

The bishop patted the boy's head, "You got some ice cream, son? Vanilla or chocolate?"

"Yes sir, chocolate."

"You got cones?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, Deacon Stone loves chocolate ice cream cones. How 'bout a couple of scoops for the deacon and yourself while I help your mother?"

"Yes sir."

Upstairs in her bathroom, Angela supported herself against the marbled sink gagging. Her throat stung as it always had after a visit. She looked at herself in the mirror. *How did I get here?* she thought. *Why have I failed so miserably at life?*

She didn't flinch as the bishop appeared behind her in the mirror.

"Cottontail," hissed the bishop, "I'm worried about you. Are you all right?"

Angela froze in disgust and remained silent. The bishop pressed against her from behind while he stared into the eyes of her reflection. She felt his nature swell against her. She gagged as if she had swallowed sand. The bishop laid his hand on her ample butt-cheek. She mustered strength to swing the back of her right fist toward his face. The bishop was quick and caught her arm. He was strong, and held her arm in place while he continued to examine the firmness of her ass.

"Shh, nice ass. If I'd known you were alone all day half naked, I would've been here sooner to pray with you."

Angela trembled under the strain of resisting him.

"But you weren't alone. I hear you had a visitor."

"My son is dead and I still get visit's. You said the visit's would stop."

"They will in time. Maybe the visitor sensed you had plans of your own. Maybe you plan to speak out against us?"

"You know I've been loyal cause I'm in too deep."

"Yes you are, and we need to protect young Julius."

Tears ran down Angela's face.

"What are you holding?" he asked. The bishop squeezed her wrist, which loosened her grip on the empty vial. He reached inside his pocket and shoved a full vial into her hand.

"I despise the very air you breathe," she seethed.

"I can live with that. The question is, can you?"

Downstairs the bishop saw Julius and the behemoth silently licking their ice cream cones side by side on the couch.

"Your mother is fine, son. She's still grieving, it'll take time. This home has endured much. It's still a holy place surrounded by divine province. You and your mother are protected, son. You have my word."

The deacon broke his silence only after he and the bishop were inside the hearse, as it rolled slowly down the tree-lined driveway.

"Will we need to be concerned about her loyalty, Zeke?"

"She's terrified. She wouldn't say shit if she had a mouthful of it."

The day spent with Rachel was a rare pleasure for me. We laughed and joked while touring the various malls surrounding the Queen City. At lunch, Rachel talked abundantly about her family and how her father wanted her to follow his steps in politics instead of wasting her political science degree on being a housewife and holding down a nurse's aid job at Bethesda Hospital.

I wondered at times who she spoke about when she praised how loving her husband was to her. When she'd touch my hand during a high point of a discussion or pulled my arm for my opinion on a dress in a display window, I saw flashes of pure joy.

Once my flash revealed Rachel doubled over with laughter at the dinner table, while another displayed her and Mitchell lost in an intimate kiss. I shook my head violently. In my heart, I had already replaced Rachel with the sister I left behind in New Orleans. In my stomach, churned the secrets of my brother.

At dinner the three of us laughed at the stories Mitchell would tell of our childhood antics. He was masterful at extracting the far and few high spots of our growing up without connecting all the tragedy that stamped the soul of a true Garnier.

CHAPTER 30

In my room, I took long sips of whiskey as I pondered my meeting with the bishop. I had a passion for music, classic R&B. My favorite artist was Marvin Gaye. It relaxed me when I felt anxious. I took another sip. The whiskey was smooth and Marvin's tone was soulful as he pleaded for the return of his 'Distant Lover'. The song made me think about Dena. *If she truly loved me, why did she leave so abruptly? She left without a word of good-bye or anything. Virginia said or did something, but what? My sister was bad. Will the bishop be worse?*

A quick knock on the door was immediately followed by Mitchell's entrance.

"How you doing, Law?" Mitchell flopped in the big chair by the window across from my bed.

"I'm doing."

"You thinking or drinking?"

"Both."

"Alone?"

"No, you got a glass?"

"Yep, brought one with ice."

"Oh, like you just knew I had a bottle."

Only a few seconds passed before we both broke out in laughter.

"I don't have to be gifted to know you keep a bottle. Man I'm really glad you're here."

"Me too, I guess. Let me ask you something Mitch. What do you think about Ezekiel Barnes?"

"I know he don't like me."

"Shit, that's just taste. Hell, I don't like you either."

Mitchell grabbed himself and in his best concession-stand voice said, "Get your nuts here!" and we both laughed harder than the first time.

"Heh, no really. Why do you say that?"

"Well, maybe what I should say is that the Good Bishop loves women and money. I think he tolerates me because of Rachel. Sometimes I feel like he's all in our business just to get close to her. And I know he loves our contributions."

"What about his preaching and leadership of the church?"

"Well, he's definitely a 'Do as I say, not as I do' preacher. It's like God only deals through him and nobody else. He talks about how hard he works with God on everybody's behalf. Last Sunday's sermon was, *You Can't Get Into Heaven By Mistake, But You Can Go To Hell On Purpose.*"

"So why do you want me working in his ministry?"

"So it can become your ministry. Listen Law, no ministry is perfect, the bishop's isn't and you know Virginia's ain't . . . or maybe you don't know. Believe me, Virginia is no saint. The bishop has a lot of pull and if he likes you, you'll get noticed and become larger than life in your own ministry. Virginia wasn't gonna give you any kind of chance."

"What makes you think he'll like me?"

"Cause you're the real thing. You got a gift, you can see the future."

"Shh, don't be so loud with that."

"Rachel is asleep."

"She doesn't know does she? You didn't tell her did you?"

"No, no, no. Get off of that, man. People are going to find out and it'll be great."

"It's been hell so far."

"It's a gift from God and you can't keep that a secret forever."

"You're the best at keeping secrets."

"What does that mean?"

"The baby."

“Shh Lawrence, don’t say that so loud.”

“You said she was asleep.”

“I hope she is. Damn Lawrence, it happened and I got to deal with it.”

“Listen, you didn’t go to work today, I saw that at the airport. You were with that baby...”

“Your niece.”

“My niece, your baby by another woman, while I went shopping with my sister-in-law, your wife. That’s fucked up Mitch.”

“I know Law, and I’m sick about it.”

“How you gonna keep that a secret?”

“I don’t know, but if she finds out right now I’ll lose her.”

“How did it happen? Why are you hurting Rachel?”

“I’m not hurting her.”

“When she finds out it’s gonna kill her.”

“I’m protecting her. I know it would kill her if she knew. Just listen a minute, I wasn’t serious about any of the women I had been dealing with. It was during an Ohio school board conference when I first saw Rachel. She was there with her city councilman father. He was working with the board to raise funds and support for the schools in his district. Her father wanted Rachel in politics...”

“I know all that. We talked about it at lunch.”

“Well, I knew instantly that she was the one I could truly love and be committed too. I wanted to do everything right. We dated but no sex. I was a perfect gentleman. I would only see the other women when, you know, I needed some. One of them caught me. She wouldn’t abort, and she said as long as I take care of my responsibilities, things would be fine.”

“Does this other girl know you’re married?”

“I mean she knows somebody’s in my life besides her... but you know... um... no.”

“Damn Mitch, Virginia was right. You’re just like daddy.”

Mitchell jumped out of the chair and strained to keep his yelling to a whisper. “What the fuck did you say?”

I jumped off the bed to face him head on.

“You’re just like your damn daddy.”

“Oh and you’re not? Mr. I drink a lot ‘cause whiskey makes me thirsty.”

Mitchell’s words stopped me cold. The facts were true, that both of us were just like our father.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Like I said, Law. I’m protecting Rachel by having you here in Cincinnati. In our house, with us.

“So you’re using me to cover your shit?”

“We’re family and that’s what family does. You can see the future. I know I fuck up a lot, but you can clue me ahead of time. Together we can change the wrong things before they happen.”

“No, no, no, no. Stop it Mitch. The truth is she’s gonna find out about the baby and about what you did. I can’t stop consequences.”

“What, like you couldn’t stop daddy’s murder? I know you saw it coming. Or did he deserve to die? Are you gonna let family down again, Law?”

“How long are you gonna live a double life, Mitch?”

“I got to live it for a minute. I can’t lose Rachel.”

“How’s her math skills?”

“What?”

“Rachel’s pregnant, about a week.”

“What?”

“I saw life in her at the wedding. She conceived in Hawaii. She doesn’t know yet and won’t know for months. But whenever she finds out about your first child and does the math. What are you going to do then, Mitch?”

“That’s what we have to figure out together brother.”

CHAPTER 31

The next morning I followed the smell of fresh coffee and cinnamon rolls. Rachel and Mitchell were enjoying stolen kisses when I entered the kitchen.

‘Morning guys,’ I greeted.

Rachel’s greeting to me was followed by a kiss on the cheek. Her joy surged through me.

“Hey buddy,” said Mitchell. “So you’re meeting with the bishop today. I think this will skyrocket your ministry.”

“He’s right Lawrence,” said Rachel. “With a successful ministry and your looks you’ll find a nice girl to settle down with in no time.”

“Come on honey, I told you no matchmaking. He’s not like me. He’s not the marrying kind. He’s too much like his daddy.”

“What the hell kind of statement is that Mitch?”

“Just a joke.” Mitchell realized his mistake.

“I’ve got to go,” said Rachel. She kissed Mitchell. “You boys play nice and I’ll see you both tonight.”

As soon as Rachel left we began.

“I didn’t mean...”

“What’s your problem, Mitch?”

“I’m sorry, Law. It just slipped out.”

“Slipped out? What if I let shit slip out tonight? ‘Great dinner Rachel, Mitchell’s got a baby. Please pass the fucking peas.’”

“Okay! Calm down. I’ll drive you to the church.”

On the road I was still seething

“Lawrence, I really am sorry.”

“What else have you let slip out about me Mitch? Did you tell Rachel that I’m a freak?”

“You’re not a freak, you’re gifted.”

“Gifted people play the piano. I see the fucking future, man!”

“I wish you did play the piano, you’d be less trouble.”

“Less trouble. Are you going to work today?”

“What?”

“Where are you going today Mitch?”

“I’m going to work.”

“Are you sure, Mitch?”

“You’re the fucking soothsayer. You tell me where I’m going!”

“I didn’t want to say, but I saw you shopping for baby clothes at the mall.”

“That wasn’t for today, we were gonna do that Sunday while you and Rachel were at church.”

“Now I’m babysitting your wife? Stop the car. I’ll walk the rest of the way.”

“Calm down Lawrence and get back in the car. You don’t know where to go.”

I looked around, “Give me the directions.”

Mitch gave a frustrated sigh, “Two blocks that way then make a right on Montgomery Road.”

I began walking. Before driving away, Mitchell called out.

“You’re gifted, Law. We’re family and I love you.”

I looked straight ahead as Mitchell drove off. I got to Montgomery Road, where a stray dog trotted up to me wagging his tail.

“Hey fella, you’re a misfit like me. Bet you’re a good boy. Are you a good boy?”

I reached down to pet the dog, and saw a blinding white light. My head felt like it was splitting. I held back my scream and reached to scoop up the dog to protect him from his imminent danger. My quick movement scared the dog, and he ran out into the street. Right in the path of an oncoming truck. The driver didn’t even know he hit anything.

On my knees, I pounded the sidewalk with my fist. I screamed in blaring silence and never took my eyes off the lifeless dog. I knew the vision of death all too well. I composed myself and proceeded on to the Church of Advancing Light.

CHAPTER 32

Bishop Barnes hardly ever wore his cleric collar, but he felt it would give a more convincing image for Lawrence and Ethan. He greeted the two in the church foyer. After introducing the men to each other the bishop led them into his chamber.

No one noticed me as I shook the pain of my flash from my head. Upon shaking Ethan’s hand, I saw Ethan dangling from the strong grip of Deacon Stone. The deacon held the angry man from the back of the collar as his feet kicked in mid-air. Inside his chambers, the bishop offered us coffee.

“Please, cream and sugar. Thanks,” said Ethan.

“And how would you like yours, Lawrence?”

“Black with a shot of whiskey.”

“Are you sure?” asked the bishop. “It’s awful early.”

“I guess you’re right. On second thought, hold the coffee and double-up on the shot.”

Ethan spit his coffee as the bishop laughed out loud.

“That’s what I like, honesty, realness, being yourself. That’s how we’re gonna turn this ministry around,” said the bishop.

“You’ve got a successful ministry, bishop. What’s to turn around?” asked Ethan.

“It’s got to be bigger, it’s got to grow. That’s why I’m opening things up to you guys.”

“Us?” asked Ethan.

“Yes, you guys. Two fresh faces to draw in fresh blood. It’s about sensationalism. When you look around my ministry, eighty percent of my members are over seventy. That means my ministry is destined to shrink not grow. Now that’s a booming business for our funeral ministry, but that’s a well that’ll dry up if we don’t dig for newer sources. We need kids. We got maybe a handful . . . five maybe six. We have a choir but not a youth choir. We don’t have praise dancers, or even a Sunday school program. We need young married couples who can have children to raise in this church.”

“You approach it as a business,” I said.

“It is son. The business of saving souls. It has a price tag too. But without it, the price would be too much for mankind to handle.”

Ethan interrupted, “I understand what you’re saying. But you do make it sound like a spiritual factory with the Bible as the standard operational procedure.”

“I said I’m about being real, and this is what it is. Listen, I’ve headed this ministry for eight years and I’ve been at this church for ten. I’ve seen a lot of members grow old and die. But they died with a hope. They died knowing that they did what they had to do to secure a spot in Heaven. I was the one who led them, with scripture, to this hope. You know what? Not one of those members who passed on to that great reward in Heaven ever thought enough of me to send me a postcard.”

Ethan and I both chuckled. The bishop continued.

“All we do as spiritual leaders is sell promises. We hold down chaos and mayhem among the masses by laying out a road map to walk this way and you’ll be rewarded. Religion is a business. . . a

necessary business. I'm proud to be a part of something so great, but I only see part of it. Religion is the wonderful business of selling promises I don't have to keep."

"I never thought of it like that," said Ethan.

"A man of the cloth should not be an unconvincing liar," said the bishop. "If you never thought of it like that you would've never been a faith-healer."

"And where do the kids fit in, I mean besides just impacting the head count?" I asked.

"Simple. Affect the children and you affect the future."

"Whose future, yours or theirs?" I asked.

"The World's," replied the bishop.

"Sounds like you want to be a king or better yet a world conqueror."

The bishop's smile was slight, "I'd never want the responsibility of owning the kingdom. The power is in owning the king's ear. It's all about influence."

I finished my drink and Ethan remained silent.

"Now here's how it'll go. Sunday I will introduce you guys to the church. You each will be expected to demonstrate your individual talents. I trust you will do your best to dazzle the crowd. It'll get the members talking about the church throughout the week. During which we'll meet here daily for a week to adjust your skills to meet this ministry's needs. Any questions?"

"May I have another double?"

"You drink a lot don't you son?"

"Whiskey makes me thirsty."

"Okay gentlemen, work on your presentation and let's get this ministry growing."

As we walked through the foyer to the front door, Bishop Barnes once again thanked Ethan and me for accepting his offer. He had more to say privately to me, so he pardoned Ethan from the church. The bishop and I walked silently back to his chambers.

"Lawrence, I wanted to show you something in private. Help yourself to another drink."

The bishop walked over to his desk while I poured myself a double. The bishop unlocked one of the drawers and pulled out a beautifully carved wooden jewelry box. He opened it in front of me. Inside was a handsome 24-carat gold ring. It was squared-off and flat on top with a black onyx inlay. In the center of the onyx stone was a ruby with brilliant color.

"Go ahead, grab it," urged the bishop.

"This is a beautiful ring bishop. It's heavy."

"Can you tell me anything about it son?"

"Are you asking me if I get flashes from this?"

The bishop hesitated for a moment, "Well... yes."

"Sorry, I don't get flashes from objects."

"Well son, that's nothing to fret over. The fact still remains... you've got a true gift." The bishop took the ring and put it back quickly, locking the drawer behind.

I poured another drink while the bishop continued, "I was amazed at how your flash about me came true."

"My gift, as you call it, is greatly flawed. It would've served you better if I had told you to keep your pants on."

"Heh, heh, jocularly, I love it. How much of that whole episode did you see? I mean the dog and cat thing was weird. So was the windstorm."

I was stunned, "A dog and cat? Was this while you were naked?"

"Never mind about that. Did you see my intent?"

"Bishop, it's like this, sometimes I see extended scenes, it's rare, but it has happened. Most of the time it's just a brief fragmented image. Some are scary, like you butt-naked on a fire escape. And you call it a gift?"

“Amazing my boy, amazing. I must say, at first I didn’t think much about your skills. But you’ve reached my heart and made me a true believer.”

“Ye of little faith, bishop.”

“Lawrence, you’ve made a wise choice to become a part of my ministry. My church needs you. I need you. I’ll admit, before a few weeks ago, I was just playing the game of religion... and it is a game. It’s a game to most preachers. Ethan knows it too, he’s been around, he’s a faith healer from Chicago. But that’s all changed now. You, my boy, are the real deal. You had a calling and you answered the call.

“Sounds like you’ve grown quite comfortable in your hypocrisy.”

“Quite comfortable. Until a true child of God came to save this church from a sinning preacher. You’ve been blessed, now it’s time to be a blessing to others.”

I didn’t respond.

“I’m being totally honest with you son. I’ve seen a miracle for the first time in my life. Now it’s time for you to see the miracle. It’s time for you to see the effect your sermons will have on spirit’s of the lost.”

As if in a trance, the bishop started taking rhythmic steps into the colorful sun rays of the huge stained glass window. He held his arms in the air as if he was anointed with the Holy Spirit. I stared as the bishop’s dance became more frenzied. Then just as quickly as he started his dance, he abruptly stopped. Winded, the bishop walked back. His glassy-eyed glare made me uneasy. As beads of sweat rolled down the clergyman’s face he began to whisper.

“I can’t confirm or deny the existence of Heaven, but to be able to motivate a poor sinner to that kind of spiritual exaltation has got to elevate you to a glorious place.”

CHAPTER 33

The church sign’s message for Sunday’s service was simply, “**Behold The Gifts In Men.**” The church was buzzing with anticipation that something brand new was to be revealed.

Bishop Barnes was most excited as he greeted the church members in the foyer. “It’s a blessed day Sister Billups.”

“It’ll also be a blessed evening for our household, bishop. We’re delighted to host your dinner.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Thelma Billups, with her stepdaughters, strolled proudly into the church auditorium in overdone handmade dresses as usual. Julius Campbell waved at Doreen as he took his place in the choir.

I daydreamed about nothing as I stood off-stage and watched the choir slowly take their places. My head began to ache as a flash of Ethan dangling from the end of Deacon Stone’s strong grip. A hand on my shoulder brought me back to the present. It was Ethan.

“Hey Lawrence, are you ready?”

“Oh hello. Ethan, right?”

“That’s me.”

“Ready or not, I’m here,” I replied.

“Well, I’m ready. Ready to pull that big money. This opportunity is gonna blow our careers sky high.”

“Careers?”

“Sky high. What’s your hook again?”

“Hook?”

“You know, gimmick,” Ethan held up a pair of white gloves, “these gloves make the power of faith believable. With just a few menthol crystals inside the tips of the thumb and index finger, folks feel warm where I touch them, and 'BAM', renewed faith. Now what do you do again?”

“I see the future.”

“Cool, it’s a lot harder to sell, but obviously you got the hook down. Well, break a leg. It’s show time.”

As everyone took their places, I was still uncertain of my future in the ministry of The Church of Advancing Light. A flurry of flashes hit me of members taking communion, and flashes of the members clapping and jumping in the aisles. I took my seat behind the pulpit to the right and Ethan Cook sat to the left.

The choir began singing, *‘Fix Me Jesus’* under the direction of the Minister Of Music. Bishop Ezekiel Barnes looked regal in his long purple and gold robe as he approached the pulpit. He opened the service with prayer. He led the alter call. Next Deacon Stone brought out the communion loaves and the baptized members partook. When it was time for the bishop’s sermon, the anticipation was high. The deacon was out of sight in the rear lab with Angela watching the service on the monitor. Bishop Barnes began his sermon laughing.

“Heh, heh, oh boy God really loves y’all! I’m serious; your Father loves The Church of Advancing Light. God’s got a plan for us.”

The members stood and cheered.

“Now don’t get it twisted, while I was talking to God, he told me all about what was going on in here. Guess what, we all are a bunch of sinners. That’s why we lost our first organ. That’s why our sons have been going to jail and why they’ve been taking their own lives.”

Angela, in the room with the deacon, dropped her head as she thought about Nate.

Bishop Barnes continued, “Yes we’re all sinners. Guess what, that’s why we don’t have praise dancers. That’s why we don’t have a youth choir. All we got is a choir, twelve old folks and a young boy. But guess what, God told me he still loves us. God said he has a plan for us!”

People began clapping and jumping and shouting, “Praise the Lord!”

Bishop Barnes continued, “God’s plan is a church growth strategy. So he gave us two gifts. The scriptures speak about gifts in men being giving to the congregations. God’s gifts to us are these two men sitting behind me. Ethan Cook and Lawrence Garnier are gifts to us by God, because we are loved by God!”

The crowd yelled and jumped as the organ played in celebration.

“Get excited for these gifts. We’ve got to give praise for these gifts. God told me that some of y’all been murmuring that we take too many offerings. Do y’all hear me? Too many offerings. In Leviticus the second chapter it talks about five offerings. These offerings are required because it defines the nature of the worship experience. Offerings are as essential to our worship as is our praise and our prayers.

“We must understand why we give and what we give in relationship to our worship. We need to show praise, thanksgiving and devotion to the Lord. So, after you have your faith renewed, and your soul strengthened through worship, don’t get sour-faced when it’s time to give offerings. Since all of us are sinners, our offerings are for atonement and covering and removal of the guilt of sin. So we should be excited to be able to give to God because he gives us so much. Are we excited today?”

The members shouted and danced in the aisles.

“Are we ready to meet our gifts? And to all the single ladies here today, these brothers are single, so y’all better brush up on your pie making and do what y’all do when y’all go man-hunting, cause there ain’t no better catch than a righteous man of God. Now, let’s get these fine fellas a taste of how we celebrate the Lord’s goodness as they do their thing for the Lord. Here’s Reverend Ethan Cook.”

The church exploded with shouting as Ethan Cook took the microphone off the stand and walked down from the stage to a basin of water.

“I’m so glad to be in my new church home! My name is Ethan Cook, a servant of God, in the ministry of healing through faith. I grew up in a God fearing home in Chicago. My father is a minister. I’m twenty-four, and the youngest of three boys.”

I began to feel uneasy. I didn't want to share my past. I didn't want any part of reliving my childhood. Listening to the smooth-talking Ethan, I couldn't help but compare backgrounds. I learned that Ethan wanted no part of his father's church and ran with the wrong crowd in the Chicago streets. In a gang fight, Ethan suffered a severe spinal injury and was paralyzed. It was on a lonely night in his hospital room that Ethan saw the face of Christ appear on the ceiling. At that moment, his body became hot. Ethan rose from his bed and called his father and declared his mission to pass God's healing power that surged through his body to others.

I felt inadequate after that dramatic display of divine calling. First off, my father was everything but a man of God. He was a gambler, and an adulterer who regularly beat his wife.

Indeed, this historic fact, was how Lawrence's mother discovered the strange gift of her young son. When his father was gone for days, even weeks, God-fearing Julianne Garnier, would constantly read the bible to her three small children. One day, little Law at the age of four, yanked and pulled his mother into the small recess of his closet, rubbing his mother's face and patting her hands as if to protect and comfort her. He'd be wild-eyed and trembling with fear. This happened regularly. It was after numerous unannounced beatings that Julianne finally understood. Little Law was seeing the beatings days before they happened.

Ethan had a father who tried to steer him in the right direction. I had a no-good daddy who pushed me out of the way so as to slug my innocent God-fearing mother. *How could two boys raised so differently end up in the same place trying to save souls?*

At that point Ethan was calling for all who needed healing to approach the basin of water blessed by God.

"If you're sick, or your money situation is ill or if your life is broke down, let the power of God heal you."

One of the church mothers walked down to Ethan at the basin of holy water.

"Great, someone brave enough to trust in God's power. What's your name?"

"I'm Sister Oates, I'm one of the church mothers, and I need some money. These bills are killing me."

The crowd laughed and applauded.

"We all need to remember one thing about God. He wants us to be able to pay our debts. He wants us to be rich. Why? Because we are his children. The question he wants you to be sure about is where is your faith based? Is it in money or is it in God? Now if you base your faith in money, you are always gonna be broke. That's because money is a tool. It's to be spent, used up, and exhausted. But God is never spent-out, used-up, or exhausted. He's always there to provide what you need if you believe he can provide it."

The church howled in praise, stomped their feet and clapped in rejoice. I glanced over at the bishop whose attention on Ethan was so intense his mouth hung open.

"Now Sister Oates," Ethan continued. "You got bills to pay, but you're broke."

"That's right."

"But where's your faith?"

"It's in God."

"It's where?"

"It's in God!"

"Is your wallet sick and needs to be healed?"

"Yes Lord!"

"Where's your wallet?"

"Shirley, hand me my purse!"

A short lady in a big hat brought the woman's purse down to the basin of holy water.

"Here it is!" Sister Oates waved her wallet in the air, while the church applauded.

"How much money is in your wallet sister?"

“Seventy-five dollars.”

“Do you truly believe that God can do more for you than that measly seventy-five dollars?”

“Yes Lord. Thank you Jesus!”

“Do you truly believe that God can heal your financial burdens and bring so much wealth unto you that your cup and wallet will runneth over?”

“Dear Lord, I believe!” Sister Oates was now in tears.

“Well, you can’t receive God’s blessing with a closed hand and you can’t put new wine in an old sheepskin. So what I want you to do is take any important documents, cards and drivers license out of your wallet and put that old sick wallet with that measly seventy-five dollars in that golden bowl over there then come back to the basin.”

Sister Oates took all of her important credentials out of her wallet and handed them to Shirley. She placed her wallet and money in one of the two golden collection bowls and returned to Ethan at the basin.

“Now tell me sister, which hand do you want to receive God’s blessing? Your right or left?”

“My right hand.”

“Dip your right hand completely in the holy water.”

“Ooh, it’s cold.”

“Repeat that so everyone can hear.” Ethan held the microphone closer to her mouth.

“I said it's cold.”

“Ha ha, cold huh? Now hold that hand out with the palm up.”

She did just as Ethan instructed. She was nervous and trembling.

“Behold the healing power of God!”

Ethan placed the tip of his index finger directly in the center of her wet palm.

“Oh, it’s getting hot. Thank you Jesus.”

“That’s your blessing on the way.”

The church jumped and cheered. The organ was playing, *‘Hold On, Help Is On The Way’*. Bishop Barnes stood and applauded.

“Ha ha, praise the Lord.”

Ethan continued, “God’s healing up in here today. If any of y’all need wealth in your life, you saw it happen here. Sister Oates ain’t giving loans out when her wealth comes in.”

Lines formed at the golden collection bowls. Money, wallets and envelopes began to pile up. Ethan would have the members wet their hand then touched them with his gloved hand. People gathered on the floor giving praise as they felt the warmth of the hidden menthol crystals. One woman complained about migraines so Ethan dipped his finger in the water and touched her temples.

“Go, for you are healed,” announced Ethan as she broke into tears.

Mertis nudged her husband Jess. He slowly rose on his cane and slowly made his way to Ethan.

“Yes brother, come on,” urged Ethan, “let the brother through folks. Now brother, what’s your name?”

“Jess Simmons.”

“Okay Jess, which leg is giving you trouble?”

“It’s not my leg Reverend, it’s my heart.”

“Your heart!” Ethan was stunned.

“I’ve had a triple by-pass and I know God’s brought me this far. I just want to go further.”

“Okay Jess, I need you to unbutton your shirt.”

Brother Jess’ wife Mertis stepped up and unbuttoned his shirt.

“Thank you Jesus,” said Jess.

Ethan dipped his finger and thumb into the water and touched Jess four places around his heart.

“I feel it Mertis, I feel the hand of God on my heart.”

“Thank you Jesus!” said a tearful Mertis.

“Go and be blessed,” said Ethan.

The crowd danced in the aisles, shouting, spinning and clapping.

Bishop Barnes grabbed the microphone, “What’d I tell ya! The Lord loves The Church of Advancing Light! This ain’t no accident. This young man didn’t want to preach. He survived a serious gun-shot wound, but God spared him for this church, hallelujah!”

The church was frantic.

“Thank you brother Ethan. Praise the Lord, yes, yes. It ain’t over folks, because we have been blessed with a young man that is truly gifted with foresight. We don’t have to fear what’s around the corner for us anymore. We now have a heads-up on the future. This gives us direction. Brothers and sisters, let’s welcome brother Lawrence Garnier!”

CHAPTER 34

Everyone cheered and applauded as I walked down from the stage to the floor and got the microphone from the bishop.

“Thank you Bishop Barnes and members of The Church of Advancing Light for that warm welcome.”

I saw Rachel waving from the audience without Mitchell by her side. I waved back.

“That’s my sister-in-law, Rachel. Well, I’m thirty-one and from Louisiana. Aside from that, I won’t bore you with my past. It’s not as exciting as Ethan’s, and that’s fine, because God finds worth and value in even the lesser ones. I guess what I’m trying to say is I need The Church of Advancing Light just as much as the church needs me.”

Everyone in the church stood and applauded. Even Bishop Barnes cheered for my humble approach.

“It’s about where we are going as a group that is important. Of course, I realize that right now you want to see my gift in action. So I welcome anyone to come to me now and ask me questions and we can see what happens.”

Suddenly Bishop Barnes began to sweat. He felt uneasy about his decision to put Lawrence out in the open. Deacon Stone felt uncomfortable also as he watched the monitor.

He immediately turned to Angela. “If I have to go out there, I want you to stay put.”

Angela nodded that she understood. She didn’t know what to expect.

No one wanted to approach me. “I know this is pretty odd, but I can’t prove myself without talking to someone.”

Mertis looked at her husband Jess. They weren’t too far away, but was there anything about their future that they were really unsure of?

Bishop Barnes looked around. The church seemed frozen. Suddenly Shirley, Sister Oates’ friend, stood up and ran to Lawrence.

“Oh, here’s someone. What’s your name sister?”

“Shirley Mason. I’m like my friend over there, I need some money.”

As she shook my hand I had a flash of Shirley jumping up and down shouting ‘I won! I won!’

“I see you jumping up and down with a pink and white ticket in your hand.”

“The lottery!” she shouted. “Sorry bishop, I don’t play it often.”

“Well, you’ll win within seven days,” I said.

The church began to rumble. They didn’t know what to make of my prediction.

Ethan leaned over and whispered in Bishop Barnes’ ear. “He’s working with a hard sell. He’s losing the crowd.”

The bishop shook his head. “Lawrence was not the showman I thought he would be.”

“Brother Lawrence!” shouted Old’ Jess, “I got a question.”

Brother Jess slowly walked to me. I reached out to shake his hand when a blinding white light shot pain through my head.

“Yeow!” I yelled as I grabbed my head and doubled over.

“Are you alright brother?” asked Jess.

I rose up and looked at Jess with tearful eyes. I knew what it was. I had seen death with the stray dog and with my father.

Jess saw the pain in my eyes. “What’d you see son?” asked Jess.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“When?”

“Soon, within seven days.”

Mertis ran over to Jess.

“I’m gonna die, baby,” Jess and Mertis began to cry.

The whole church held it’s breathe as the old couple walked back to their seats. I dropped my head.

Bishop Barnes was stunned.

Then Mertis screamed, “Oh God! No! Jess is gone!”

Old’ Jess was dead where he sat. Bishop Barnes couldn’t choke back his grin. *He did it*, he thought.

Instantly people rushed out of their seats to get to me.

“Stop!” shouted the bishop. He ran down to me.

“Wait here,” said Deacon Stone to Angela as he went to control the crowd.

The bishop reached me just before the crowd did.

Shouts came was the rushing crowd, “Tell my future!” “Tell mine!” “I want to know too!”

I kept my eyes to the floor as Bishop Barnes grabbed the microphone and tried to hold the crowd back.

“Stay back people! This is still God’s house! Let’s keep order!”

The deacon began working through the crowd, pushing people back.

“Ethan!” shouted the bishop. “Get Lawrence and take him to my chamber!”

Ethan grabbed me and we ran up the steps to the stage then off to Bishop Barnes’ chamber.

Deacon Stone was not far behind us. When Ethan and I reached the chamber door, Ethan punched me, knocking me to the floor.

“What the fuck did you do? You made a fool out of me. I just healed that guy.”

Ethan kicked me in the ribs. Deacon Stone grabbed Ethan by the collar raising him off the floor.

Immediately, Bishop Barnes ran to unlock his chamber door.

“Man-oh-man, Stoney, it’s crazy out there! Lawrence did it! There’s so much money on the floor, we’ll be sweeping up twenties for a week! I got the choir singing right now.”

He stopped when he noticed me on the floor moaning. Then he saw Ethan dangling from the deacon’s grip.

“What happened?”

“This one was beating on Lawrence.”

“Boy, what the hell’s wrong with you? If you damaged any part of his gift, that’s your ass. Get in here, both of you.”

I crawled in behind the bishop. Deacon Stone tossed Ethan into the office.

“Stoney, go shut the service down. Secure the money, and load Brother Jess in the hearse. We’ll comfort Mertis later.”

“Alright, but handle these two.”

“I got them.”

Bishop Barnes locked the door.

“Bishop, I healed that guy and this fool deliberately showed me up!”

“What have you been doing for the last ten minutes, huh? Picking your damn nose? That nigga died, you didn’t heal shit!”

“Fuck you!” screamed Ethan. “I did my job out there!”

“Watch your tongue boy. It’s wet and it’s libel to slip. You did your job, yes, but Lawrence did his, and a lot better than you did.”

“That asshole hit me,” I moaned.

“Lawrence my boy, you did it!”

Bishop Barnes helped me into a chair.

“You’re golden son, pure gold.”

“Hey, I’m part of this team too,” yelled Ethan.

“Shut the hell up Ethan!”

The bishop poured me a drink.

“This is how it’s gonna work from now on, Lawrence will always go on first. Since he’s the real McCoy, if there’s anything you need to know, he’ll clue you in. Starting tomorrow morning, you two are going to be here working on polishing your performances. You’re free to go Ethan, see you tomorrow.”

Ethan left and the bishop poured me another drink.

“Are you okay son?”

“Yeah, I’m alright.”

“I can’t even begin to tell you how huge you are about to become. This is your calling and your blessings will abound. You were great!”

“Well, I don’t feel so great. A man died out there.”

“A very old man with a bad heart. You’re not a doctor; it wasn’t your job to save his life. You did your job, you saw his future. You’ve got credibility now. Anything you tell the church after this is gospel. Now I got a surprise for you.”

“What is it?”

The bishop reached into his pocket and revealed a card.

“You’re officially ordained. You can preach in all fifty states. Ethan was only legal in two before now.”

I took the card and examined it.

“Look at it boy and say hello to first-class air flights, forgiven loans, etc. It’s your key to the Kingdom. Now go home, get some rest, and I’ll see you in the morning. I’ve got a dinner date with the Billups.”

CHAPTER 35

I wanted to make sense of the old man’s death, so I left the bishop and walked onto the empty stage. As I stood on the empty stage, Julius ran up the steps to get his choir robe that he left behind. I caught a flash of the boy sitting at a dinner table. A woman sat down across from him, it was her, Angela. Julius left as quickly as he came. *Was the mysterious woman who lured me here his mother?*

Rachel waited outside the church for me. The ride home was quiet. Rachel didn’t know what to say but she had to know the truth. “Lawrence, I’m sure you don’t want to talk about it, but I know what I saw. A man died today and you predicted it. How?”

“Rachel, I... I didn’t want that to happen.”

“Mitchell never told me you had super powers.”

“I don’t have super powers; it’s more of a curse.”

“Explain it to me, Lawrence. What’s going on?”

I told Rachel all I knew about the foresight.

“Did you get it from your twin?”

“I don’t really know, Rachel.”

“Is there anything special about Mitchell?”

“Believe me, there’s nothing special about him!”

“This is hard to wrap my brain around, Lawrence. You’ve got to promise something. Wait a minute, you already know what I’m about to say.”

“Rachel, I can’t see anything concerning my own future.”

“Then you’re better off than the rest of us.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want to live a predestined life. I want to experience my life as it plays out. I want to experience surprises. I love you, but promise me that you’ll never tell me anything about my future, good or bad. I don’t want to know. I don’t want to alter my life by trying to change the future. So, right now, promise me.”

I dropped my head. “I promise.”

CHAPTER 36

“Thelma, you’re as talented in the kitchen as you are around that sewing machine,” said the bishop as he sat back and rubbed his stomach.

“Thank you bishop. Did you get enough?”

“I’m ‘bout to bust right now. Ed, I think you took the best cook the church had.”

“Want to join me outside for a cigar, bishop?”

“That don’t sound too bad, Ed.”

“Ed, no. I don’t want this blessed visit wasted on a filthy vice like smoking. Besides, Doreen wanted to recite the bible books for the good bishop.”

“Well bishop, I guess you can’t come out and play. I guess I should quit smoking, but today ain’t the day to break a tradition. I’ll be out on the porch Thelma.”

“I’m sorry bishop. I don’t know what to do about him.”

“Ed is alright Thelma. He’s been through a lot and it’s good you support him.”

“I just try so hard for this family. I want us all to be blessed.”

“You’re doing a fine job, sister. Just look at these little ladies. Who wants to recite her bible books?”

“It will be Doreen.”

“I can go to…”

“Debbie! We’re talking to Doreen, not you.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Go ahead Doreen.”

As Doreen recited the books of the Bible, Debbie stared at the bishop. She stared so hard that a couple of times the bishop forgot about Doreen. The bishop felt something strange about the little girl. It was an uneasy feeling. When Doreen finished, the bishop praised her. Thelma pushed her chest out like a proud mother hen. Once again, Debbie tried to participate.

“Debbie, no one’s talking to you,” snapped Thelma.

“Thelma,” the bishop interrupted, “I think Debbie wants to ask me something.”

Thelma glared at Debbie. “Well, go ahead girl.”

Debbie looked for a minute. “Bishop Barnes, why is your hair like that? It’s white on one side and

black on the other, just like Cruella De Vil.”

Thelma gasped.

“Like who?” asked the bishop.

“You know from One Hundred and One Dalmatians, Cruella wanted to kill all the puppies. She was evil and her hair was just like yours.”

The bishop’s eyes pierced through the little girl. “Woe to the child that brings grief to her parents,” he mumbled before regaining himself.

Thelma spoke quickly, “I... I’m sorry Bishop Barnes, she’s...”

“She’s darling,” he said, “I must be going; I’ve got a lot of church planning to do.”

Thelma walked the bishop to the door. Doreen bumped her little sister as they followed behind. She shook her head at Debbie and mouthed the word *‘dummy’*. At the door Bishop Barnes whispered intently to Thelma, then both adults shot glances at the little girl.

Then the bishop smiled. “Thelma and little ladies, thanks so much for a lovely dinner. Be blessed.”

As the door closed behind the bishop, they could hear him talking to Ed. Thelma bristled and folded her arms.

“Debbie go to your room and stay there.”

Julius finished his dinner and waited for his favorite dessert. His mother cut him a healthy piece of hot apple pie and topped it with a large scoop of vanilla ice cream. She barely sat down before he attacked it. She poured herself a cup of coffee.

“How is it, baby?”

“Mmm, the best,” his answer was muffled.

Angela sat back down at the table and sampled her son’s dessert. “That is good.”

“Mom, church was kinda exciting today.”

“Yes, it was interesting.”

“I was thinking that maybe now you could get healed from that sickness you get sometimes. These two new ministers seemed pretty cool.”

“We’ll see, son.”

Angela sipped her coffee and watched her son enjoy his dessert. She wished she could be helped, but she knew that because of Julius she was in too deep.

Later that evening, I sat quietly in my dark room sipping whiskey and listening to music. The knock on the door disturbed my groove but it was a knock I was expecting. It was Mitchell.

“How you feeling, guy? Rachel told me what happened at church. She was wondering what other family secrets I was hiding from her. She asked me if our kids would be able to fly or spit fire. It was gonna come out, Law, better now than later.”

“Do you ever wonder what Lyle would’ve been like if he were alive today?” I asked.

“I know he would’ve looked just like you. That’s a pity.”

“Everything’s a joke with you Mitch. I’m being serious, what type of person would he have been? You know Virginia told me that the wrong twin died.”

“Growing up, I’ve learned that Virginia said a lot of stupid things, Law. You’ve got to overlook her.”

“What if she was right, Mitch? I mean Lyle was just a baby, why did he deserve to die and not me?”

“Don’t be crazy, Law, you were a baby too. Neither one of you deserved to die. It’s tragic, but it was just something that happened. He’s not with us anymore, but he’s still our brother. We still love him and when we think about him we still feel him.”

“That’s just it Mitch, what I feel is a hole inside me. Everyday I know that there’s something missing. It’s a void that hurts. Lyle was truly a part of me and that part is dead.”

Mitchell put his arm around his brother. "I know it ain't much, but I'm here. I know that there's a special bond between twins, the same is true about brothers. Our bond is alive and something that we can build on. Don't live in the past, Law, let the pain go and move forward. You may not see it, but your future will be bright."

I said nothing as I embraced my brother. Mitchell felt my pain as I clung to him. He felt my fear of the future as I hung onto him for dear life.

CHAPTER 37

The eighth-graders got out of school at 2:45. Sawyer Junior High was only a ten-minute walk from Parham Elementary. Doreen always had plenty of time to meet her sister at the flagpole when the fourth graders got out at 3:15.

Julius hurried down the steps to catch up with her. "Dory hold up!"

"Why do you always call me that? My name is Doreen."

"I know that, Dory is easier."

"I think you're just lazy."

"I was hoping to borrow your math notes for tomorrow's test."

"I guess so. I need to get in my backpack."

Doreen stopped to remove her pack. Julius grabbed the strap to help her.

"Why don't I just wait till we get to your house?"

"I have to pick my sister up on the way."

"That's fine; I'll carry your pack for you."

Doreen smiled as the two walked together.

"You could've just asked to carry my books you know."

"It was easier this way."

"Why aren't you watching football practice with your friends?"

"I'd rather walk with you," Julius started to laugh.

"What?"

"Especially since you're not wearing one of your church dresses."

"I don't believe you said that!" She tried to hit him but missed."

"It was just a joke," he laughed.

"You wear a dumb dress every Sunday too," she laughed.

"It's a robe, not a dress, but it is dumb looking."

Julius and Doreen laughed so hard together that they never saw Deacon Stone drive up.

The deacon beeped once to get Julius' attention.

"That's Deacon Stone, where'd he come from?" said the boy.

"Hello Julius, can I have a quick word with you?"

"Let's go see what he wants, Dory."

"I'll wait here, that hearse gives me the creeps."

Julius walked over to the deacon.

"Hey Deacon Stone."

"Hello Julius how was school today?"

"It was alright."

"That's the Billups girl isn't it?"

"Yeah, we have class together."

The Parham Elementary kids yelled and ran as usual around the schoolyard. Debbie waved

goodbye to her classmates as she headed to the flagpole in the center of the yard. She noticed her sister was not there yet and sat on the stone wall that separated the yard from the ball field.

“So, does your mother seem to be doing better since she had that last spell?” asked the deacon.

“Yes sir, she’s okay.”

Doreen was getting anxious, “Julius, I gotta go!”

“I’m coming! Sorry deacon, we gotta go.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Would you kids like a ride?”

“No thanks, we like walking.”

CHAPTER 38

“Fight! Fight!” sounded an unknown voice in the schoolyard.

Kids everywhere scrambled to see where the fight was. Debbie stood and stretched to see what was happening.

An older kid who Debbie had never seen before approached her, “Your sister is fighting over there behind the school.”

Debbie took off, leaving her backpack against the stone wall. When she reached the back of the building, two thugs who looked to be in their early twenties grabbed her.

“We’re taking you to her,” said one thug.

The two men drug the little girl through a cut out section in the chain link fence. They hurried down a slight path through the woods that led over to the next street. The little girl could hardly keep up with the two men; she stumbled over cans and beer bottles.

“Stop! You’re hurting me!” screamed the little girl.

“Wait,” one man said to the other. “You better shut-up.” He came hard across the child’s face with the back of his hand. When they approached the street, they turned up the alley and entered the rear of a run-down auto garage. The vacant building was dark and the air was musky with traces of gasoline and oil. The men pushed the little girl against the wall.

When Doreen and Julius got to the schoolyard, there were only a handful of kids running around. Doreen saw her sister’s backpack next to the stone wall.

“Oh my goodness, she’s not here!”

Julius ran over to the few kids playing. “Did you see the little girl who was over there?”

The children shook their heads no and kept on playing.

“We’ve got to find her Julius!”

“We will Dory, we’ve got to.”

“Where’s my sister?” cried Debbie.

“I told you to keep your mouth shut,” the man pushed a nine-millimeter gun in her face. Debbie’s eyes crossed in terror as she stared at the gun barrel.

“School ain’t over yet. We’re gonna teach you things a little girl your age should never know. Face the wall!”

“Please, I’m scared. Don’t...”

“Turn around!”

The trembling little girl turned and faced the wall behind her.

“Put your hands on the wall!”

The little girl just cried and shook in fear. She felt the barrel of the gun being pressed against the back of her head.

“Put your hands on the fucking wall! And you better not turn around.”

Debbie put her hands on the cold greasy wall.

“Get her panties down.”

She felt the warm rough hands go up her skirt. She felt faint as the man’s fingers grasped her elastic and pulled. Unable to hold her fear any longer, she relieved herself.

“Ahh, this little bitch pissed on me, shoot her.”

Debbie heard the startling sound of the gun click. She closed her eyes so tight she saw stars.

“*Please help lord,*” She heard a garage door suddenly slide open.

“Who are you?” asked the man with the gun.

Debbie heard no reply. She could tell that her two attackers were frozen in fear.

With eyes shut, the terrified little girl continued to pray. *Please Lord, I don’t want to die. Jesus save me.*

Debbie didn’t know how long she had been praying, but she knew she didn’t hear anything. *Don’t look. I’m so scared. God please don’t let me die.*

She opened one eye and slowly turned her head. She saw no one behind her. She saw the open garage door that lead out to the street. She pulled up her panties and ran as fast as she could to the street.

Julius and Doreen ran frantically up and down the surrounding streets calling for the little girl.

“Debbie! Debbie!” they both cried out.

The two ran back and forth crossing over streets and looking down alleys. They only stopped to ask any lingering kids if they had seen anything strange.

“Debbie! Debbie!”

“Doreen!”

“Stop, I heard your name,” said Julius, “around the corner, come on.”

The three children collided in tears.

“Where were you?” screamed Doreen.

“Two men grabbed me,” cried Debbie.

“What? Who?” asked Julius.

“I don’t know, they had a gun, they were going to teach me about sex.”

“No! Did they touch you?” screamed Doreen.

“Someone scared them off before they did!”

“We need to run now, straight to your house Doreen!” said Julius, “They may still be around. Come on don’t stop for nothing!”

The three started running. Julius led the way making sure to look forward and behind so as not to cause notice.

“Come on!” he yelled.

He saw Deacon Stone’s hearse approaching the corner in front of them.

“Deacon Stone!” he yelled waving his hands.

The deacon saw the three children and rolled down his window.

“Are you kids alright?”

“Please, we need a ride home,” said Julius.

After Julius explained what happened, Deacon Stone assured them that they were safe and that those responsible for the attack would be brought to justice. Then he made three phone calls. First to the Billups’ home to tell them that he was bringing the girls home, next he called the police and reported the crime and gave the Billups address. Then he called the bishop.

CHAPTER 39

When Bishop Barnes reached the Billups' home, the police were already there. Ed opened the door and the alcohol reek washed over the bishop like a bad mood. Bishop Barnes understood why Ed was drunk this time. He was distraught and rightly so. The bishop composed himself and entered.

"We will cast this emotional burden into the Lords' hands, Ed."

Ed led the bishop up to the little girl's room. Inside Thelma and one female police officer was with the child.

"Thank you for coming bishop," said Thelma.

"This too shall pass, sister," he said. "How is she?"

"The police want to take her to the hospital."

The officer spoke up, "She says that nothing sexual was completed. Unfortunately since she's a minor, we won't do a rape kit on her. She may not even know what was done to her."

"How's her emotional state?" he asked.

The officer responded first, "she's definitely shook up, but she may have been traumatized in ways that haven't manifested themselves yet. A crisis interviewer will talk to her to see if there's anything she needs to say that she's not comfortable saying around loved ones."

"Can I have a brief moment to pray over the child before you leave?"

"If the parents don't oppose, we won't either."

Bishop Barnes turned to Thelma.

"Please pray for her," she said.

Thelma and the officer stepped out into the hallway. Debbie was still trembling as the bishop placed his hand on her head.

"Divine Father, I partition you on behalf of one of your little ones. It's obvious that this little girl has angered you greatly, but forgive her father for she knows not what she has done. For the disrespect of your purpose that she has committed, please don't hold it against her. This child will surely die without your protection. So I beg for her, Father. Please forgive her badness so that she will live. Amen."

Tears streamed down the child's face. Bishop Barnes pulled out a handkerchief and gently wiped her tears.

"Child, you're in God's hands now. I just hope this prayer wasn't too late."

CHAPTER 40

Angela Campbell paced between the dining room and the kitchen while Julius washed the dinner dishes.

"Mom, I just can't forget what happened. She's in my class and she goes to our church and you know that there ain't too many young folks that go to our church. So I have to walk Doreen home from school."

"Baby, I know you want to help. I just don't intend to lose another child. The Billups are responsible for the safety of the girls, not you."

"Mom, what would Bishop Barnes think if he heard you didn't want to help someone from your own church?"

"Do I care what Bishop Barnes thinks? I go to church to worship God, not follow a man."

"If we're in the right church, shouldn't the man we follow should lead us to God?"

Angela stopped and lit a cigarette.

"I don't want to lose another family member either, mom. So I wish you'd stop smoking. Maybe that will stop those spells you get."

Angela put her cigarette out. She was angry that her only son was becoming a man and she had nothing to do with it.

“OK, son, I’ll talk to Thelma about arrangements to and from school but know this, none of you will be walking to school or home together. I’ll drive you all.”

CHAPTER 41

The Billups were about to get word on Debbie’s condition. The female officer and the child crisis interviewer met in a conference room with the family. The interviewer was an older lady with white hair.

“Good news, Mr. and Mrs. Billups,” started the interviewer. “Debbie was not raped. There was a reddish abrasion on her right cheek. It could’ve come from a slap or from a tree branch as she obviously ran through a few trees. There were traces of leaves and twigs on her clothing. There’s lots of holes in her story.”

“You think my little girl made all this up?” asked a disheveled Ed.

“I’m not implying anything of the sort. Some of her details seemed a bit much for a child to go through and all she sustained was a small scratch on her cheek. Has she had bathroom issues at home?”

Thelma shook her head no, “Nothing that I’ve been aware of.”

The interviewer paused for a moment. “Mr. and Mrs. Billups, my personal opinion is that maybe she had a bathroom accident on the school grounds and because of shame, she ran off her normal route in a state of confusion. Or maybe not, in any case, whatever happened caused her to contrive a story to cover shame or she believes what happened was real. I suggest that you give her some space, you know, alone time. No school for a couple of weeks and plenty of love. We’ll do a follow-up interview with her at her home in about a week. We are also going to talk to her teachers to see if there are any issues there that need to be addressed. Afterwards, you will be fully informed of our final determination of the facts.”

“Ma’am, what if my daughter believes it really did happen?” asked Ed. “I mean somebody out there might be watching my child to harm her the first chance they get. You all sound like you’re just gonna smooth this over.”

The female officer spoke up. “Not at all, Mr. Billups. The police are going to fully investigate this case. We’re still treating this as a crime. We will examine the area in which she described, and if this happened, we’re gonna find who did it.”

“I really wish we could tell you more,” said the interviewers. “I’m just glad it wasn’t worse, we’ll bring the child out and I’m sure she will bounce back to her old self very quickly. Love and assure her safety and you’ll see results.”

Angela carried her son’s lunch to the car and waited briefly for Julius to come out. They arrived at the Billups’ home in about ten minutes. Doreen promptly ran out as the car pulled up. Thelma stood at the door. Angela yelled out to her.

“How’s the baby, Thelma?”

“Physically she’s fine. She’s gonna be alright, the Lord will see to that?”

“Everyone has got to work together to see all these children through.”

“That’s right, Angela. Thanks so much for your help. Be blessed.”

CHAPTER 42

On his way to work, Mitchell dropped me off at the church. Inside the main auditorium, down in front of the stage Bishop Barnes chatted with Ethan.

“There’s my boy! Come on down son,” urged the bishop.

I took a seat, looked at Ethan, but remained silent.

“Ethan!” alerted the bishop.

Ethan stood and walked over.

Before he got to me I yelled, “Well if it ain’t the board director of The Council For Misplaced Aggression! Where the only thing coming between innocence and blame is a minty-fresh finger!”

“I’ll take that, he said. “Lawrence, I was wrong yesterday and I’m very sorry.”

“Save it,” I said.

“You’re not gonna hold a grudge are you Lawrence?” asked the bishop.

“No, I’m just hung-over.”

Ethan held out his hand. “Am I forgiven?”

“No problem,” I shook his hand and received a flash of Ethan praying over a little girl.

“Amen,” said Bishop Barnes. “Now let’s talk business. I don’t want you two to be put off by my terminology. By thinking in the terms of business you will understand exactly what I expect from you. We are in the business of selling hope.”

The bishop paused to see a reaction. “Go ahead guys, say it, ‘Oh no, he’s emphasizing the money, gasp.’ Correct; I am because it’s a way to measure our affect on our members. It’s our job to reach them. Teach them and give them hope, which brings them closer to God. In 1999 folks dreaded the millennium. Everyone thought ‘Lights out on the world’. Everyone was going to church wanting to be saved.

When Y2K came and nothing happened, church attendance dropped. Then the best thing for churches happened. . . 9/11. Folks ran back to church, now we’ve got to keep them here, we need this ministry to grow and we need children. That’s where you young guns come in. Yesterday things did get a little crazy, but you guys did the one thing every preacher ever wanted to do. You convinced them. You only had to do it once and you guys did it straight out the gate.”

I looked over at Ethan and thought, *we’re from totally different worlds. How did we crash here?*

Ethan looked at Lawrence and thought, *you’ll never be greater than me.*

“So here’s how this ministry and y’all will work,” continued the bishop. “For this ministry to survive, we need to captivate and draw. We not only need new customers but repeat customers. To keep the gears of this church well lubricated with the donations and gifts of the faithful, we need a new attraction every month. That means a new prophecy or a new word from the Lord. What’s hot and what’s not depends on the creativity of you two. I will work personally with each one of you in creating exciting rides, attractions and innovations.”

Ethan raised his hand to ask a question.

“Go ahead son,” said the bishop.

“I was thinking about the way you present communion. Real flat bread and breaking portions by hand, you know, it’s kinda ‘old-timey’. We could order communion packets with the wafer and side cup of wine. Ushers can pass the kit’s to everyone and it’ll save time.”

Bishop Barnes looked at Ethan for a moment. “So that’s what you think? Is that how they do it in Chicago? Is that the Chi-Town way, huh? You think salvation should come freeze-dried? Why don’t we just serve drink boxes and pop-tarts at communion? Ethan, I’m putting you on notice, don’t say no more stupid shit for ninety days.”

“Hey, it’s your church that’s in trouble.”

“Boy, what’s wrong with you? You think you’re all that? Son, you’re good at what you do, but all you’re doing is hustling. You ain’t nothing but a well-dressed snake-oil salesman. You ain’t shit, Reverend Chicken-Wing. But you’re right about one thing it is my church. If you don’t like how I run

it, leave and get your own. Just remember, you fuck with me and the only place in the whole region you'll be preaching will be in front of a liquor store shouting into a karaoke machine."

Ethan shook his head in silence.

The bishop continued, "I'm running this show, deal with it! You know what? Get out of my face right now. Here's a thousand bucks, go buy some gators you fake-ass preacher."

The bishop took money from his wallet and threw it in the young man's face.

"That's right," he said, "I got it like that, now get out and have your ass back here tomorrow morning at nine."

Ethan picked up the money and walked out.

"And bring back receipts!"

I sat stunned at what I had just witnessed.

"Close your mouth son, we're going shopping too."

In the Benz, the bishop and I headed downtown.

"You like this car, son?"

"Who wouldn't like a ride like this?"

"You'll have one. Just wait and see how I dress you, you'll be a believer then."

I looked at the plush insides of the bishop's car then he slowly cracked a slight smile.

CHAPTER 43

Our first stop was Nobby's Tailors. Judging by the greeting when we entered, the bishop spent large amounts in the place. The bishop took control picking only the finest silks, linens and wool blends. He was also taken in the back for an exclusive first-look at the newest fabrics from Italy and China. I was left totally out of the loop, stepping from side to side dodging all the bolts of fabric brought to the bishop. I watched, as the bishop stood out of plain sight discussing, what I figured was, details. Suddenly the bishop took a seat while the head tailor measured everything from my neck-size to sleeve length, waist size to inseam and shoulders. Then the head tailor informed the bishop that his last purchase was ready and promptly brought him a garment bag.

"Now, let's walk over to Batsakes to check out some brims," said the bishop.

"I'm not much of a hat man."

"You will be."

After an hour the bishop asked, "You hungry son?"

"A little."

"I'm starving, so we'll grab some lunch. Everything we just bought will be delivered to the church when it's ready. Let's go."

We walked a couple of blocks to Morton's Steakhouse. Once inside, the Maitre d greeted the bishop.

"Bishop Barnes, wonderful to have you. A table for two?"

"Yes, and I'll have a White Label and water. Lawrence?"

"A double Johnnie Walker Black on the rocks."

The Maitre d led us to our table, and drinks followed promptly.

"Lawrence, how about the filet mignon? It's manna from Heaven" said the bishop.

"That's fine."

When the waiter arrived, the bishop ordered. "Two double-cut filet mignons, medium rare, potatoes, butter and sour cream, and two Caesar salads."

"Very well sir," said the waiter.

"Also," I said, "Another double."

“Yes sir.”

The bishop took a sip of his scotch and water.

“Ah, that’s good. After we eat, we’ll take care of your footwear. We can’t have you preaching with holes in your shoes.”

I looked off into the distance and chuckled.

“Did I say something funny?”

“That statement reminded me of what my mother used to say. She read the bible to us continually, she’d say, ‘If you know your scriptures, you’ll never want for nothing and you’ll never have to preach with holes in your shoes.’ My brother and I would laugh at the thought of ‘holy shoes’. It’s silly now, but man it was sure funny back then.”

My drink arrived. “Thank you, and keep ‘em coming.”

“Son, you drink like a man who’s trying to forget something,” said the bishop.

“Maybe I’m just parched.”

“No, you’re trying real hard to escape your past. Why?”

I finished my drink. “The stuff that hurts tends to keep hurting. This is just a pain-killer.”

“It can also be a gift-killer, if you don’t ease up.”

“Oh my gift is strong because I’ve tried to shut it down, but I can’t. Don’t get me wrong, alcohol slow it down, which is fine with me... the problem is I can’t stop it.”

“Can you get a flash on me now?”

“It would probably take a while or I may have to touch you.”

The waiter arrived with our salads and another drink for me.

“Go ahead,” said the bishop. “Shake my hand.”

I took a long sip, and then shook the bishop’s hand. “Nothing.”

“Are you sure?” asked the bishop. “Try again and really concentrate.”

I grabbed his hand and held it. The bishop squeezed firmly as if to get a better connection. “Nope. No flash.”

“Well how do you know if the gift will come back?”

“It always comes back, always.”

“So alcohol dulls your gift?”

“I wish it would kill it. Everyone else calls it a gift, I don’t.”

The bishop thought for a moment then ate his salad. I held my empty glass in the air just as another drink arrived. I took a sip.

“But fear not sir,” I said. “If it’s a flash you want then you’ll get it.”

“What?”

“I’m also cursed with a good memory and I already had a flash on you back at the church.”

“Really?”

“You were standing outside in front of the church talking to some news reporters.”

“About what?”

“I came in on the part about the increased attendance at the church.”

“That’s great. When was it? Or should I say when will it be?”

“Sometime this week, within seven days.”

The meals came and I asked for water with my food. The steak was perfect.

“What’d I tell you, son? It’s the best filet mignon in the city.”

“You’re right.”

The waiter brought my water.

“You finally gave up on the whiskey?”

“Not with my steak. I’ll drink more for dessert.”

We remained silent for the rest of the meal. When we were done, the bishop ordered a cigar and another drink. I ordered another double.

“Man, there’s nothing like a good cigar after a terrific meal,” said the bishop.

“Except a double shot.”

The bishop laughed. “We really need to get back at it?”

“At what?”

“The shoes brother.”

“Aren’t you spending a bit much?”

“It’s an investment. After your performance in church you’ll bring in twice as much in one service.

Now let’s get going.”

CHAPTER 44

Thelma’s manner was very matter of fact as she cut the grilled cheese sandwich. She placed the sandwich on a tray next to the steaming bowl of tomato soup. Her mood was solemn as she carried the sleeping child’s lunch up the stairs. She kept replaying The bishop’s words over and over in her head. *‘Break the child’s spirit’* is what he told her before leaving. She entered Debbie’s room.

“Debbie, lunch.”

Debbie had been awake for about two hours. She was confused and still frightened. She slowly sat up as Thelma set up a tray table at the edge of the bed.

“Is my daddy home yet?”

“No. It’s only noon. I let you sleep through breakfast but you must eat your lunch.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“You know Debbie, your father is not handling this well. In fact he may have to go to the hospital if things don’t get any better.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s you dear, you’re the reason your father left the church. You’re the reason why he drinks.”

Debbie sat stunned. Even at her young age, she felt the burden that Thelma’s words placed on her.

“Child, I’m not saying it’s your fault. It’s just how you came into this world. You have an evil cloud that hangs over you because you were born through death.”

Debbie’s mouth fell open. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You are the reason your mother’s dead. Most children don’t live when the birth mother dies before they’re born. But you passed through after your mother was already gone and you brought death’s curse with you.”

Debbie dropped her head and tears dropped onto her tray.

“Why are you crying? Your mother is not worth your tears child. She was evil. You and the rest of your family were in constant danger because of her slothful ways. In fact, you should be happy that the Lord has found favor in you.”

Debbie’s tearful eyes met Thelma’s.

Look at your blessings child. You don’t deserve to even be here, but yet you exist. Better yet, the Lord has given you two people who deeply care about your salvation.”

“My sister and my daddy?”

Thelma laughed. “No silly, the good bishop and me. Your sister and your father are still in real danger because of you. It’s so bad that even if you so much as mention any of this to them, they could die on the spot.”

“I don’t want them to die!”

“Of course you don’t, but you’re cursed. The Lord loves you, but he wants you to get your mind right in order to save your family. He’s giving you a second chance. I was brought to you to break your curse.”

“How?”

“Oh my child, I’ll deal with the how. I just need you to have the fullest trust in me. Together we will save your sister and your father. But it won’t be easy on you or me. It will hurt us both but if we can stand it and you get your mind right with God; your family will live long happy lives.”

Debbie wasn’t clear on what Thelma was telling her but she knew that if her sister and father were in danger because of her, she had to do something.

Thelma saw the confusion in the little girl’s face. “You’ll die like your evil mother without my help. Is that what you want?”

“I want my sister and father to be okay,” cried the little girl.

“Then follow me and I’ll start the fight for this family’s salvation immediately.”

Debbie trembled as she slowly rose from the bed. “Is this gonna hurt?”

“Oh yes my dear, but it’s the only way.”

Thelma gently took the little girl by the hand and led her into the bathroom.

CHAPTER 45

The bishop and I pulled up in front of Mitchell and Rachel’s house around 5:30 pm.

“I really appreciate all you’ve done for me today, bishop. I really don’t know what to say.”

“Say thank you to God, my boy, he’s the one who has blessed you for finally acknowledging his gift to you. Just do me one favor.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t let me catch your shiftless brother in any of your new clothes.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry Lawrence, I just don’t respect a guy who comes into God’s house just to pick a beautiful flower from the Lord’s garden then rarely shows his face in church.”

“Do you really care that much about their life?”

“Enough to charge you with the task of keeping that union on track spiritually. This ministry ain’t no easy ride, son. We’re being attacked viciously by the Devil. Just the other day, the youngest Billups’ girl was attacked by a couple of thugs.”

“What?”

“Why didn’t you see that coming?”

“I don’t even know who that little girl is? I’d like to help her though. We should pay her a visit.”

“You’re not doing a thing for her. You’re gonna take my car and pay a visit to Mertis Simmons. You foresaw her husband’s death so you can console her. Me and that idiot Ethan will check on the Billups’ girl.”

“I guess I’ve got my work spelled out for me with this ministry.”

“Hear me straight, Lawrence. I know and trust your gift, but this is my ministry and my church. I know my flock, they need hope. No matter how bad a vision you get from any of them, never give them the bad news. Give ‘em hope then tell me what you really saw.”

“So you want me to lie?”

“If you can’t make it positive, yes. Listen, most of these members are old. If you start going around confirming everyone’s checkout time, you’re gonna be known as the Angel of Death. Our job is to build a positive church so everyone wants to attend.”

I thought about Rachel. I knew the bishop was right.

“Alright, I’ll only tell you the bad flashes for the sake of the church.”

“Excellent. Now, let’s get your bags inside and I’ll meet you at the church in the morning.”

CHAPTER 46

Mertis Simmons sat quietly sipping coffee as she flipped through stacks of photo albums. Exhausted from loneliness, she wondered how long she would have to exist before joining her loving husband. She was startled by an early knock on the door, and even more startled when she answered it.

“Good morning Mrs. Simmons, I wanted to check up on you. I hope I’m not intruding.”

“Oh, Rev. Garnier. No, you're not intruding. I just hope you're not here to tell me that I won't be around to see that my husband is properly buried.”

My head was stinging from flashes of Mertis crying at the dinner table set for two. *Some gift, what else would she be doing?*

“I’m sorry about your husband. I didn’t . . .”

“I’m sorry too, young man. You didn't kill Jess, it was his heart. Come on in.”

I moved slowly. I didn't know how to comfort Mrs. Simmons in her time of grief. She led me into to dining room. There were photo albums on the table.

“I – I don't want to forget his face,” she said. “I never thought I could ever do that, but right now I'm not so sure. Can I get you something to drink? Coffee?”

“Whisk . . . uh, coffee will be fine.”

I thumbed through the open photo album and saw youthful photos of Jess and Mertis. There was innocent joy in their eyes.

“Have a seat there at the table young man,” said Mertis, “here's your coffee.”

“You two were quite an attractive couple,” I said.

“And so much in love. Are you in love, Lawrence?”

“I might have been close to it once, but I really don't know.”

“You're still young. Love will find you. Love will reunite Jess and me one of these days.”

Why am I here? I can't comfort her.

I continued to flip through the photos. I stopped on one with Jess standing among five men. One of the men looked like Bishop Barnes, only younger and with solid black hair.

“Is that Bishop Barnes?”

“Yes, only he was a deacon back then. That was just before the church's big split.”

“The church split?”

“We were The Gospel Way Church before we became The Church of Advancing Light. Reverend Robbie was a wonderful preacher. The only problem was we were a poor church, but we were happy.”

“Money isn't everything.”

“That's kind of how we all felt back then. Reverend Robbie always worried about the bills, but we always got by. Jess and the other deacons really supported the good reverend.”

“So what went wrong?”

“Reverend Robbie took a real shine to that young man. He took him under his wing and taught him everything about his ministry. Then times started to change. That young man really had the good reverend's ear. First the church started a fund for the elderly, then the ideal of putting the church in charge of everyone's finances.

Then the deacons started to fight amongst themselves. The church bought a funeral service, complete with it's own cemetery. The man who ran that business became our next deacon. Then the reverend talked about retiring and passing the ministry to one of the deacons.”

I looked at the photos of the five deacons. No one was of unusual size.

“I'm assuming this photo was taken before Deacon Stone.”

“That's right.”

“Those other three deacons left the church.”

“Why did Jess stay?”

“I never knew why. He always felt like we needed to stay. Maybe it was for the others who stayed or maybe just for me.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Jess would always say. ‘If we’re in the wrong place of worship, the Lord will reveal it and deliver us. And if anything ever happened to him to find Willa Mae and get out of town.’”

“Who’s Willa Mae?”

“Here’s a photo of her.”

Mertis showed me a photo of a plain woman sitting at an old piano.

“She played that old thing for a whole lot of years, never missed a service. Until Bishop Barnes brought in that elaborate organ and a Minister of Music. Willa Mae was out so she left the church.”

“So she got away clean.”

“Jess would say that very thing. One of those deacons dropped dead a year later. The other two, no one ever heard from them after two years.”

“I really don’t think the bishop is capable of anything like that.”

“Oh don’t think I’m accusing the bishop of anything. I’m just telling you what Jess thought. He actually wanted to leave the church until our son died.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What did he die of?”

“A drug overdose. He didn’t live with us so we never knew he was on drugs. It was unbelievable. Jess had a heart attack and was never the same. He stepped down from the position and said we’d stay with the church and with Reverend Robbie. When the good Reverend died, that’s when Jess told me to contact Willa Mae.”

“So did Reverend Robbie install Barnes as head of the ministry?”

“After the good reverend’s death, a letter from his will surfaced, leaving the ministry to Ezekiel Barnes.”

“How did Reverend Robbie die?”

“We all told him he was too old to drive. One evening after Sunday dinner he fell asleep behind the wheel and that was it. He had a wonderful funeral though. He looked so peaceful in his casket. Bishop Barnes took his death really hard. We all did, but the bishop changed after that. I mean we really started to feel a change in his sermons.”

Mertis rambled through a couple of photo albums and found photos of Reverend Robbie’s funeral.

“Here, see how peaceful he looked.”

I froze seeing Reverend Robbie laid out in his casket. His hands folded across him, the right hand on top of the left. I needed another cup of coffee. I focused on the reverend’s ring. I had seen it before. Bishop Barnes had shown it to him in his chamber.

“This is a beautiful ring that the Reverend had on.”

“The church gave that ring to the Reverend before all the trouble began, you know, before the split. He never took it off. It was very expensive. It was the only valuable gift the church ever gave to him.”

“And he was buried in it?”

“We wouldn’t have had it any other way.”

Ethan sat downstairs while the bishop visited with the little girl. Thelma watched as the bishop prayed over the little girl as she laid in her bed. Outside the child’s room, the bishop smiled and held Thelma’s hand.

“I think she’s going to be fine Thelma, the Lord has blessed your efforts with that child. When will she interview with the social worker?”

“Next week.”

“I think she’ll be fine, but don’t let up, the Devil is working overtime. I’m here for whatever guidance you may need.”

“Thank you bishop.”

The bishop and Ethan left the Billups’ home. Ethan got into the church van on the passenger side. Once the bishop got in, Ethan spoke.

“How’s the little girl?”

“She’s finally on the road to salvation.”

CHAPTER 47

I stayed with Mertis on into lunchtime. She fed me well with leftover meatloaf, country green beans and macaroni and cheese.

“Mm, mm, there’s nothing like home cooking,” I said.

“Don’t you get home cooking?”

“I do now. I live with my brother and his wife. She’s a great cook. Back home at the mission I got my meals out of the cafeteria, it wasn’t quite the same.”

“It does my heart good to have someone make over my cooking. Jess loved my cooking. Let me fill your iced tea glass.”

I finished my lunch and welcomed the final glass of tea. Mertis stood over me. She bit her lip but couldn’t bite her tongue. She had to ask.

“What are you running from son?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry boy, but you’ve been given a special gift and somehow you don’t want it. You’re in so much pain. What’s causing it?”

“What gives you the idea that there’s something wrong?”

“Young man, you’re not the only one the good Lord gave a gift to. I’m a woman so I’ve been given the gift of intuition. I’m sure it was the same way with your mother, nothing got by her either.”

As a tear rolled down my face, Mertis knew she hit a nerve. I opened up.

“My mother was a God fearing woman who died at the hands of my father. He beat her on a regular basis. When I was a year old, my twin brother died during one of those beatings. My sister recently told me that the wrong twin died. I can’t even stomach the smell of mint because it reminds me of the smell of my father’s girlfriend.

He was shot to death in her home in front of my brother and me. My brother, my dear brother always wonders why I didn’t use my wonderful blessed gift to save my father from his impending demise. So you must forgive me for not having the urge to raise a glass in honor of my God-given talent.”

“You hush up that kind of talk boy. God gave you something that made you special for a reason, you may not know why. You may not understand your path to glory, but you had better appreciate it. That’s the only way to master it.”

“Path to glory? That implies a future, and there lies the problem, Mrs. Simmons. I see futures, all these flashes of what’s to come in other peoples’ lives, but I can’t see one minute into my own.”

“Neither can anyone else son.”

“They can with my help. What benefit’s others; is not a benefit for me. All I know is tragedy from my past, I can’t escape it. You think I’m blessed? I say it’s a cruel joke.”

“I’m gonna pray for you to find your way before you fall into the Devil’s hands.”

“Save your prayers Mrs. Simmons. The Devil’s been a neighbor of mine all my life.”

Mrs. Simmons shook her head in silence.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Simmons; I’ve imposed on your hospitality long enough. My prayers are with you.”

No more was said and I left.

Mertis Simmons cleared the lunch dishes. She stood over the pile of photo albums. She sat as her emotions took over. The reality of her loneliness was almost too much for her to bear.

What have I gotten into? I thought. That ring. . . I can't believe he stole the dead reverend's ring.

CHAPTER 48

Angela and Julius walked Doreen to her door as Thelma waited.

“How’s Debbie doing, Thelma?” asked Angela.

“The Lord has truly blessed this home, Angela. I can see a turn for the better in her.”

“Wonderful!”

“I want to thank you for taking care of Doreen for us.”

“It’s my pleasure, Thelma. Doreen is such a sweet child. We’ve lost too many of our children to this wicked world. I’m not losing another child close to me.”

“Amen. Would you mind picking Doreen up for church tonight?”

“That’s not a problem.”

“She’ll be ready.”

“We are at war people!” shouted the bishop. He was on the floor below the pulpit. Ethan and I sat on stage.

The bishop continued, “The Church of Advancing Light is now in a spiritual battle. The enemy is the evil forces of the Devil. We are all weakened by the loss of our beloved brother Jess. Almost a month ago, we buried young Nathan Campbell and now ‘Old Brother Jess’, a pillar in this church for years is gone.

“And just this week one of our little ones, the youngest Billups girl was attacked. And it just came to my attention that one of my own tenants who was also a member of this church died yesterday in a domestic dispute. She was shot by her boyfriend who just got out of prison.”

I watched as the whole auditorium squirmed with nervousness, but I couldn’t think of anything other than the ring that Reverend Robbie was supposed to be buried with.

The bishop continued, “Why are we under attack?” Bishop Barnes turned and pointed to the stage. “It’s because of those two men!”

I was instantly forced into the moment.

“Didn’t I tell you God loved this church?” shouted the bishop. “Didn’t I tell you I wasn’t gonna let this ministry fail?”

“Amen!” shouted the crowd.

“This church has a plan! This church has a prophet and a healer! This church has the Devil on the run!”

The crowd stood and cheered!

“I chose tonight not to have our normal discussion of the scriptures to tell you these things because you are the core of this church. Look around! Look at the faces. If you don’t know them, get to know them. Soon this church will grow to such a capacity that we’ll be strangers in God’s house. The Church of Advancing Light will show the nations and the world the path to Heaven because we are on it!”

The crowd applauded.

“It won’t be easy. The Devil is a fighter so we will have difficulties but we will prevail. Lawrence the prophet has revealed these visions to me personally.”

Bishop, what are you doing? I thought.

“Ethan the healer of our faith is fully confident in our victories. I now invite the healer of our faith onto the floor in order to clear the path for our blessings.”

Ethan slowly descended the stage to the floor. The bishop passed Ethan on the steps taking the seat next to me. Ethan walked to a water basin in the center of the floor. Ethan raised his hands and began to pray over the basin.

I whispered to the bishop. "Why are you putting words in my mouth?"

"I'm just setting things up for Ethan. You've already won the crowd, it's his turn now."

"But you can't be making promises to people on my behalf."

"Shhh... watch."

As Ethan prayed, the water basin began to gurgle and bubble. The crowd stared intently. Next Ethan picked up a gold goblet and dipped it into the bubbling water. A hint of menthol oil lifted into the air. I sneered at the scent of mint in the air.

Ethan dipped his finger into the cup and flicked water onto the floor.

"Lord, bless this house from which we petition you."

Ethan walked up and down the aisles flicking holy water onto the crowd.

"Lord bless this congregation." People began to feel warm from the water droplets.

Ethan saw a few people rubbing their eyes from the sprinkles.

"Lord please burn the seeds of doubt from those who don't believe."

The bishop slapped his knee and laughed. "He's hooking them."

"The Prophet Lawrence foretold a victory over evil for this church. Lord clear the way for our victory."

"I didn't say that shit."

"Quiet. It'll be fine."

Mitchell walked in and took a seat next to Rachel. I was disgusted as HE kissed Rachel. She seemed to melt into him.

"Bless us Father," continued Ethan. He stopped next to Doreen and Julius, "and especially bless our children."

The crowd stood and applauded as Ethan sprinkled the children.

"He got 'em, boy. You see that?" said the bishop.

My head began to ache as I watched Doreen. I saw her leaving her house with school books and getting into the car with Julius. Then I saw the driver. It was her. The beauty that made my heart stop.

"Let's go boy," said the bishop as he hit me in the arm.

"What?"

"It's over. Follow me to my chamber."

Inside the bishop's chamber, I saw Bishop Barnes go straight to the bottle of Johnnie Walker and pour a double shot. The bishop shoved the drink into my hand. "Have a seat, boy. What's your beef?"

I didn't answer immediately. I savored my drink with one slow swallow.

The bishop filled the empty glass.

"Speak up boy. Why are you tripping?"

"You cannot mislead these people and say it's coming from me."

"Mislead? How can you say that? Our job is to build faith. That's what we were doing out there. Your job is to play your position while I call the plays."

"You can't put words in my mouth!"

"I'm paying for your mouth and for your God-given gift. When was the last time you looked into the eyes of a hopeless person? Someone wrought with fear and weighted down with problems? Take that little Billups girl, she lived through something terrible.

"More bad things may come her way, but you can't tell her that. Not if you want her to heal. That's the harsh reality, Lawrence. We've got to make them believe things will get better. Soon as they do, things are better. Sometimes you got to sacrifice yourself for the greater good, boy."

I downed my drink, "Another please." I held out my glass. The bishop filled it and I gulped it down.

“You can’t speak for me!” I yelled.

“And you can’t speak for God!” the bishop yelled back. “He’s using you and he’s using me to direct you. Bringing hope to the hopeless is not wrong. You’ll have everything you want serving this ministry. What do you want? I’m offering you the keys to the kingdom.”

I poured a drink for myself. “The boy...who’s his mother?”

“You mean Julius? You’re interested in Angela?”

I downed my drink. The bishop smiled.

“Ooh you nasty. You want to climb into her pew and start holy rolling, huh. That’s fine, son. It’s not a problem. You’re a man and she’s a very fine woman. She’s had her share of tragedies, so don’t go breaking her heart. Don’t be like your brother and hang around this church just for pussy.”

The bishop walked to his desk and sat down. I didn't say a word.

“I can arrange it so that you two can get together. But you’ve got to commit to this ministry here and now.”

“I’m committed.”

“Then let the floodgates of Heaven shower you with riches and bless this ministry. You know son, I don’t really care if you have faith in God or not. But for God’s sake, man-up and have faith in yourself and have faith in me.”

I poured another drink, “I feel like I just sold my soul.”

“Sometimes the road to Heaven feels like the road to Hell. Just remember this is the first time that we’ve captured the attention of every member of this church. All we have to do now is take these lies and make them true somehow.”

I don't believe I'm letting this grave-robbing liar suck me in for the sake of wealth and sex. I'll ride this wave for a minute, but I refuse to be a sucker forever, you rotten bastard. Who's using who now?

Silently I turned and headed for the door. Bishop Barnes crumpled a piece of his stationary and tossed it at me. The paper bounced off the back of my head. I turned and glared at the bishop.

“Just checking,” said the bishop. “It was a joke, lighten up.”

Once home, I chose to allow Rachel and Mitchell some much needed alone time. I grabbed my favorite snacks and headed to my room. Mitchell wanted to talk and was put off by the cold shoulder I threw his way.

“Well, just answer one question,” said Mitchell.

“What?”

“Have you seen anything that I need to be aware of? You know, does Rachel know anything?”

The lump in my throat caused my eyes to well up. “No Mitch, your forecast for the next seven days looks bright.”

CHAPTER 49

Thelma walked out of her bedroom to see her husband and Doreen peeking into Debbie’s room.

“Ed! Leave her alone. She needs her rest.” She grabbed him by the arm and led him down the steps.

“I miss my little girl,” he said.

“I miss her too,” said Doreen.

“Doreen, you need to go to bed. Ed, it’s important that she's left alone. She’s doing better. She’ll come around, we just need to be patient.”

“I can’t handle this,” he said. “It’s like I’m cursed. I need a drink.”

“Ed, don’t run from this. Alcohol is not the answer. I’m trying to keep our family together.”

“I just can’t lose my heart again. I lost her mother, I can’t handle losing her.”

Ed stormed out of the house. He never even noticed the horrid expression on the homely woman’s face. Thelma slowly retired to her room. As the house slept, no one heard the tears that fell onto Debbie’s pillow.

Late that night, Bishop Barnes made a final calendar check at his desk inside his chamber. He had to make some important decisions about Lawrence. He needed to speak with Stoney. He hated the idea of going to the funeral home, especially late at night. There were several things that went on at the funeral home that Bishop Barnes didn’t agree with. But this was important and he knew two things for certain. First, Stoney was great for his thought process and second, Stoney never slept.

Angela finally felt the blood return to her body. She peeked out from under her bed. These visit's were coming more frequently and she wondered how much more she could endure. Her breathing began to slow down and she climbed out from under the bed. She reached for her cigarettes and fumbled until she got that first calming drag deep into her lungs.

I’ll endure whatever I have to for the sake of Julius, she thought, I won’t lose another son.

I played my music low as I finished a can of deviled ham, and the rest of my peanuts. I washed the last of the snacks down with my usual beverage, only this time I was taking it straight from the bottle.

I know Bishop Barnes is no good, I thought. I know I need to get out of this miserable ministry, but I want that woman, and I might as well get paid first.

CHAPTER 50

The bishop’s car turned onto the driveway of the funeral home. The house in the distance was huge and creepy. It chilled the bishop’s bones, whether in broad daylight or the dead of night. The mood around the funeral home was always creepy and the creepiness stuck to Stoney. Just like the house, there was a woeful presence that hung around him. To state that Ezekiel Barnes was afraid of Stoney, would be an exaggeration. He was far too hungry and thirsty for wealth and power to be in fear of anyone. He had his concerns, but he was smart enough to realize that without Stoney on his side, what would be left of his life would be far too complicated and unbearable. As the bishop pulled toward the front of the house, he noticed Stoney’s collection of hearses parked in a line along the gravel driveway leading behind the house, making room for a tractor-trailer.

Is it that time for a casket shipment already? he thought.

The casket shipments ran like clockwork. Since Stoney could do the work of ten men, the process always seemed effortless to the bishop while his ministry grew financially because of it. As the bishop approached the front door, he found the silence eerie. As usual, it took a moment before the giant answered the door.

“Sorry for the delay,” said Stoney. “I was taking inventory of the shipment.”

The bishop held up the calendar from his chamber. “Stoney, we’ve got to make some serious decisions about Lawrence Garnier.”

Later that night, Thelma heard Ed come home. She listened as his footsteps landed heavily on the stairs. She peeked through the bedroom door and watched as he stopped at Debbie’s door. He reached for the door knob.

“Ed, please let the child sleep.”

Ed turned toward Thelma. Tears stained his flushed face.

“Come to bed, Ed.”

Ed took a shower and changed into his pajamas. When he came out of the bathroom he saw Thelma sitting on the side of the bed. “Doreen and I are going to the funeral Saturday,” he said.

“That’s fine. I’ll stay home with Debbie.”

“Old Jess and Mertis were always there for me. They stood by me when I lost ... when Diane died. Now I could lose ...”

“Debbie is gonna be fine. Ed listen to me. You were a widower with a little girl and a brand new baby. You were confused. Bishop Barnes came to you and suggested accepting me as your wife, for the girl’s sake. I know all of that and I accept it. I promised to take care of your daughters and I’m doing just that. I never asked you to look at me as a beautiful woman. I know you can’t and I accept that also. But I am a woman and I’d love for you to treat me as your wife by trusting me as your woman.”

Ed hesitated before he spoke, “Thelma, I treat you as a wife.”

“Touch me, Ed. Treat me like a woman tonight.”

Ed got into the bed and kissed Thelma on the forehead.

“I’ve got to get up early in the morning,” he said before turning his back to her.

CHAPTER 51

The next morning, the alarm went off at 6:00. Thelma reached to wake Ed, but he was already gone. She slowly gathered herself, along with a load of laundry. She started a new load and emptied the dryer. She carried the clean load upstairs and stopped at Doreen’s room.

“Doreen, time to get up. Come on now, get in the shower.”

She placed clean underwear in Doreen’s drawer and left. In her room, Thelma put away her things then placed Ed’s underwear away. She matched eight pairs of Ed’s socks and neatly made eight balls of socks. As she put Ed’s socks away in his drawer, she saw his prized possession, a photo of himself and his first wife Diane, along with baby Doreen.

Once a week, Thelma had to endure the sight of that photo in his sock drawer. Ed looked so happy. Thelma knew he was because she would see the family at church. She stared at the woman. Ed’s first wife. She was everything that Thelma wasn’t. She was happy and beautiful. Thelma wasn’t happy and was never going to be beautiful.

Her appearance was unpleasant at best, due to the structure of her face. Her jaw line was long and hard. Her overstuffed mouth had large teeth, that when contained, left her with a rodent-like sneer. But her smile was most frightening because it extended beyond her face. Her eyes were small and sunk-in and along with her broad toothy smile she resembled the mysterious Cheshire cat of Alice in Wonderland fame.

Thelma replaced the photo and finished putting the laundry away. She passed a mirror and stopped. Her own face repelled even her. Born an only child, Thelma was raised by the only parent who wanted her around, her grandmother.

Tormented as a child, she stayed under her grandmother as much as she could. Her grandmother was a mother of the church under Reverend Robbie’s tenure, and Thelma served right alongside her. Thelma’s grandmother taught her everything domestic. She’d tell the girl, “Child, life dealt you a cruel hand. No man is ever gonna pay you no mind lest I teach you how to tend to his every need.”

“I’m ready for my cereal ma’am.”

“Huh?” Thelma was brought back to the present.

“My breakfast?” stated Doreen.

“Oh yes, I’ll get it now.”

Thelma drank coffee while Doreen ate.

“Ma’am, it’s been a week already and I miss Debbie. Is she gonna be alright?”

“She’s going to be fine. She just can’t be disturbed.”

“Is that why her door was locked last night? I went to check on her and it was locked.”

“Don’t ever try to disturb her again. It’s important to her health that she remains isolated.”

“But I miss her.”

“Did I make myself clear?”

“Yes ma’am”

When Angela and Julius arrived, Thelma handed Doreen her lunch and hustled her out to meet them. She waved to Angela and returned inside to prepare Debbie’s breakfast. As she entered the little girl’s room, Debbie stared.

“I – I need to go to the bathroom ma’am,” the little girl’s voice was weak.

“Well, can you walk?”

“I don’t think so. My feet hurt so bad.”

“Now what did we say about whining?”

The little girl dropped her eyes to the floor. “We should rejoice whenever God gives us trials by fire because it means he loves us.”

“That’s right,” said Thelma. “Life is as simple as that. Now let’s get you to the bathroom.”

Thelma helped Debbie to her feet. The child grimaced in pain. Thelma led her to the bathroom.

“I’ll be back to get you in a minute.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Thelma went downstairs and glared out the window in the living room. The neighborhood was quiet, with no one on the street. She drew the blinds and closed the curtains. She did the same in the dining room and the kitchen. Out of the cupboard she pulled a 12-inch piece of sawed-off broom handle.

Debbie supported her weight on the sink as she washed her hands. Thelma returned,

“Let’s get you back to bed so I can take a look at your feet.”

The little girl began to sob, “Please don’t.”

“You knew we were going to complete the training,” said Thelma.

“But it hurts so bad.”

“Quiet now and get back in the bed so I can look at your feet.”

Thelma removed Debbie’s socks. The right foot was still badly bruised. Thelma could feel the little girl’s trembling.

“It’s looking better,” said Thelma trying to sound convincing.

She looked at the little girl’s left foot. The bruise was yellowing.

“This foot is a lot better. We can use this one.”

Debbie began to cry.

“Debbie, the more you cry, the longer this will take.”

“Y-Yes ma’am.”

Thelma took a firm hold on the little girl and firmly struck the sole of her left foot.

Wham!

The little girl screamed.

“Proverbs 22:15!” shouted Thelma.

“Foolishness is tied up in the heart of a boy, but the rod of discipline will remove it far from him,” grimaced Debbie.

“What else?”

“That goes for little girls too!”

“Good.”

Wham!

“Deuteronomy 5:16!”

Wham!

“Deuteronomy 5:16!”

“Honor your father and mother!” screamed the child.

Thelma smiled as the child fell limp.

CHAPTER 52 THE FUNERAL

It was 9:00 Saturday morning when Mitchell, Rachel and I drove upon the crowd in front of the church. There were news vans and cameramen from every local network as well as CNN. We saw the bishop in front of the church surrounded by microphones.

“We have always relied on the presence of God’s favor at this church,” said the bishop. “So it’s not surprising that while other houses of worship are losing members and even closing down. We at the Church of Advancing Light are nurturing and raising prophets.”

“This funeral is turning into a circus,” said Rachel.

“I’m sure the bishop loves the attention,” said Mitchell, as we parked and made our way to the front.

The reporters bombarded the bishop with questions.

“Bishop Barnes, do you feel that your church will benefit in some way by someone’s death being prophesied?”

“There is no benefit to losing a beloved member of this church. This phenomenon is clear evidence of divine revelations. God is directly guiding the Church of Advancing Light. To know this is beneficial to all.”

“Will we get to talk with the prophet who foretold the death of Jesse Simmons?”

“There he is now,” cried a voice from the crowd.

The group of reporters charged us. The bishop bolted from the front of the church and threw himself around me.

“Can you really see the future?” shouted one reporter.

“What does death look like?” shouted another.

The bishop shielded me from the reporters.

“Don’t say anything son. Go on into the church and go straight to my chamber.”

Mitchell and Rachel stared in amazement.

Inside the church, I was overwhelmed and made quick time to the bishop’s chamber. *Now the news media is onto my curse.*

It seemed strange to me that the door to the bishop's chamber was open. I closed the door behind me. I had no way of knowing that the bishop had two deadbolt locks added to the outside of the door; at the top and bottom. I never heard the bolts slide, locking me inside. I did notice a rolling rack of four new suit's with a note attached:

Lawrence, the tailor delivered the first four finished suit's.

Look the part.

Ezekiel

I forgot the morning chaos and admired the tailor’s handiwork. I tried on a couple of the suit jackets and noticed two unopened bottles of Johnnie Walker.

One stiff drink will do my nerves some good.

The crowd was huge for the funeral of Jesse Simmons. There were people who hadn’t been to the church since Bishop Barnes replaced Reverend Robbie. Also, many were simply visitors who heard by word-of-mouth the phenomenon surrounding the proclamation of ‘Old Jess’ death before his demise.

They wanted to be entertained, shocked and scared. They wanted Lawrence Garnier.

I just finished my third drink when I decided to go out front for the funeral. I tried the door.

“Locked?” I tried the door again, “it is locked!”

Mitchell and Rachel took their seats. “Mitch, have you seen Lawrence?” asked Rachel.

“No, he’s probably not going to sit with us. The program had him saying a prayer at the closing of the casket and at the cemetery.”

I had two more drinks and tried to figure out how I was going to make it out.

Deacon Stone marched down the back hallway. He stopped at the locked door marked: **UTILITY-No Admittance**. Inside he entered the office behind the lab and turned on the monitor to view the bishop’s chamber. In his usual stoic manner he watched Lawrence realize his dilemma while indulging a cocktail.

The organ music could be heard throughout the whole church, the audio system made it especially loud behind the stage and throughout the less accessible places in the church. I pounded on the door and yelled, but no one could hear me.

Deacon Stone, satisfied that Lawrence was secure, proceeded onto the stage for Old Jess Simmons' final church service. He opened the casket, adjusted Jess’ tie and coat, then the procession to view the body began.

I was halfway through one bottle when I decided to wheel the bishop’s plush office chair to the only hope of an exit that existed, the great stained-glass window. I positioned myself to hoist the chair through when I froze at the sight of the face of the angel who held back the hand of Abraham who was about to sacrifice his son Isaac.

My eyes locked onto the image as if I recognized the image personally. I shook my head to clear it then focused again. I kicked the chair to the floor then went back to the whiskey. No glass was needed; I just turned up the bottle.

CHAPTER 53

The funeral service of Jess Simmons was very moving even without the prayers from Lawrence Garnier. Ethan’s prayers were proper replacements there, and at the cemetery as they lowered Jess Simmons to his final resting place.

Thelma helped Debbie into the bathroom and told her to draw her bath.

“I’ll be up in a moment to wash your hair,” she told the child.

Mertis was overwhelmed. Her best friend Willa Mae Carter stood by her side for the entire service and burial. Ed Billups and Doreen made their way through the crowd to give their condolences.

“Ed, it’s so good to see you. I always hold a special prayer in my heart for you.”

“Ms. Mertis, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“We all lose what matters most to us, son. I don’t need to tell you that.”

Ed dropped his head, “Ms. Willa Mae, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Ed, you look tired, but I’m glad to see you. This young lady looks like you just spit her out.”

“And Willa Mae,” said Mertis, “the littlest one looks just like her mother.”

There was an uneasy silence.

“Boy, just because Jess is gone don’t mean I won’t talk about him every chance I get,” said Mertis. “The memories of the ones we love fade fast enough. Enjoy them while you can.”

Ed’s eyes were tearful.

“Your little Debbie is a blessing from God. She’s the last gift, to you from Diane, and she’s her spitting image, that’s God’s work. Now how is the child doing?”

Ed broke down, "I don't wanna lose her. She's just not the same. I can't handle another loss."
"The Lord never gives us more than we can bear," said Mertis. "But I know it hurts."

Thelma entered the bathroom. The downstairs blinds were all closed. Debbie sat quietly in the tub. Thelma knelt down. She applied shampoo to the little girl's long wet hair. She was careful not to get suds in the child's eyes. She began to hum as she gently massaged the girl's hair.

"Lean back" said Thelma.

As the water ran through Debbie's hair, Thelma thought about her own hair. *My hair was never this long. Now it's dry and brittle.*

She applied conditioner to Debbie's hair and massaged it in deeply. Thelma continued to hum.

Ed embraced Mertis. He held her tightly.

"You be strong son," she whispered, "your family needs you. Thelma is a godly woman. I'm sure she's good for the girls."

Thelma stared as the water ran through Debbie's hair. Some of the water flowed over the little girl's face. She coughed slightly. Thelma stopped humming and began to mumble. More water flowed over the child's face as she began to slide further back into the tub. Debbie could hear Thelma mumbling. She was praying.

"Help me Lord, rid this house of evil."

Before Debbie could scream, she was forced under the water. She reached to claw Thelma's face but the pressure of the woman's hand on her shoulders was too great. Debbie's feet and legs flung helplessly against the slippery porcelain. Thelma's grip slipped and the little girl sprang out from under the water gasping. Thelma secured her grip and shoved the girl back under. Debbie struggled violently and broke Thelma's hold again.

"No!" screamed the child. Gasping, she was forced under again. Debbie swung her arms and legs wildly out of panic. Thelma felt the little girl weaken. She could see the child's eyes fluttering. Suddenly, Debbie managed to turn just enough to reach Thelma's hand and bit down hard.

"Yaaa!" screamed Thelma as she fell backwards. Debbie hung over the side of the tub belching up water and gasping for air.

"You demon!" shouted Thelma. "You were born from death and you need to be destroyed!"

"[cough] Please mama, don't!" wheezed the child.

"What did you say?"

"Don't kill me mama. I want to live!" Debbie cried as she spoke. "Oh God, I'm so scared. I'm really scared mama."

Thelma's eyes fluttered.

"You called me mama. You've never called me anything but ma'am."

Thelma scrambled over to the tub and embraced the child. Tears flowed from Debbie and Thelma. Thelma stopped crying abruptly and glared at Debbie.

"What if you backslide?"

"I won't mama," sniffed the girl.

"You've got to have your mind right to do right."

"I'll get my mind right."

Thelma raised her arms upwards.

"Dear Lord, spare this child's life! I pray for your undeserved mercy on this cursed soul who promises on behalf of her sister and father to commit her life to you."

Thelma hugged the little girl tight and whispered in her ear. "I hope you're serious child, your sister's and father's lives depend on it."

CHAPTER 54

Mertis Simmons kissed Doreen on the forehead. "You take care of your family child."

"Yes ma'am."

"Ed, you stay strong and get back into the church," said Mertis.

"But if you're smart, it won't be the Church of Advancing Light," chimed Willa Mae Carter.

Ed smiled slightly, "Let's go home now, Doreen."

"Willa Mae, you're a mess," said Mertis.

"But I'm right," replied Willa Mae. "The sooner we make distance from that so-called bishop the better."

"I know Willa, I just wanted to see someone, but he never showed up."

Bishop Barnes was annoying Angela Campbell. Julius called to Doreen as she and her father walked by.

Bishop Barnes noticed Mertis in the distance.

"I'll be back, Cottontail, don't leave." The bishop went after Mertis.

"Hello Ed," spoke Angela.

"Ms. Campbell, hello. Thanks for helping us out with Doreen and all."

"It's no bother, she's a good kid. We need to protect all these kids. How's Debbie?"

"I don't know, I haven't had much time with her. Thelma says things will be fine. I just don't know."

"Mertis!" called the bishop, "I wanted to make sure you were alright."

"She'll be alright as soon as she's far away from you bishop," snapped Willa Mae, as she quickly stepped between the two.

"Willa Mae Carter, I didn't know you were haunting this graveyard."

"Never mind me, you demon, Mertis is finally getting away from you and your corrupt church."

"Going away? Mertis are you leaving the church? Where are you going?"

"Don't answer him Mertis, he'll kill you just like he did the others."

"I didn't kill you Willa Mae."

"And you don't scare me either. You killed my husband and you finally got Old Jess. But you won't get Mertis. The Lord is truly our Shepherd, come on Mertis."

As the two elderly ladies started to walk away, the bishop reached for Mertis.

"Where are you going Mertis?"

"Don't touch her, you devil," hissed Willa. "This one got away. You all need to get away from this evil man!"

Willa Mae's voice got louder and louder as the two women walked away.

"The Devil is in you Barnes! The Devil owns this man! Beware of the Devil Barnes."

Bishop Barnes stood frozen while his eyes never left Willa Mae's. He watched as they drove off.

"So be it," he mumbled.

"Bishop Barnes where is Lawrence?" asked Rachel.

"Oh Sister Rachel and Brother Mitchell. I was gonna ask you that very question."

"He was on the program and he missed everything," said Mitchell. "Where is he?"

"Tell you what, Deacon Stone and I will find Lawrence and bring him home. Go on, we'll find him. I'm sure he's a little upset about Jess. We'll find him."

The bishop headed for Angela who was still talking to Ed Billups. "Well, give Thelma and Debbie my love. Will we see you in church tomorrow?"

"No, I won't be there,"

"Well, if you'd like us to pick Doreen up tomorrow we will."

"Thanks, we'd appreciate that."

“Excuse me Ed,” interrupted the bishop. “I need to speak with Sister Campbell.”

“No problem, we’re leaving.”

“God bless your family Ed,” said the bishop.

“What do you want now, Ezekiel?” said Angela.

“Meet me back at church, I want to introduce you to someone.”

[A passed out Lawrence was face down on the bishop’s desk when the chamber door was opened.

Deacon Stone walked over and with one hand, palmed Lawrence’s head. Without a word he held Lawrence’s head up and swatted his face twice.

“Hey!” shouted the bishop. “Wake up boy!”

“Lawrence slowly opened his crossed eyes. With much effort, he focused enough to see Bishop Barnes and Angela.

The bishop continued, “Cottontail, I’d like you to meet the Prophet Lawrence Garnier.”

Lawrence’s eyes went out of focus again. “Shit,” he sighed.]

CHAPTER 55

A very excited Thelma greeted Ed and Doreen at the door.

“Ed, our little girl is gonna be fine.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ed.

“Go see for yourself.”

Ed and Doreen raced each other up the stairs. Doreen reached the bedroom door first and burst in. There at the end of the bed sat Debbie. Doreen stood frozen while Ed approached his child and dropped to his knees.

“Hi daddy.”

Ed’s eyes flooded as he embraced her.

“I thought we lost you, baby.”

“God is good,” said Thelma.

“God bless you daddy,” said Debbie. “God bless us all.”

The expressions on Rachel and her husband’s face showed both embarrassment and disgust as Lawrence swayed back and forth in front of them.

“I wouldn’t be too hard on him,” said the bishop, “he’s burdened by Jess’ death.”

“He’s seen death before bishop. He needs to grow up,” said Mitchell.

“Just let him sleep. I’ll tend to his growth. We’re all in this together,” said the bishop.

“I want to thank you and Deacon Stone for getting him home safely,” said Rachel.

“We’re only doing what God expects from us,” said the bishop.

After seeing the clergymen off, Mitchell started.

“Man, what’s your problem? I’m done with this life-long funk you’ve been in. You see the death of a total stranger then suddenly you can’t stomach it? What about your own father? Did you see his? Could you stomach not warning him?”

“Mitchell!” screamed Rachel.

“No, he needs to get it together. He’s running out of opportunities.”

Lawrence raised a silent hand in the air. Mitchell stopped. Without a word, Lawrence straightened his crooked tie and adjusted his disheveled lapel. With rubbery legs, he looked like a disoriented turtle as he struggled to his room, slamming the door behind him.

“Mom are you okay?” asked Julius.

“Huh?”

“You’re drinking so much coffee and you’ve been nervous ever since the funeral.”

“Sorry baby.” Angela got up from the table and hugged her son. “You know what funerals do to me. It’s nothing for you to worry about. I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Bishop Barnes always asks me if you’re sleeping okay. You won’t get much sleep tonight.”

“Listen baby, sometimes I have a lot to sort out. That’s just being an adult. I may look stressed at times but your mom eventually works everything out. So, let’s not take everything that goes on in this house to the bishop, is that clear?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Go on to your room and I’ll check on you later.”

Julius kissed his mother and went to his room. She had a lot on her mind and most of it was concerning Lawrence.

CHAPTER 56

An old sedan cruised down Louisiana's back roads and alleys. The driver, unconcerned with the neighborhoods he traveled through, took another sip of whiskey from his flask. It was after midnight and the game started promptly at 1:00.

“Y'all boys quiet down back there,” grunted the driver.

He turned the radio up then took another sip. The two young boys in the back seat stopped the ruckus they were causing immediately.

“Pull out your marbles Law, cause you got my black molly,” said the older boy.

“No I don’t. Mitch stop! I’m sleepy.”

“Well you better wake up boy,” said the driver. “You got to take care of business like you did last week. And like back there, I’m gonna take the kitty this week. Remember the system?”

“Yes daddy, wait till everybody is sitting down. The direction is just like the hands go on the clock. Whoever got aces tap their number on the back of your leg.”

The big game was every Friday night. Last week, Frederick Garnier tried his system out for the first time and went home a winner. He was ‘Big Time’ now that he had his secret weapon.

“Ha ha, I always thought the wrong twin died, but you stepped up to the plate, Law. I’m just sorry that your mama ain’t in her conscious mind to see you finally amount to somethin’.”

The sedan pulled in back of a row house. It was the after hours joint of Ms. Mayzell LeBeaux. The night air was steamy. The boys followed their father up the dank stairway. Little Lawrence held his brother’s hand tightly, and closed his eyes just as tight when his father began to knock. He didn’t want to see what he saw last week. The kiss of pain shot through his head as the horrifying vision of the future came to him anyway. His eyes shot open giving way to the small stream of tears. Suddenly the door opened, Mitchell’s eyes bugged with innocent lustfulness. The lust in his father’s eyes was far from anything innocent. There she stood in a low cut black dress, Ms. Mayzell. She was never without a drink in her hand. Her favorite drink, her only drink, mint juleps. She would chew the leaf garnish and always smelled of mint. She stood a moment before she spoke.

“Missed you baby,” she said. Then it happened. The kiss that shocked young Lawrence a second time.

“You’re not my mommy,” he shouted.

Whack!

The blow across the forehead knocked the boy to the floor. Mitchell ran to help his brother up.

“Mind yo tongue boy and stay out grown folk’s business.” Frederick raised his hand again.

“No Freddy,” said Mayzell. “Let him be.” You boys go on in, I’ll fix you a nice bowl of gumbo

and for a little sugar, I'll fix ya a cherry sno-ball."

Mitchell quickly gave the woman a kiss on the cheek. Lawrence tried to resist as the woman leaned toward him.

"Sugar for a cherry sno-ball?" she said.

Lawrence pecked her cheek than rubbed his lips. He hated the smell of mint almost as much as he hated his father.

Inside, the air was smoky and the music was loud. There were tight dresses and slow grinding all around. In the back room was a large table. The boys stayed close to their father as he took his seat. Mayzell handed him a cold beer to chase his whiskey while she laid another kiss on him. The boys sat on the floor and pulled out their marble sacks while two loud men took their seats at the same table. Mayzell brought the boys two bowls of gumbo as promised.

The boys dug into their bowls like refugees devouring rations. More bourre players entered the room and took their seats. There was one seat left. The boys, with their faces buried ears deep, licked their bowl as if in a bowl cleaning race. Mitchell never noticed who walked in the room next, but Lawrence had been rubbing his aching head even before Tate walked through the door!

"Finally, the coon-ass made it. I don't like waiting for my money," laughed Frederick.

"It don madda Freddy, da wheel of luck forever turns. So let's just pass a good time," said Tate.

Tate was a huge man of Creole descent. His accent was thick and every word fell heavy to the floor .

Lawrence never took his eyes off the dangerous looking man who sat across from his father at the bourre table. He wanted to leave his father's side and go out to the balcony and play marbles with Mitchell in the night air, but his father gave him a job to do. As the game proceeded, Lawrence did his job keeping his father well informed as to who was holding aces at all times. Frederick won hand after hand.

"Mayzell," shouted Tate, "bring me a brew and a po-boy dressed."

He threw a ten spot in her direction.

Hand after hand, Lawrence tapped out a code on his father's leg while most of the time Frederick won. Lawrence tried to rub the ache out of his head and Mitchell mindlessly dug around in both of the marble bags pirating the best ones from his little brother.

Tate's frustration grew hotter while Frederick continued to win hands.

"Put your luck on hold Freddy, why don ya. So da rest of us can make groceries next week too," he said.

Lawrence yelped out loud grabbing his head. Frederick glanced at his son then turned his attention back to Tate.

"Nar a soul sitting at this table expects to lose," smiled Frederick.

"Daddy, my head."

"Damn boy, not now!"

"Yea, ya right Freddy. Ya don't come to the bourre table to lose, ya come to win. Last week, ya win all da money. Ya win all my money."

Lawrence began to tug at his brother's collar, "Come on Mitch."

"What? Get off me," wined Mitchell.

Lawrence dragged his brother with one hand while holding his head with the other.

"Stop!"

Lawrence pulled his brother outside onto the balcony, and then buried his head into Mitchell's chest.

Voices at the Bourre table rose well above the loud music. Frederick and Tate were both standing, while the other players were yelling.

Mayzell ran into the room.

"Stop all this gumbo ya-ya, folks are starting to leave," she yelled.

“Ya got cheat’n ways, Freddy,” hissed Tate as he came from behind his back with a gun.

Bang!

I sprang straight up in my bed. I was covered in sweat and gasping for air. This dream took my breath away. This nightmare chased me every night for years, always leaving me wet and breathless.

CHAPTER 57 THE MIRACLE TOUR

Immediately after Sunday service, Bishop Barnes marched through the back hallway toward his chamber. He had just gotten word that Lawrence was furious over an announcement he just made during service. Now the bishop was mad.

“I don’t give a damn about what he don’t like,” mumbled the bishop, “I’m running shit up in here.”

I paced back and forth in front of the chamber door then I unloaded when I saw the bishop approach.

“How are you gonna make an announcement like that to the whole church and not talk to me first?”

“We’ll talk inside my chamber.”

“No, answer me now!”

“Boy, you better get yo ass in that chamber before I call the deacon.”

Inside his chamber the bishop exploded.

“First off, I run shit up in this bitch, not you! So I don’t have to clear nothing with you.”

I stayed quiet.

“Now, we’ll talk about this calmly. Would you like a drink?”

I hesitated at first.

“Yeah, just one, make it a double.”

The bishop smiled and poured me a drink.

“Son, you’ve been blessed with a wonderful gift, and you were given this gift in order to benefit this ministry. In order to bring the benefit’s, you’ve got to expose this ministry to the world. You’re not here by accident, there’s a purpose for all of this. You’ve got to work inside the church and outside as well. You follow me?”

“No.”

“Boy, you’re about as dense as a bag of wet sand. You’ve got no clue of what the members think of you, do you?”

“No.”

I held my glass out for another drink.

“Is it important to you what the members think?”

“Of course.”

“You sat out there on stage for the whole service and you didn’t get one flash?”

“I got one.”

“Really, from who?”

“Ethan. I saw him catch a cell phone.”

“That’s it? That’s the great message from God to the Prophet Garnier? I don’t even know why I bother. Listen son, I’m gonna give it to you straight, you’re freaking out the members.”

“Is that’s why you gave a press conference to the media before the service? Even before Jess’ funeral yesterday, you held a press conference. Why? To tell everybody about the freak?”

“You’ve got to expect this reaction man. These people ain’t never seen a miracle before. They’re trying to wrap their brains around it all. They’re scared. They’re calling you ‘The Angel of Death’ and

they don't want to be your next pick."

"I thought you wanted me to prophesy."

"I want you to benefit the church. You're right, you're here to prophesy. You got their attention now, so you don't have to tell them everything. Some folks can't handle everything at once. Sure, you have the knowledge of the future, but we've got to lead the whole flock to it. We got to be selective in what we tell them."

"What does that have to do with me going on some revival tour?"

"It's not only a call for your ability, it's a call for your availability. It's a three month revival tour called "The Miracle Tour." It gives the nation a chance to see how this ministry is blessed and it gives this church a chance to recover from the miracle just witnessed. The members will get a chance to be proud of the work one of their own is doing. It'll improve your image here and with- " The bishop stopped cold with his words.

"With who?"

"I don't want to say. You want another drink?"

"Thanks, now tell me it'll improve my image with who?"

The bishop poured another double for me before answering.

"Angela was hurt when she saw you in the condition you were in yesterday, just as I'm sure your family was. Only she's not used to it. She needs to see you in a better light son."

I downed my drink then dropped my head.

"I want to see you two together." The words slid off of the bishop's tongue like a serpents hiss.

"I'm not only looking out for this church, I'm looking out for you too son. You've just got to learn to trust me."

CHAPTER 58

I stayed in my room for the rest of Sunday. My family was upset with me. Rachel avoided me while Mitchell outright ignored me. For a moment, I thought my brother would burst into the room to force his opinion on me. I never expected to miss Mitchell's rants, but I did. I made myself scarce all day Monday.

Catching the Metro downtown gave my mind a chance to wander. I strolled in and out of department stores and little shops just to pass the time. I finally found myself lost in the darkness of a hole in the wall bar, sipping whiskey. When I got back home I went straight to my room. Nobody disturbed me for the rest of the night. I slept the morning away and woke just in time to hear a quick knock on the door. When I finally managed to stumble to the door there was no one there, only two suitcases and a garment bag.

"Rachel?"

Nothing. I was alone. I was packed for the tour a day early, thanks to Rachel.

Early Wednesday morning, Mitchell drove me to the church. It was the only time since Saturday morning that the two of us talked.

"Rachel and I both love you Law, you know that. It's just your self-destructive ways that has us worried."

"I understand your point, but you've got issues that are self-destructive too. You've got a great wife and a baby that she doesn't know about."

"You're right, Law. That's why we need each other. We've been fucked up since childhood, but we've got to survive it somehow. Maybe these three months on the road will help, if you let it. You've got to be responsible. Try not to drink during this tour. Accept your gift and be serious about helping others and you'll be the one who'll get the most out of this. Then maybe when the time is right, you can

help me break the news to Rachel.”

“In the meantime, Mitchell, I still see you enjoying family time with the other woman and the baby.”

“It’s what I have to do for now. I just don’t want you to see Rachel leaving me because of it.”

“I don’t want to see that either, but if I do, I’ll be there before it happens. I just wish you would’ve thought about the future so that I didn’t have to deal with it.”

We pulled into the church parking lot and unloaded the luggage.

“Well, I’ll see you in three months,” I said.

“I love you brother, this will work out for the best.”

As Mitchell drove away, Bishop Barnes came out of the church.

“Lawrence my boy! The heavens are about to spill blessings all over us for the work we’re about to do.”

Just then Ethan pulled up and began to unload his car.

“You boys leave your bags right there and come with me, they’ll be loaded on your transport shortly,” said the bishop.

We went to the bishop’s chamber. He opened the middle drawer to his desk and pulled out two cell phones.

“Think fast, Ethan,” yelled the bishop as he tossed a phone to him.

“Heads up Lawrence.”

I caught my cell phone.

“Gentlemen, these phones are your direct contact to me and to your escort on this tour. As you can see, I saved all the important numbers you’ll need.

We scanned the numbers the bishop set.

“Who’s Bluefield Black?” asked Ethan.

“Ahh, Mr. Black, I’m glad you brought him up. He’ll be your escort on this tour. He’s one of my best men. He’s just a little ...”

I looked up at the bishop’s silence.

“He’s a little what?” I asked. “Strange?”

“Different,” replied the bishop, “but very capable of getting you through this tour successfully.”

The bishop’s own cell phone rang and he scanned the display.

“Well, speak of the devil. Mr. Black is here and you guys are ready to go.”

As we walked toward the front of the church, the bishop seemed uneasy. He stopped abruptly in the foyer and nervously started looking out through the windows.

“Is something wrong bishop?” I asked.

“No son, today is a glorious new beginning for us all.”

Bishop Barnes saw the black Escalade but the driver wasn’t inside.

“Well gentlemen, your bags are all loaded up and you’re ready to go.”

We both felt rushed by the bishop.

Outside, I got in the front seat and Ethan got in the back. Then we waited.

“So where is this loser driver?” said Ethan. “How long do they expect us to wait?”

I rubbed my head as I caught a flash from Ethan, and laughed to myself.

Inside the church, Deacon Stone approached the bishop as he watched through the window.

“Are they gone yet?”

“They’re waiting for Blu. He’s around, I just don’t know where. It looks like Lawrence never knew you were here. Did you keep reading our plans for him out loud?”

“Over and over again. I guess he really can not sense the future as it pertains to him.” Interesting.

CHAPTER 59

“This is pissing me off,” said Ethan. “This joker needs to come on.”

“Here he comes,” I said.

A man came from around the side of the church. He had on a black silk shirt and a soft leather black sport coat and was zipping up his black trousers.

“Are you sure he’s the driver?” asked Ethan.

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“Who does he think he is, John Shaft?”

The man walked with a slow kimble.

“Somebody forgot to tell this brother that the seventies are over,” I laughed.

The man approached the truck and opened the drivers’ side door but he didn’t get in.

“Question, gentlemen. A drug dealer and a hooker. . . whose gonna make the most money?”

Ethan and I stared silently with our mouths open.

The man continued, “I’m pretty sure it’s the hooker, cause she can wash off her crack and resell it.” He broke out laughing.

Ethan and I remained silent.

“Whew,” said the man, “I love that one. What up! I finally get to meet the ‘Good Book Boys’.”

The man jumped into the truck. “My name is Bluefield Black, but you’ll call me Blu. That’s B-L-U, no E, now which one might you be?”

“I’m Lawrence.”

“Shit, the bishop told me all about you.”

Blu looked over at Ethan, “Then you must be ‘Smoke and Mirrors’.”

“Say what?” yelled Ethan. “Man, watch your mouth cause you don’t know me.”

“The bishop told me about you too. You’re just the warm-up band. The Lawman here is Earth, Wind, and Fire and you’re Milli Vanilli.”

“I ain’t got to take this crap from you,” said Ethan. “Your job is to drive us around, so drive!”

“Let me explain something to you, just so you get it right. The next time you get the notion to yell at me, take a minute or two and practice falling down in the dirt. Rollin’ around bleedin’ and swellin’ all up around the eyes. Cause the next time you gonna catch hell.”

Ethan looked at Blu who stared back at Ethan while I stared at both of them.

“You threatening me?” asked Ethan. “Cause you picked the wrong one on the wrong day. Let me out of here.” Ethan fumbled for the door handle.

“Oh, you want to dance now?” Blu got out of the truck.

“I’m gonna kick yo ass, pops,” yelled Ethan. He got out and ran behind the truck to get to Blu who had a .357 pointed right at Ethan’s head.

“Oh shit!” Ethan fell to the ground.

“What the hell’s wrong with you boy?” asked Blu. “How you gonna want to fight out here in front of a church. You on holy ground, fool. Show some respect.”

Ethan scooted backwards and tried to get back in the truck with Blu following.

“Get yo ass back in that truck and act like you got some sense.”

Both men got back into the truck. Ethan’s lungs were heaving as he tried to catch his breath.

“You’re crazy! You ain’t no driver, you’re just an old punk with a gun!” he huffed.

Blu turned to me. “This bitch just won’t shut up! I got something for his ass!”

Blu unhooked his belt and pulled it out like a whip almost hitting me in the process. He flung around towards the back seat and shoved his gun in Ethan’s face.

“You gonna keep talking, huh?”

He started beating Ethan with his belt.

“Ahh! Stop, oww!”

“You ... better ... shut ... the fuck ... up! I ... ain’t gonna ... tell ... yo ass ... again!”

From inside the church, the bishop watched in amazement.

“I don’t believe what I’m seeing, Stoney. It looks like Ethan is getting a whooping!”

“Hey!” I shouted. “Blu, stop! The bishop is watching.”

“Huh?”

“Ya both need to chill out.”

“Oh,” said Blu as he started to compose himself. He turned and waved at the bishop and the deacon.

Ethan climbed back into his seat.

I paused for a moment and wondered why I never sensed that the deacon was inside the church. *I never get a flash from him.*

Blu turned back to Ethan. “Listen punk. Any other time you’d already be planted under some bush. My job ain’t driving. You see this gold chain and these rings? My job is making money and you ain’t nothing but cargo.”

Blu started the truck and began to drive.

“You can’t do this to me!” shouted Ethan. “I’m a man of God!”

Blu, still in the church parking lot, slammed on the brakes.

“You think I’m not? I’m the mysterious way through which God works. In the battle between good vs. evil, I’m the one who gets his hands dirty for the sake of good ... for God’s sake.”

Blu glared at Ethan in silence, then started to sing. ***“I once was lost, but now I’m found. Was blind, but now I see ...”***

I started to laugh.

“What you snickering ‘bout?” snapped Blu.

“She can wash her crack off and resell it.”

“Ain’t that some shit?” laughed Blu.

The truck finally pulled out of the church lot. The stereo blared *Parliament’s “Make my funk the P-funk”* as we disappeared down the street.

Inside the church Deacon Stone approached the bishop.

“You seem to be pleased with the way things have developed. I hope you’re right.”

“Stoney, this is going to expand our work to lengths that we didn’t even imagine. Lawrence is the real deal, and he’s on our side.”

“And you just put him out into public view.”

“Don’t worry Stoney. Blu is flashy, crude but fully capable of protecting our interest. What we need to focus on for the next three months is getting everything we need to do done. Trust me, by the time Lawrence gets back, things will change pretty fast. So for right now, I’m gonna call Cottontail. She’s got lots of work to do.”

The two men headed for the bishop’s chamber. The glaze in Ezekiel Barnes’ eyes made him appear manic as he wrung his hands in greed.

“Stoney, we will acquire unimaginable wealth.”

“Wealth is fine, Zeke, but let us not lose our focus on the real prize ... influence.”

“Don’t worry Stoney, I never lose focus.”

CHAPTER 60

In the women’s restroom at General Hospital’s employee’s lounge, Rachel raised up for air for the third time after heaving into the toilet. A coworker was trying to help.

“Whatever you ate at lunch obviously ...”

“It’s not lunch, ‘cause I didn’t have much of an appetite. I have to see the doctor and I need to call my husband.”

Judy was coming back from the mail room when her receptionist phone rang. “Withrow High School, this is Judy. How may I direct your call?”

“Judy, this is Rachel Garnier, could you connect me with Mitchell?”

“I’m sorry Mrs. Garnier, your husband called off sick today.”

Blu’s SUV barreled down I-75. Ethan tried to escape conversation through sleep.

“So Lawrence, what’s the numbers for tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. I can’t do that kind of stuff.”

“Shit man, I got to believe in my work. I got to believe in you as much as the bishop does. You ain’t gonna get off that easy talkin’ ‘bout what you can’t do.”

“I need life, a person in which I can see a flash of their future. Lottery numbers don’t just jump in my head.”

“You need life? Do I look dead to you? Show me something.”

“Well, I don’t know if today is the day but I already had a flash on you. You were sitting in a restaurant near the buffet and you ordered coffee. You took a flask from inside your coat and fueled your coffee with something of a higher octane than cream.”

“Aw shit, you’re a goddamn Kreskin. You know what I been doing.”

“I know what you’re gonna do. So why don’t you let me wet my whistle right now.”

“Hell naw! The bishop told me to never to let you drink before a performance. Seems you got a reputation of getting straight zooted when you drink.”

I smiled, “So you’re gonna hold my past against me?”

“Listen Law, I like you and I can’t stand ‘Smoke and Mirrors’ back there ...”

“I hate you too,” mumbled Ethan.

“Shut yo ass up!” Blu leaned over and whispered to me. “I’ll have a bottle in your room tonight.”

My smile grew into a cheesy grin, “Cool.”

Angela slammed the phone down. “I wish I could just disappear and start over.”

“WHY ANGELA?”

The voice she heard made her eyes slam shut. She wasn’t going to stay for this visit. She opened the first drawer in the dresser next to the bed. Underneath her diary was a vial the bishop gave her. She needed to meet the bishop at the church, but she needed to escape the visit first. She quickly headed to the bathroom, turned on the shower, and stared in the mirror. She didn’t recognize herself anymore. The image peering back at her was terrified and enslaved. She held up the vial. “I despise you Ezekiel Barnes.”

Blu, Ethan and I stopped in Jellico for lunch.

“Welcome to Shoney’s. Someone will be with you in a moment.”

We were seated close to the buffet.

“What can I get you guys,” asked the young waitress.

“Where’s Silvia?” asked Blu.

“She’s been out sick for a week now.”

“I’ll have a chef salad. Do you have herbal tea bags?” Ethan was abrupt.

“Yes we do.”

“Tell her what shade of nail polish you want too, you fairy,” said Blu.

Ethan remained silent.

“I’ll have the buffet,” I said.

Blu looked over at the buffet, “Do y’all have soup beans today?”

“Yes, Great Northerns.”

“Good, I want two bean sandwiches.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said the waitress.

“Will you be fixin’ it?” asked Blu.

“No.”

“I know the cooks in the back know ‘cause I’ve ordered them from Silvia. But I will enlighten you on how to prepare this delicacy. You take two large biscuit's and slice ‘em smack through the middle. Then ladle on the beans, don’t drain ‘em either. Just pour bean juice and all, that’s why you use biscuit's. Then cut two slices of onion ‘bout that thick, pop on the biscuit top and try not to bite yo tongue ‘cause it’s good eatin’.”

Everyone chuckled except Ethan.

“What’ll you have to drink?”

“I wish you had some red Kool-aid back there. Since you don’t, black coffee.”

I left for the buffet while Blu stared Ethan down. The waitress brought the drinks, as I returned to the table.

Blu reached inside of his jacket and pulled a flask and poured a shot in his coffee.

“Great, this pimp wanna-be drinks and drives,” mumbled Ethan.

“Fool, do you see me in a car? This is just a little sweetener for my coffee.”

I cleared my throat and smiled.

“What?” Blu thought for a moment. “Oh yeah, ya know what I’ll be doing before I do it. You see that, ‘Smoke and Mirrors’? Law is the reason we all are gonna get rich on this tour, you mark my words. He’s a big plate of fried catfish and you’re the hush-puppies.”

Before Ethan could reply, their food came.

“Now that’s what I’m talkin’ ‘bout, Law. It don’t get no better than a good ol’ bean sandwich.”

After lunch, Blu grabbed the bill and handed me the keys. “You guys can get in the truck, I’ll take care of this, courtesy of the bishop. Y’all want any gum or mints. I’m gonna get five packs of Tic-Tacs and ten rolls of Tums.”

Outside the restaurant Ethan realized this was the only time he had to talk to me alone.

“I know we didn’t really hit it off very well at first,” he stated.

“If I remember correctly, you got the first hit off very well.”

“I’m trying to be serious. I apologized for that already and I think we need to stick together on this tour, you know... friends.”

“Why now?”

“Because of this Blu guy. He’s a psycho.”

“I kinda like the guy.”

“He’s liable to drive us out in some cornfield and shoot us execution style.”

I laughed.

“You laugh, but he worries me. I can’t believe the bishop would deal with this thug.”

“I think you’re exaggerating. Just give him a chance, you might learn to like him.”

“I ain’t gonna give him a chance to kill us. I would hope since you’re so gifted that you’ll see it coming and sound a warning.”

“I don’t think I’ll see anything like that.” *I know I won’t in my case.*

I only mumbled that last part.

CHAPTER 61

The truck rolled around to the service entrance to the Georgia Dome in Atlanta around 7:30 pm. I

was glad I had time to get settled and showered in my hotel room. A room I didn't have to share with Ethan. The bishop, so far, seemed to be just as financially generous as he was when he took me shopping. I was excited to be preaching in such a large venue as the Georgia Dome.

A young man in coveralls met us at the service door. "What's the word, Blu?" asked the young man.

"The word is payment of debt, black man."

"There you go, Blu. Don't worry, I got your money."

"Jimmy, I'm both shocked and proud that you're such a fast learner. You may actually get your MVP card in this lifetime."

Jimmy counted out about \$1,000. Blu handed him the keys to his truck.

"Tell Murph to make sure he gets my wheels all the way clean this time."

"I got you, Blu. Now let my uncle know when he can get some more barbecue sauce."

"Jimmy drove off and Blu led us inside. As we walked down a long corridor toward the stage area, we could hear music. Blu stopped."

"I'll be damned, that's Little Milt Moses!"

"Who?" I asked.

"Little Milt Moses, that's his new gospel hit. Shit, come on y'all"

The sound of the music increased as Blu rushed us down a long corridor that led to the left entrance to the stage.

Shadrac, Meshack and Abednego

Shadrac, Meshack and Abednego

"Let's make some noise for the Hebrew boys!" shouted a short man in a green silk choir robe.

"That's Little Milt Moses!" shouted Blu.

Milt Moses was backed-up by a seven piece band and a chorus of thirty choir members chanting.

Shadrac, Meshack and Abednego

Shadrac, Meshack and Abednego

Little Milt Moses skipped, jumped and slid across the stage as he sang.

"They proved the Devil a liar, when they were thrown in the fire. 'Cause everybody learned that them boys didn't burn."

Shadrac, Meshack and Abednego

Shadrac, Meshack and Abednego

My mouth dropped when I saw thousands singing, clapping and dancing. "Now this is what I call a service."

"Man you ain't said nothing but a thang. This is the big time, Law," replied Blu. "This ain't no store front, rent-money preaching."

"Three went in but then they were four."

Shadrac, Meshack and Abednego

Shadrac, Meshack and Abednego

Blu nudged me then pointed toward the band.

"The bass player over there, that's Thumper Jones, you know him?"

"No, I don't."

"I'm telling you, this is the big time. Thumper Jones played on the debut album of the Funkadelics. He got mad that he didn't get album credit, so he started scoring music for porno flicks, ya know, ***bom chicka wah-wah***. Now he's thumping beats for the Lord"

"He saw the error of his ways?"

"No, he looked at one of those pornos and saw his wife."

Blu's cell phone rang.

"Blu here. What? Yeah, I know. Yeah, bye."

As Blu closed his cell phone, he looked back to see Ethan standing several feet behind us. "Come

on Lawrence.” He headed straight toward Ethan.

Ethan stood firm although he was shaking inside as Blu approached.

“You sissified punk! You called the bishop on me?”

“You need to know you can’t do or say whatever you want to me,” said Ethan.

“You ain’t shit to me or the bishop. Lawrence is the draw here. To me you ain’t nothing but luggage. The bishop pays me to lug you around. Now the Samsonite is trying to come between me and my money?”

Blu was turning red in the face. I was getting nervous.

“Blu, you gonna be alright?”

“I’ll be alright way before this asshole will. I’m telling you this once, Ethan. If you fuck up any of my money, just like a suitcase full of drugs at the airport, I will tear you apart. Now let’s get ready to perform.

I stayed silent as Blu led us to a dressing room to change. Ethan finally broke silence after we were dressed. As we waited for our cues, Ethan showed a different side of himself.

“I’m scared, Lawrence.”

“Why? You’ve done this before. Don’t think about the larger crowd, just do the same service.”

“I mean the tour, I’m scared I won’t be able to deal with this for any length of time... especially Blu.”

I didn’t say anything. I tried to get a fix on a flash from Ethan, but before I could, Ethan spoke again.

“I need you to watch my back. I won’t survive this alone. I’m sorry for hitting you and all that bad shit. I need your help.”

Before I could say anything, Blu entered the dressing room.

“Alright you squares, here’s the deal. You each will get twenty-five minutes. Ethan, you’ll be on in ten minutes. Your little bird-bath shit will be set up.”

“It’s a holy water basin,” Ethan said dryly.

“Whatever. You’ll get out there and bless the stage while the ushers direct the helpless ones to you. Don’t worry, they’re all actors so you don’t have to grow somebody’s leg back or some shit like that.”

I snickered.

“When the ushers cut the line off, you’ll bless the stage again, ya know, sprinkle, sprinkle, and then get yo ass off. Now go out there and get your microphone hooked up.”

Ethan left the room and Blu turned his attention to me.

“I really hate his ass.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Forget it Lawman, it’s all about you this evening. How you feeling?”

“Alright I guess, I’m a little nervous.”

“Don’t sweat a thang man, everybody out there is waiting to see you. The bishop worked hard to get the word out about you.”

“Really?”

“Believe that! Now, you’re due in thirty minutes. No one will be allowed on the stage. First, you’re gonna prophesy abundant blessings for everyone in attendance. Then you’ll go out in the audience and do your flash thang, but you’ll only mingle in the floor seating area. Folks in the arena seats will only be allowed down on the floor with the usher’s direction.”

“Sounds like you got it all covered.”

“Everything but the collection plates, and I know you’ll fill ‘em to the brim. I’m gonna go out there and make sure ‘Smoke and Mirrors’ don’t miss a step with his little song and dance.”

Blu was almost out the door when he remembered something.

“Oh yeah, this is straight from the bishop. If you see something bad during your flashes, whatever you do, don’t ever bear bad news. It’s bad for business.”

I stood in the corridor as Ethan came off stage. He was almost giddy as he approached me.

“Woo, what a rush! There’s got to be thirty thousand out there. Lawrence that’s a different ballgame. I mean, out there, I was almost believing it myself.”

I glared at Ethan.

“I meant that about my abilities, not yours.”

“Lawrence, you ready?” shouted Blu. He was at the edge of the stage. “Come on.”

I stood at the side entrance to the stage. A local preacher came out to introduce me. The thunderous voice of the preacher demanded the crowd’s attention as he proceeded to speak auspiciously about the honorable prophet. My mind started to wander. Amongst the faces of thousands, I saw my mother, not as she was just before her death, but as she must have been at her happiest times. She smiled and I could hear her voice.

“You have been given a gift my son, use it in order to understand why.”

“Here he is, Prophet Lawrence Garnier!”

“You’re up,” said Blu. “Make it do what it do.”

I walked on stage to a roar of applause from thousands.

I was in awe of the vastness of my new platform. I turned and looked at the banner above the stage that read: **The Miracle Tour**. I turned to the crowd and began to speak.

“I stand before all of you this evening humbled and blessed. Just like you, I am blessed because I am here. But it’s the gift I bring to you that has humbled me. You see, the Lord has revealed to me that you all have been searching. You have been begging for a miracle. You have been beaten down by the world and you’re tired. Well, the Lord told me to tell you all to stand up! Beg no more! Your search is over because your miracle has begun!”

As the crowd roared, I raised my arms and slowly proceeded to the floor. The organist played as I started up the first aisle. A very old man on the outside seat in the third row reached for me but I side-stepped him because of the 'Old Jess' incident. A hand breezed across my leg and I got a flash of a tearful reunion at an airport.

“There’s someone here who’s missing a loved one or expecting someone!”

“Me! It’s me!” shouted the young woman who touched me.

I turned and pulled the woman into the aisle. “Get close to me so my mic will pick you up,” I said.

“Yes, I just found out two weeks ago who my father is, but we’ve never met.”

“Were you expecting to meet him soon?”

“No, he didn’t know when he could get here.”

“Oops, well the Lord just let the cat out the bag that you’ll meet him before the end of next week!”

The woman screamed with joy and so did the crowd. A man placed his hand on my shoulder and I saw a flash of him jumping up and down with a lottery ticket in his hand.

“Wow!” I yelled, “We got a lottery winner here.”

“Really?” asked the man.

“Yes, before the end of next week!”

Another man jumped up and asked the guy, “What number are you playing?”

“I don’t know,” replied the man.

“Don’t lie to me punk, tell me!” The man grabbed the future lottery winner and the two started fighting.

“No!” I shouted. “We need security over here!”

Police ran over to stop the fight just as an old lady grabbed me.

“Oow!” I yelled as an intense white death flash hit me.

I ran to the next aisle and was met by a very thin, desperate looking man.

“I’m hungry prophet. I’m starving to death,” he said as he grabbed my lapel.

I saw a flash of the man running out of Capital City Bank with a gun in one hand and a bag of money in the other. *The bishop said no bad news no matter what.*

“Sir, you’re going to come into a lot of money and you’ll never be hungry again, before the end of next week.”

The man jumped for joy and the crowd went wild. I grabbed a nearby policeman and whispered into his ear.

“Please, before the end of next week, the Capital City Bank will be robbed at gunpoint. Wait outside starting tomorrow and you’ll catch him. He’ll go peacefully.”

The ushers could not contain the area and the crowd started to close in on me.

The bishop sat at his desk in his chamber when his phone rang.

“Hello... Blu, my boy, what’s up?”

“Bishop, this is bigger than I think we imagined. The crowd is going crazy!”

“Aha, I love it!” shouted the bishop. “Son, never underestimate the power of the ignorant in masses. I already contacted the local media and told them that a true prophet from God was in their midst.”

“This tour is gonna break all records!” shouted Blu, “but we’re gonna need a whole lot more security. Oh! Gotta go. Lawrence is being mobbed. Ethan come on!”

The black Escalade slowly moved through the traffic. Pedestrians and news media made things almost impassible. Regular announcements came over the intercoms:

“The prophet has left the Georgia Dome, please leave the premises. The prophet has left the Georgia Dome.”

“Oow,” I moaned as I reclined in the front passenger seat. “My head is killing me. There were so many soon-to-be dead folks, it was like a Thriller video in there.”

“Woo wee!” yelled Blu. “Look at me; I’m rollin’ with the Ohio Holy Boys. That was crazy. Ethan, your value even went up. You ain’t luggage no more; you’re a carry-on bag.”

“I’m sick of your damn jokes Blu!”

Blu, looked over at me, “Lawrence, I’m very sorry that you have to hear this with your head hurtin’ n all. But I want everyone within the sound of my voice to know that if this asshole don’t shut his damn mouth, I’m gonna drive this truck hell-bent into the side of a mountain. We’ll all explode into three unidentifiable piles of shit. And when all the investigations are done and the top officials make the final conclusions of what happened, they won’t know if these three piles of mangled shit was man, woman, black, white, young or old. They’ll never be able to say. But they will know without a shadow of a doubt, that before we made impact up-side that mountain, the pile of shit behind THIS HERE steering-wheel knocked the holy HELL out of that pile of shit in the back seat. So shut up or get knocked the HELL OUT!”

“What’s with the threats Blu? What if I knock YOU THE HELL OUT?”

“Then it’ll just be a hell-knockin’ night ‘CAUSE WE’LL BE FIGHTIN’!”

“My head can’t take either one of y’all, PLEASE!” I kept both hands over my eyes.

Blu pulled his flask from his coat and handed it to me.

“Here, suck on this, it’ll dull the pain.”

“Thanks.”

“You just blew your wad is all. The bishop wanted you off the sauce while touring, but it’ll be three days till you’re on the stage again. So you can stay drunk for a day and a half.”

“I knew I liked you Blu. You know, whiskey is my drink of choice, Johnnie Walker to be exact.”

“Then give my yak back if you don’t want it.”

“It’ll do, for now.” I waved Blu away from the flask.

“I know what ya hinting at. You’ll have a bottle in your room waiting.”

I smiled and snuggled back into my seat with the flask.

“I got something else for both of y’all.” Blu handed envelopes to us. “It’s pay day! You’ll find a Visa card in there. The bishop opened bank accounts for y’all. For tonight’s performance he placed three thousand each. You’ll get paid after each performance this way. Call the number on the back of

the card. Your access codes will be the word, **'BISHOP'**, then the last four digit's of your social. Once in, you can change your passwords to whatever you want. So Lawrence you can go on and tell 'Smoke and Mirrors' what his password is gonna be."

Ethan sat up. "Quit playing Blu!"

"Don't worry, I'm not a mind reader," I said.

Blu laughed hard, "Let's get some supper."

And so it proved to be very lucrative for both Ethan and I on the first night of 'The Miracle Tour'.

CHAPTER 62

After the first week, stories of how the prophet's words came true flooded the news media. The Atlanta police officer who caught the bank robber became the first testimony. The headlines in the paper read:

"Two Hots and a Cot."

The article interviewed the starving man who admitted the truthfulness of the prophet's words that his hungry homeless state would end within a week's time. Every city the tour visited, gave testament to the foretold prophecies that came true. Reporters from everywhere chewed these personal accounts like rabid dogs. News of the true prophet grew nationwide.

The Miracle Tour grew also. In every new city, preachers, pastors, reverends and ministers joined just to be associated with the phenomenon. Security was so tight around me it became almost impossible to get a good photo. Bishop Barnes insisted that I was not to give interviews.

The bishop held press conferences in his chamber. He was on every national news program claiming the Lord gave him the power to raise prophets. The ministry of The Church of Advancing Light was finally growing. The Miracle Tour conquered Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee and just finished it's run in Mississippi.

Just outside of Jackson, in an obscure dive, the usual dull atmosphere was being rattled by the laughter of three friends who didn't want to be recognized.

"So there I was," continued Ethan, "legs dangling with this giant fist squeezing me from my shoulders to my cheek bones."

"Oh, I wish I could've seen that shit," laughed Blu.

"Blu, I'm telling you, he looked like Scooby-Doo after one of those monsters grabbed him up," I yelled. "I thought Ethan was gonna say 'Rut Row'."

Blu could hardly breathe as he slapped the table.

"What's up with the size of Deacon Stone's head?" he said. "I mean it's Boris Karloff big. How does he buy hats? He could put a garbage can lid on his head and it would still be a stingy brim."

We howled with laughter. Blu continued, "I bet it killed his mother when he was born. His first name is probably 'Ouch.' I bet Ouch Stone is on his birth certificate and where it says head size they put 'to be continued on next document.'"

We screamed in unison.

"Can we get another round!" I shouted.

"What's with Bishop Barnes' hair?" chimed Ethan.

"His shit is fucked up!" said Blu. "Black and white, what's he wearing a skunk-skin cap?"

I laughed, "Maybe he only had half a can of shoe polish."

Another round of drinks came while we were laughing.

"Ah man, y'all some fun cats," said Blu. "Hey Lawrence, you know we ain't too far from New Orleans. We could go down and visit your sister for a couple of days. We got a week before we have to

be in Michigan.”

“Naw, she would hate that and make our lives miserable all the while. She hates me. She’s a cruel woman.”

“You can’t take that serious. Brothers and sisters say and do all kinds of shit to hurt each other but they’re still family,” said Blu.

“No, this is serious. She told me that the wrong one died.”

“Wait, who died?” asked Ethan.

“I’m one half of twins. Well, I should say, was. We were identical.”

“So what happened?” asked Blu.

“Of course I don’t remember. I was a toddler but I heard it this way. Around dinnertime, my mother and Virginia had just finished setting the table. My brother Mitchell was already at the table. My asshole father had been yelling and smacking my mother around for most of the afternoon and then he started back up because dinner was late. In a rush, my mother told Virginia to take one of us, who knows which one we were identical, and put us in our high chairs. My father started beating my mom just as she was putting one of us in the high chair. Virginia went to help my mother and somehow Lyle was able to get out of the house during the chaos. He was struck by a car and died.”

“Damn, I’m sorry,” said Blu.

“Yeah, me too,” said Ethan. “Did you have a flash of his death?”

“No, that ability came later. They say I felt it though. I screamed in pain for seven days.”

We sat in silence for a while.

Blu raised his glass. “A toast to a successful month on the road.”

I raised my glass and Ethan his beer bottle. Blu continued, “As far as I’m concerned, you guys are the closest thing to family I’ve had in a long time.”

“What? You mean the mysterious Mr. Bluefield Black is revealing a personal side of himself?” chimed Ethan.

“I was always willing to be forthcoming. It’s just you two selfish bastards never asked.”

We laughed and I ordered another round.

“So?” asked Ethan.

“So what?” asked Blu.

“So, I’m asking. What about your family?”

“Oh! I got a sister back in Philly. She’s married with a son. Yeah, I guess Nathan is probably a man now. Damn, twenty-two or three, I think.”

“You think? Don’t you know?” I asked as the drinks arrived at the table.

“It’s been twenty years since I’ve seen her. I never met her husband or my nephew.”

“How’d that happen?” asked Ethan.

“Time travels fast. I tried many times to find her. The bishop told me she went back to Philly with a husband and baby. I just can’t find her. She doesn’t want me to.”

“You mean Bishop Barnes is involved in this?” I asked.

“It was rough on ma after dad died. She sent us to Cincinnati to live with our grandmother. Ma stayed in Philly. Gram forced us to go to church. It was Reverend Robbie’s ministry.”

“So you knew about the great split in the church?” I asked.

“Yep, my grandmother had already passed but she was rock solid in her faith. She would never let nothing remove her from her home church. After Gram died, this street hustler from Philly never stepped foot in that church again. My sister was a woman of faith, so she stayed. The bishop took a shine to her, but she wasn’t having it. He took a liking to my street skills and we’ve had a working relationship ever since. Angie didn’t like the work I was doing for the bishop, but I was making large bank.”

“Who’s Angie?” asked Ethan.

“My sister. She goes by Angela.”

I nearly choked on my drink when Blu showed an old photo-booth picture of the two of them. I'm skilled when it comes to keeping quiet and quiet I kept.

"So, what kind of work did you do for the bishop?" asked Ethan.

"I'm doing y'all a favor by not telling you those kinds of details."

"Ah, come on, it's just us here," cheered Ethan.

"I will tell you this, the bishop has far reaching power. He's got eyes and ears everywhere. So watch your back, cause you don't want to get on his bad side."

I leaned in closer to whisper. "Reverend Robbie was buried with a valuable ring from the congregation, but I saw it in the bishop's possession."

Blu got serious. "You don't get it. You think we're alone, but I guarantee if there's a bag of potatoes in this place, some of those eyes belong to the bishop."

"Well, if you and your sister weren't talking, how did you find out about her husband and son?" asked Ethan.

"She did send me letters through the bishop. Since my work kept me on the road, the bishop was like a mediator."

The three of us sat in silence for a moment, until I spoke. "Do you trust the bishop?"

"Hell naw, but he pays great. I pray at the alter of the almighty dollar and Bishop Barnes showed me the way. Ain't that why y'all do what y'all do?"

"I guess you got a point," replied Ethan.

I shook my head in disagreement, "No, not me. I really don't know why I'm here. I feel like a freak of nature with this curse. I'd give money just to get rid of it. The bishop says it's a gift from God to bring people into the ministry, but the ministry is getting rich because of it. Is that really God's will?"

"Very interesting," replied Blu. "You're the only one anywhere with a true gift from God and you're the most confused. I'll let you guys in on a little job I was a part of for the bishop's ministry."

"You sure you want to expose something you shouldn't" asked Ethan.

"This ain't saying much, but it does shed a lot of light on things. The church was strapped for money a couple of years back. The bishop had me and some others remove the church's beautiful organ from the Reverend Robbie era. We made it look like a church break-in. He sold the organ to a ministry down south and humbly received a finders' fee.

"Then he convinced his members into donating funds for a new organ of lesser value claiming that he didn't want to belong to a church that didn't have music. Bishop Barnes told us that we were doing God's will for the ministry, even though behind the scene actions appeared questionable. He got the church's books back into the black and turned a profit, all for the sake of the ministry."

There was momentary silence.

Blu continued, "To tell you the truth, being on the road with you guys is the very first time I've ever felt like I was a part of something holy."

He raised his glass and started to sing.

"I once was lost but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see."

CHAPTER 63

That night in my hotel room, I couldn't sleep. I was burdened by my thoughts. *It could've been coincidence that Blu had a sister with the same name as Angela, but there was no denying that photo. What kind of game is the bishop playing with Blu? One thing for sure, I'm not saying nothing about it. Blu obviously has his share of secrets, he wouldn't talk about Reverend Robbie. I don't know*

who to trust.

My cell phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey Bro, Mitch here. You busy?”

“No, I’m just sitting here thinking.”

“About coming home I hope.”

“Yeah right. I still have two months left with the tour.”

“Are you going to finish the tour?”

“Why wouldn’t I? I’m getting paid.”

“What if you had a family emergency?”

“What emergency?”

“Listen Lawrence, I know that you’re working and making a lot of money. After all, I recommended you to the bishop. But I never intended for you to be so far away from me, I mean, I wanted you here. I need you here.”

“Why Mitch? Let me guess, you miss me.”

“Lawrence, I . . . ”

“You want to know if I’ve had a flash on you.”

“Listen Lawrence . . . ”

“You know enough about my condition to know that I’m too far away for that to happen. So, why don’t you tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s Rachel, I think she’s starting to suspect something but I’m not sure. I just feel uneasy about everything.”

“That’s why you should think with your head, not your pecker.”

“Please, I don’t need a lecture.”

“Yeah you do, and for once you need to listen. You fucked up, now you want somebody else to fix it. You’re using me, Mitch. That’s the only reason why you wanted me in Cincinnati in the first place. That’s the reason you want me there now.”

“We’re family, I need you. You need to be there for family at least once in your life.”

“There it is! There’s the family speech. Next comes the question, did you see dad’s death? Why didn’t you do something? Next you’ll tell me that the wrong twin died.”

“I’d never say that.”

“Wrong! Wrong! Virginia said it when she couldn’t use me anymore and you’re just like her. It’s what our family is all about. We’re all users. You want my help Mitchell? OK, you’ll get it but not now. You’ll just have to wait.”

I hung up.

Ethan opened his door. He was in his robe, tired and ready for bed, a fact that I already knew but knocked anyway.

“Lawrence, it’s late man, what’s wrong?”

“Sorry, I just need to unload this junk in my head.”

“Come in.”

I needed to unburden myself. I didn’t care about solutions. I just wanted to talk to someone for the first time in my life about how I felt about things. Ethan listened as I talked about my brother’s indiscretions, and my sister’s evil treatment. I kept quiet about Blu’s sister, but did express concerns about Blu’s back-door dealings with Bishop Barnes. I talked for almost an hour and Ethan listened. As I began to leave, Ethan assured me of one thing.

“Lawrence, life will always present challenges that seem to be nothing more than problems. Time changes and so does our views of those problems. Before you know it, you’ve learned from those challenges and are better for having the experiences. It will all work out.”

“Thanks man, good night.”

It was a rare event, but this night Deacon Stone's phone rang and it wasn't the bishop.

"I hope I didn't wake you," said the voice over the phone.

"I'm never caught sleeping," said the deacon dryly.

Julius rolled over without waking. Normally, his mother would have been pacing the floor, indulging in coffee and cigarettes, but this night, Angela slept soundly.

Despite the amount of drinking done the night before, we were on the road early. The next leg of the tour was three weeks in the state of Texas, starting in Houston, then Dallas and ending in the panhandle plains of Lubbock.

Ethan took notice of the direction we were heading.

"Blu, why are we going this way?" he asked. "It would've been quicker to go through Louisiana, we're heading toward Arkansas."

"It's just a little detour. I got to collect some money for a barbecue sauce delivery. I figured since neither one of you boys are doing any driving, you wouldn't mind."

"Drive on brother," said Ethan.

I snickered, "That must be some damn good barbecue sauce."

Blu laughed, "You know what I been doing."

I didn't mind the detour. I remembered what my sister said if I stepped foot near home. Even if it was an exaggerated statement she was definitely evil enough to pull it off.

CHAPTER 64

In Houston the media was buzzing about the Miracle Tour. On every news station, local preachers were expressing the spiritual power that was being bestowed upon the city. The headline on the front page of the Houston Chronicle was: **A True Prophet in Our Midst**. The front page of the Houston Press read: **God's Law Has Arrived**.

There was national media coverage also, but of a different kind. At the Women Mission in New Orleans, Virginia is awakened by knocking at her room door. She found an excited young woman when she opened it.

"Sorry Sister Virginia, I thought you'd like to know that there's a news story about your brother on CNN."

Virginia went to her TV and the young woman followed.

A smiling Bishop Barnes appeared on the screen. The caption on a banner underneath him read:

Prophet – Real or Hoax?

"Live via satellite we have the founder of The Miracle Tour, Bishop Ezekiel Barnes. Thank you for joining us Bishop Barnes."

After a three second delay, the bishop responded.

"Thank you for having me."

"Bishop Barnes, The Miracle Tour, which you established is slated by many as potentially being the greatest spiritual revival event in history. And all of this is potentially riding on the coat-tail of the Prophet Lawrence Garnier. Are you surprised by this?"

"No, I'm not. It was revealed to me that a prophet would rise up out of my ministry...The Church of Advancing Light."

"So are you also claiming to be able to see the future?"

The bishop laughed “Oh no, not me, I’m just a humble preacher. No, God spoke to me...after 9/11 and told me that messengers for the world would come out of my ministry. Prophet Garnier is the first of these messengers!”

“Some critics are claiming that Lawrence Garnier is a hoax.”

“Listen, folks from every area that this tour has appeared said that his prophecies came true. I’ve seen it, so have members of my church. I’m approached everyday by different denominations wanting to partnership with this tour. A hoax? Guess God pulled a good one. But God don’t pull tricks, he brings blessings and miracles. So let’s embrace this miracle.”

“Bishop, you’ve also been criticized for not letting Prophet Garnier do interviews.”

“That’s not what he does, he’s a prophet. I allow him the platform to be who he is. Prophet Garnier isn’t interested in being a celebrity. These roles were placed upon us by God. Right now, in this ministry, Lawrence Garnier is the quarterback, I’m doing his blocking, and God is calling the plays.”

“But the phenomenon that is the Prophet Garnier is what makes him a celebrity.”

“Listen our Lord and Savior couldn’t feed all those five thousand folks with only five loaves of bread and two fishes if he had to clear dishes too. I’m telling the world, let the prophet do what he does and allow him to bring you into this ministry.”

“One more question Bishop Barnes. Why your ministry? I mean, you even said God told you these things. Why you?”

“You tell me. Don’t God deal with any other ministries? Don’t he talk to no other preachers? Am I the only one? I mean really, is he only talking to me?”

“Thank you Bishop Ezekiel Barnes. There you have it. Is this Prophet real or a hoax. What do you believe?”

“Ain’t that something Sister Virginia? Lawrence hit it big. Aren’t you proud?”

Virginia turned sharply toward the young woman, “I’m sure you have much to do this morning!”

“Yes Sister... I’m sorry to disturb you.”

Virginia closed the door then turned off the T.V.

“Definitely the wrong twin died.”

Angela and Julius pulled up in front of the Billups’ home.

“Honey, make sure you speak to Debbie when she gets in the car, okay? Make her feel welcome. Oh and remember, Mrs. Billups is picking her up after school. I’ll pick you and Doreen up.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Doreen came outside first. Angela noticed a flushed look on her face. “Morning Doreen, are you glad your sister is able to go back to school?”

“I guess.”

Thelma stepped outside and waved at Angela.

“Thank you so much, Debbie is on her way out.”

Angela waved back, “I’m glad this day is here, I knew Debbie was gonna be all... Oh my!” Angela’s jaw dropped as Debbie came outside in a hideous church dress, complete with white gloves and ankle socks with a bible tucked under her arm.

Julius looked back at Doreen as she sank into the back seat.

CHAPTER 65

The Miracle Tour in Houston saw a greater amount of security. The Astrodome attendance was upwards of 10,000. My walk among the field seats took two hours to complete. It was clear that this would be the last time that I would actually go out into the audience. It was simply too difficult to

control the crowd.

Blu helped me back onto the stage. He noticed that I was visibly shaken. As I waved farewell to the cheering crowd, I broke into tears. Blu escorted me back to my dressing room.

“I can’t do this anymore, Blu. This tour is over for me.”

“What’s the deal, man?”

“I’m lying to the people.”

“Those people love you. Your gift is a miracle to everyone who witnesses it.”

“I’m seeing death in the crowds. I’m seeing horrible things in the near future of a lot of those people, and I’ve got to keep smiling. I have to tell them something good. I can’t change their future and I can’t keep lying to them.”

“Man, listen, you’re doing more for those people than you think. I’m sure most folks know that they’re lives are fucked up, but you’re giving them hope.”

“False hope.”

“You’re giving them something to believe in. That’s what you’re getting paid to do. You ain’t God, you’re just a sign pointing in God’s direction.”

“There was a young woman out there tonight with her four month old baby. She wanted me to bless the child. Her husband stood up and shook my hand. He was a soldier home on leave from Iraq. This was the first time he had seen his child. They were so happy.”

“So what’s wrong with that?”

“I had to keep smiling. He’s going back in two days and I had to keep smiling. Next week he’ll die in an ambush.”

Blu, for the first time was speechless.

I didn’t go to dinner with Blu and Ethan that night. Under the direction of the bishop, Blu made sure I only had less than half a bottle of whiskey in my room. I listened to my music and dined on Underwood Deviled Ham, Ritz Crackers and Planter’s Peanuts.

My cell phone rang. It was the bishop.

I started right in, not allowing the bishop to speak. “Sorry bishop, this is not working for me. Get me off this tour, immediately.”

“Son, listen to me. Just listen.” His tone was eerily calm.

I stopped speaking. He continued, “I know this is rough on you, but this is part of the process. You’re a prophet. It was the same way for Jonah, he didn’t want the job either. He was swallowed by a whale before he became more agreeable. Accept this assignment Lawrence, before something drastic happens to convince you to do it.”

“Why me? I ain’t nobody.”

“Moses had a speech impediment, but he parted the Red Sea with God’s help. You’re the one with the gift. Why? Because God has plans for you. Nobody said it was gonna be easy, but you will succeed.”

“I see terrible things about to happen to people and I can’t save them.”

“You’re a prophet, not God. You’re just a sign of hope pointing to God.”

“It’s hard, this gift. I just wish I was normal.”

“You ain’t normal, and your blessings ain’t normal either. I was saving this information for the end of the tour but I’ll tell you now. The keys to your brand new Benz are sitting on my desk.”

“What?”

“Your Benz is in the garage at One Lytle Place, underneath your furnished suite.”

“What?”

“Feel better ‘bout your skills now? Tremendous skill brings tremendous blessings. You’ll be able to woo Angela in style with your new set-up.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Praise the Lord is a start.”

I chuckled, "Praise the Lord!" .

"Now get some sleep and tomorrow you'll be refreshed to start earning your keep."

CHAPTER 66

The posted sermon for The Church of Advancing Light read:

THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE SOUL BUSINESS

Inside, Bishop Barnes was just finishing the rousing sermon in front of a record crowd. "Praise the Lord! I want y'all to look around the church today. Look at this crowd. Praise the Lord!"

The crowd applauded.

The bishop continued, "Notice all the new faces. There's a whole lotta folks in here I ain't never seen! If this is your home church, find an unfamiliar face and shout WELCOME!"

The church members did just so. "And if this is your first time here shout, THANK YOU LORD!"

The response was thunderous.

"Now I want to take a moment and announce two of the Lord's blessings. First, way down here in front is the newest of our church mothers, Thelma Billups, y'all give her a hand. Stand up Thelma, and show everybody that beautiful white hat!"

Thelma stood all in white and clapped her hands. Suddenly she grabbed her husband Ed's hand and stood him up.

"Oh my God!" shouted the bishop. "This truly is a blessing, Ed is in the house! Y'all clap for Ed cause the Lord, worked overtime to get him in here, ha ha! Yes Lord!"

Thelma's unattractive face beamed with pride while an embarrassed Ed quickly sat back down.

"That ain't all! The blessing to beat all is that one of our precious seedlings is back with us. Everyone, let's hear it for little Debbie Billups!"

The crowd applauded as the little girl next to her father slowly stood revealing a gaudy church dress. She turned and flashed a big smile as she waved to everyone.

"Thank you Lord!" shouted the bishop. "Yes, we are blessed up in here this morning! For all you new folks who don't know, it wasn't always like this. There was a time when half of the church abandoned us."

Heads started to nod in agreement throughout the crowd.

"There was dissension among us! Over half of the church left cause they didn't like me. They couldn't accept that Reverend Robbie was gone. I was called a snake! A liar! The Devil himself! Everything except a child of God! To those unbelievers, those back-biters and haters! I ask... HOW YOU LIKE ME NOW?"

The crowd roared.

"They attacked the church it'self! Broke in and stole our organ! Our music! But look at the beautiful instrument we have today. The few faithful ones, who weathered everything the devil could throw at us, got together and scraped their hard-earned money and LOOK AT OUR FINE ORGAN NOW! Thank you Lord! So to all those non-believing, no faith-having, back-biting, belly-crawlers I say, STAY GONE!"

Everyone rose to their feet.

"BYE BYE! Hasta la vista! Hit the road Jack and don't come back! We're on the right track now! The Lord had to clean his house out so he could raise prophets! Now we're on the map. We're on the covers of Newsweek, Time, Ebony and Jet! Now, we're saving record souls. Now we're going to expand into a mega church. Construction is to start within the year. This is to prepare for our live television broadcast EACH SUNDAY!"

The church burst into shouting. The music was playing. The choir started to sing. Debbie Billups clapped and sang louder than anyone.

“The Church of Advancing Light is moving UP!” shouted Bishop Ezekiel Barnes. “Praise the Lord! There’s no business like SOUL BUSINESS!”

After the service, the deacon met with the bishop in his chamber to discuss the three men they sent on The Miracle Tour.

“I appreciate your concerns, Stoney, but if we’re patient, we’ll get everything we expected and a whole lot more.”

“Is greed a valid reason to throw caution to the wind?” asked Stoney.

“I guarantee that whichever one poses the biggest threat, we’ll kill. I just don’t think they have enough pieces between them to put the puzzle together.”

“I must admit Ezekiel, that I fully trust your reputation for ruthlessness. It is the timing that has me concerned. If in fact it proves that the prophet Garnier is a threat, it may be too late to kill him.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are raising this man to greatness. Kill him in that elevated state and he becomes something much stronger. He becomes an ideal.”

“Well Stoney, if we find ourselves in that kind of a pickle, we’ll just have to knock that great man down a notch.”

“We can not afford to let it get to that point,” said the deacon as he left the chamber.

CHAPTER 67

Debbie sat on a swing after eating her lunch. Nearby, three of her classmates wanted to play Four Squares.

“Do you want to ask her?” said one of the girls.

“No, Debbie’s a weirdo now.”

“We need four to play. Come on.”

The three girls approached Debbie while she was reading her Bible.

The larger of the three girls spoke as she bounced the ball.

“Hey weirdo, wanna play Four Squares?”

“No.”

“We need a fourth, weirdo. We’ll let you play.”

“My name is Debbie. Not weirdo, you know that.”

“You’re a weirdo and God don’t love you cause you wear ugly dresses. Weirdo!”

Debbie slowly looked up at the three.

Joyce Johnson was in the teachers lounge peeling her orange when she heard one of her students yelling her name.

“Ms. Johnson, come quick. Debbie’s on the playground going crazy!”

She followed the child outside and ran into a crowd of excited children.

“Let me through!” Ms. Johnson struggled to get in front.

The three girls were cowering against the building as Debbie paced in front of them with a tree branch that she tapped against her Bible.

“And I will execute great vengeance upon them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon them!”

Debbie raised the branch well above her head as the three girls began to scream.

“Debbie, NO!” shouted Ms. Johnson as she grabbed the child.

I dried off after my noon shower. It felt good to sleep late and felt even better to not have plans for the day. I didn't have to perform until tomorrow night. We were in Dallas, but I had no desire to visit the Grassy Knoll, I wanted a drink. A lot of drinks, in fact. I put on a pair of sweats and rinsed out one of the hotel glasses and poured a whiskey.

"Shit, this is the first and last drink of the day from this bottle."

My cell phone rang, "Hello. Rachel, it's great to hear from you."

"I'm pregnant. You're gonna be an uncle."

"Really?"

"Don't sound so surprised, you probably already knew!"

"No, I – I'm too far away. That's wonderful news. I really miss you guys."

"Lawrence, sorry I was so angry when you left. I guess my emotions were screwed up."

"No worries sis, I was irresponsible."

"So, you stopped drinking?"

"No," (as I turned up the empty bottle), "I'm not drinking as much."

"Well, I won't keep you, I just wanted you to know as soon as possible."

"Thanks sis, I can't wait to meet my niece."

"What?"

"Niece, nephew . . . it's got to be one or the other, right? Hey, I've got to run now."

"Alright Lawrence, love ya, bye."

I rubbed my head. I hated lying to Rachel and hated even more knowing the pain she was feeling. What I didn't know was who was cruising the garage of the Crown Plaza Hotel.

CHAPTER 68

Angela, Julius and Doreen arrived to pick Debbie up from school. They were surprised to see Ed and Thelma Billups arriving also.

"Hey you two, did we get our signals crossed?" asked Angela.

"No, Debbie's teacher called us, there was some problem. Sorry we didn't get to catch you in time," replied Thelma.

"No problem. Is Debbie alright?"

"I'm sure it's nothing. Thanks for being in our corner, Angela."

"All we've got is God and each other. Well, we can take Doreen home."

"No, she can stay with us. I'll call you later this evening. Thanks to both of you."

Inside the garage of the Crown Plaza Hotel, on the fourth floor, the large car stopped behind the black Escalade with Ohio plates. Three men stepped out, one was well dressed in a suit. The other two wore jeans and flannel shirts. All three wore cowboy hats.

"Here it is, just like they said, boss."

"Yep this is it, down to the plates. Amazing how much truth money can buy," said the man in the suit.

"Want us to hang 'round case they leave, boss?"

"No, we know they're here. Tomorrow we'll go to the revival and see for ourselves. Then we'll make our move."

In Ms. Johnson's classroom, Debbie showed her sister the art work that was displayed on the wall while Mr. and Mrs. Billups spoke outside the room.

"Debbie has come through a lot in the past couple of months and she's proven herself to be quite a

remarkable child,” said Mrs. Billups. “I’m sure she didn’t start the commotion on the playground.”

“I understand what you’re saying Mrs. Billups, and I am speaking to all parents involved. With that being said, I must insist that Debbie not rebuke children on the playground.”

“You know,” said Angela while she drove. “I really don’t feel like cooking.”

“McDonald’s?” chimed Julius.

“Sounds good to me.”

“This is my desk here,” said Debbie.

Doreen plopped into the seat before Debbie could.

“No fair,” cried Debbie.

“You got all these others you can sit at,” laughed Doreen. “Today your desk is mine.”

Ed Billups stepped into the classroom.

“Debbie honey, can you come out here? We want to talk to you.”

“Yes daddy.”

Debbie popped Doreen on the top of the head before she ran out.

Doreen tapped the desktop as she glanced around the room. She stopped, then opened the desk. She rummaged through notebooks, a book from the school’s library, crayons, pens and pencils. At the bottom of the pile was a beat up spiral notebook with only a few sheets of paper in it. Doreen pulled it out to look through it. Her eyes widened as she saw drawings.

Debbie had drawn their stepmother with fangs and claws and the words coming out of her mouth was “God hates you Debbie!” Behind the fanged stepmother stood a very large Bishop Barnes also with fangs but he had fiery red eyes and devil horns. On the next page the picture had the monstrous stepmother drowning a little girl in a bathtub.

The words coming out of the stepmother’s mouth was “Die Debbie, die.” The last picture had no words but showed a little girl in bed screaming while stepmother was beating her feet with a large stick. It showed puddles of blood on the floor. Behind the stepmother was the evil bishop with a red pitchfork looking on.

Doreen tore the drawings out of the spiral, folded them and put them in her pocket.

CHAPTER 69

The Dallas leg of The Miracle Tour proved to be another successful event. The attendance at The American Airlines Center was upwards of 20,000. The three cowboys from the garage made their way through the crowd. As they took their seats, Ethan had just finished praying over his basin of holy water. He began to descend the stage to the people seeking to be healed. The heavy security made sure that only approved subjects could approach him.

I sat in my dressing room staring out into space, when Blu knocked on the door.

“Hey man, you’re supposed to be on deck. You know, Smoke and Mirrors can’t hold ‘em for long.”

“I’m not feeling this anymore Blu.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing and everything. I just wish this tour was over.”

“It will be after tonight, you just got one more performance.”

Blu looked across the room and saw the empty whiskey bottle. “Listen, get through tonight and I’ll have a bottle waiting for you.”

“It ain’t that, Blu. I’ll go out there tonight and there’s gonna be a lot of people that I have to lie to.”

“Don’t take it personal. It’s business and we’re all making a lot of money in this business. Just

think, you'll go home to your very own luxury apartment and a new Benz. No telling what you'll have in five years from this ministry."

"If I want to sell my soul to the bishop."

"He's into the money that's all. He a businessman. It's just business."

"Was it just business when he killed Reverend Robbie?"

"Come on Law, you need to leave that alone."

"I saw the ring he was supposed to be buried with. The bishop showed it to me."

Blu grabbed my shoulders and shook.

"Enough, I said! Listen close man. Bishop Barnes ain't nobody to play with."

My head began to ache.

"You reading my future? You better keep that shit to yourself. If I don't ask, don't tell me nothing. As for the bishop, deal with him about the business of this ministry only. If you cross him, he can be dangerous."

I thought about keeping quiet, but I spoke anyway.

"Did you cross him? Is that's why you and your sister-."

"My sister? You don't know shit about my sister!"

"Sorry, Blu. I was out of line. Sorry."

You need to get your ass out there and get to work."

We met Ethan coming off the stage.

"The crowd's ready for you man." He patted my shoulder.

My head ached from the flash of Ethan laying hands on a cow and praying.

Heading toward the stage, I stopped and looked back at Ethan.

"A cow?" I muttered with a puzzled look on my face.

Ethan tried to understand. "What'd he just say?"

"I think he called you a cow," said Blu. "Don't worry bout it, he's been trippin' all day."

The three cowboys were in the audience as Lawrence stepped on stage.

"Well guys, we've tried everything else," said the one wearing the suit. We're running out of time. He's the one."

Ethan and Blu walked back to the dressing room.

"I don't think Lawrence is enjoying all of this," said Blu.

"He's the one with the true gift and he wants to ruin it."

"It's not just that, Ethan, he knows something. He wanted to tell me something about my sister but he held back."

"I guess nothing comes easy, Blu. Not even gifts from God."

Bishop Barnes sat back in his chair and rubbed his full belly.

"Sister Billups, you are truly an artist in the kitchen. Ed, you ought to weigh three hundred pounds with all this good cookin'."

"Thank you, bishop," said Thelma. "After such a fine service this Sunday, you deserve a good home cooked meal. I'm also glad Angela and Julius joined us. You both have been a great help to this family."

"Thank you for having us," said Angela, "can I help clear the dishes?"

"No, Doreen will you clear the dishes. Julius would you like to help her?"

"Yes ma'am."

"We're living in wonderful times," said the bishop. "The construction on the church expansion is going well and the crowd we had today . . . wasn't that something?"

"God has truly blessed this ministry," said Thelma.

Bishop Barnes grinned. "I'm planning to take this ministry to the next level, starting with television."

“That’s wonderful!” said Thelma.

“Since the Lord blessed us with raising prophets we’ve got to reach folks worldwide.”

“Prophets?” asked Thelma, “I know Lawrence Garnier is doing great things but who else?”

Bishop Barnes smiled as he glanced over at Debbie.

“Little miss, can you recite your scriptures now?”

“Yes sir, said Debbie. “Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers . . .”

Debbie ran through the books of the Bible with ease. Thelma beamed with pride.

“Thelma, the Lord spoke to me about Debbie,” said the bishop. “This ministry is truly raising prophets and Debbie has been blessed with the gift.”

At the funeral home, Deacon Stone entered the kitchen carrying a tray with two empty wine glasses when his phone rang. He answered and listened. “You did well in calling me with this.”

CHAPTER 70

Blu was waiting, as I came off stage.

“Congratulations on completing a successful tour Lawman.”

We walked to the dressing room where Ethan was already enjoying a cold beer. Blu handed me a bottle of Johnny Walker which put a smile on my face.

“Oh, so a state seal is all it takes to make the Prophet Garnier smile,” said Blu. “That and the biggest steak the hotel has to offer.”

“Yeah, I’m starving,” said Ethan.

“Sounds good,” I said. “Let’s go.”

The black Escalade pulled inside the garage of the Crown Plaza and Blu noticed me staring him down.

“What the hell is your problem?” asked Blu.

“You don’t have any intention of having dinner with us. You’re about to run out tonight with Maria.”

“Who’s Maria?” asked Ethan.

“You reading my mind?” asked Blu. “How’d you know her name?”

“I don’t read minds. I just had a flash of you getting this fine Latin chick’s mail out of her box. Hence, I picked up on the name.”

“I’ll pay for dinner, but she’s coming to get me for the night and I got more important things to do than chew on a side of beef. Wait a minute Law, that’s why you had an attitude. You need to get your squirt on.”

I thought for a minute.

Blu continued, “Hey, she’s got a sister and I hear she can do some things with small appliances that’ll make you scream. You know a waffle iron ain’t just for breakfast anymore.”

A huge grin came across my face. “Really? She got a sister?” Suddenly I thought about Blu’s sister, Angela. “No, I think I’ll pass.”

“Suit yourself,” said Blu. “Ethan, I would pass the offer to you, but I can tell by your plaid shirt that you ain’t ready to give up your virginity.”

“Hey, I probably need to sprinkle some holy water in your crotch so your shit will work right.”

“Man, I stay right and last all night and I bite.”

Eyes were watching from inside the garage, as the unwary three exited the Escalade laughing as they walked into the hotel.

Inside the lobby Blu pulled out his wallet and took out two one hundred dollar bills.

“Alright you squares, enjoy your evening on me.” Blu handed me money. “Maria is picking me up in an hour. Here's the keys to my truck in case you guys want to go out.”

Blu was about to put the keys in my hand then stopped. “Oh hell naw, you drink too much. Just like a fish.” Blu snatched the keys back and tossed them to Ethan. “That’s like giving Flipper the keys to the boat. Ethan, you scratch my truck and I’ll scratch yo ass. Fellas, I’m off to perform a few miracles of my own.”

Blu hopped on the elevator, waved and then flipped them the finger just before the door closed.

“Let’s eat,” said Ethan.

“And drink,” I said.

At dinner I revealed some startling news to Ethan.

“Lawrence, have you lost your damn mind? You can’t tell a maniac like Blu that his sister, who he thinks is somewhere happy, is working with the bishop right under his nose.”

“He needs to know where his sister is.”

“He don’t need to know while we’re on the road with his crazy ass.”

“I know that.”

“The only miracle of this tour is that we survived this long with him. Yeah, we get along, but I still don’t trust him.”

“Well I don’t trust Bishop Barnes and I’m glad this tour is over. I’m tired of not being able to tell people what they need to know.”

Ethan shook his head, “Well, I trust you’ll keep those thoughts to yourself ‘til we’re safely back on our home planet. What’s with you anyway? Since you’ve been with this ministry you’ve made more money than you could've imagined. Sometimes business is business.”

“Now you sound like the bishop.”

“You got a gift that is bringing people to God.”

“Why is that my job? I’ve seen more evil than most. lot of it from my own family. So why me?”

Ethan remained silent. I downed the rest of my drink.

Ethan smiled, “Listen, we’re celebrating the end of the tour. Forget about anything upsetting. Hey, we got money and keys to a slick ride. Let’s go out and party.”

“You’re right, and I could use a drink. We don’t know the area so where we gonna go?”

“We’ll find somewhere fun. Someplace where we can start up a soul train line and cut loose. Let’s ride.”

“Why not. Let me run to my room first to call my brother and tell him I’ll be home soon.”

“No problem, I’ll meet you in the lobby.”

It disturbed me when Mitchell wasn’t home at such a late hour. While going down the elevator I kept replaying the trembling sound in Rachel’s voice when she told me she hadn’t seen her husband since she left for church that morning. The doors opened into the lobby, I saw Ethan sitting on the couch on his cell phone. As I approached Ethan ended his call.

“You ready?” asked Ethan.

“Ready.”

As we walked out into the garage, Ethan asked, “So why didn’t you want to go with Blu and get your freak on?”

“Well, between me and you, I’m really interested in his sister Angela. The bishop said she was interested in me too. I don’t want to do something shameful with Blu and then he finds out I’m with his sister.”

“I hear that,” replied Ethan.” Well maybe we can meet some ladies and just keep it between us.”

The three cowboys followed as the Escalade drove off.

“Damn this truck handles well. I gonna get one of these when we get back home. We ain’t in no rush, let’s see how it handles on the highway for a minute.”

Thelma was in the kitchen washing dishes, while Ed sat at the dining room table sipping coffee. Thelma stepped into the doorway.

“Ed can you believe it? Debbie could be a child prophet.”

“Listen Thelma, my girls go to church cause I feel they need it, that's all. Don't warm up to the idea that the bishop is gonna use my child to boost his ministry.”

Ignoring Ed, Thelma went back to the dishes, “The Lord has got plans for that child.”

CHAPTER 71

Ethan and I had been on the highway for about twenty minutes with Ethan raving about how the Escalade handled. He noticed a large neon sign: **The Lone Star Saloon.**

“Lawrence, that place looks like it's jumping, wanna check it out?”

“Sure. If it sucks, we'll move on..”

They got off the highway and swung around to a large parking area.

“It must be live in there; this lot is packed,” said Ethan.

An unnoticed car slowly pulled into the lot with the lights out.

“Are we going in boss?” asked one of the men inside the car.

“No Manny, I don't reckon those two will be in there very long. We'll wait.”

There was a faint breeze of music in the air as Ethan and I approached the saloon. The front was surprisingly dark as we walked up the two wooden steps. They opened the door to a dark front room. There were swinging saloon doors separating the darkness from the light beyond. We stepped through the door. With the exception of the music from the jukebox, all activity stopped while everyone inside the saloon stared at the front.

“We won't be forming any soul train line in here,” said Ethan.

“In my lifetime, I ain't never seen so many cowboy hats,” I replied.

“Let's go.”

As we turned to leave, we came face to face with two men from the dark. Whether it was our imagination or not, we both thought the same. . . *That's the biggest redneck I have ever seen.*

“I guess you two didn't read the sign, we don't serve your kind here,” said the big guy.

“We didn't see any sign,” said Ethan, “but the message is loud and clear.”

“So we'll just be going now,” I said.

“Naw, we can git you in under our mascot law.”

The big guy took us under his huge arms and walked us to a table where two rough looking men sat. The big guy nodded for them to get up.

One seated man spit tobacco on the floor in front of us.

“I ain't giving my table to no niggers.”

“These niggers are our new mascots, so move yer ass or lose yer ass,” growled the big guy.

The two guys slowly stood up and backed out of the way.

The big guy pushed us into the empty chairs.

“Sit down!” he growled.

One of the waitresses ran up to the big guy.

“Ben! Sam said no trouble tonight!”

I instantly whispered to Ethan, “Quick, give me your hand.”

Ethan's mouth dropped, “We're about to get our asses kicked and you want to hold hands?”

I ignored him and grabbed his shoulder. I instantly got a flash of Ethan peering from underneath the table. I heard a loud song and saw people stomping and clapping.

“What are you doing?” whispered Ethan.

"I don't know."

I couldn't figure out the flash.

"Where you niggers from?" asked Ben.

"Chicago," said Ethan.

Ben glared over at me.

"New Orleans."

Ben stepped back a pace.

"A coonass, huh." He looked at Ethan, "I ain't never been accused of liking' no nigger, but I can't stands no coonass."

"Oh shit," sighed Ethan as he slid under the table.

I broke out in a sweat. I was confused at the song from the flash that was playing in my head. Ben stepped forward and lay his huge fist on he table and growled at me.

"Now I'm gonna kick the shit out of you, boy."

"Now just hold on Ben," I stood up slowly. I turned to find Ethan peering from under the table.

"Me and my partner, came to tell ya'll something real good. Everybody in here is gonna be happy about what I'm gonna tell you!"

"Shut your mouth boy!" snarled Ben.

"Hold up on the ass kickin' Ben. I wanna hear what the boy's gotta say!" The voice came from the back of the room.

"Yeah Ben, we'll kick his ass after he talks!" shouted another.

"Thanks," I said, noticing that there was no music playing on the jukebox. "I wanted to tell y'all something good, but I gotta do it over there." I pointed toward the jukebox.

I slowly walked over touching as many folks as he could. I touched a guy's shoulder, "Excuse me sir." I gently moved a woman out of the way "Ma'am please." All the while, I was receiving flashes and hearing the same song.

When I got to the jukebox I looked at the listing. Everyone in the saloon looked puzzled.

"I wanted to tell y'all this!" I dropped a quarter in the jukebox. When the music started I began to clap my hands.

"Come on everybody!" I shouted. "Clap your hands!"

As the song began, I jumped on top of the bar and started to sing along.

'My horse died and my dog did too. My woman's gone cause love wasn't true.'

A voice from the back shouted, "Winkie Travis' new song, that's my favorite!"

'I hurt so bad there's just one thing to do, a bottle of Jack will pull me through.'

People started to join in to the chorus with me.

'Say bartender leave me alone. Ain't got no money and I ain't going home. I'll just hang out here with an old friend of mine, I'm drowning in Jack and I'm going down a third time.'

I jumped from the bar and got on top of a table.

Ben looked confused as the whole saloon was clapping and stomping to the music.

'Hard times follow me and I can't cope. In a Jack Daniel's bottle is where I'll float. It keeps me level and helps me deal, my one and only friend wears a state seal.'

'Say bartender leave me alone. Ain't got no money and I ain't going home, I'll just hang out here with an old friend of mine. I'm drowning in Jack and I'm going down a third time.'

I jumped on top of the table that Ethan was under. Ethan peered over the top, I signaled for him to come on. I jumped off the table and continued to sing as Ethan joined in.

"Yee ha, partner! There's that buzz. Can't even tell you what my trouble was. Didn't like that horse and won't miss that dog. That bitch I lost was just a mean old hog.

Outside, the three cowboys waited in the car. "They been in there way too long," said the one in the suit. "Pop the trunk and load up!"

Inside, the saloon was jumping. Ethan and I were singing and stomping our way toward the door.

Ben noticed that we were on our way out.

“Ol Jack Daniels is my next of kin. I’m on the rim of the bottle and I’m jumping back in.”

We broke for the door. Outside the saloon, we were grabbed by cowboys.

“Whoa fellas, settle down,” said the cowboy in the suit.

Ben exploded out of the saloon and met nose to barrel with a rifle.

“The gentlemen are coming with us amigo,” said Manny.

I glanced over at Ethan. “Out of the gumbo pot....”

“Into the fire,” replied Ethan.

Back inside the saloon, one waitress carried a round tray of glasses to the bar. “Sam, who was that guy?” she asked.

“Beats me, Katie,” replied Sam.

“Heh, heh, he fooled y’all,” laughed an old man sitting at the bar. “He didn’t fool me, that was none other than Charlie Pride.”

The large car with the Texas plates drove onto the highway and into the night. Followed closely by the black Escalade driven by one of the cowboys. Inside the car Ethan and I were in the back seat. We had to turn over our cell phones to the cowboy in the suit. Everyone was silent for the first ten minutes of the ride, then the cowboy in the suit spoke with a deep slow Texas drawl.

“I reckon you fellas are ‘bout as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rockin’ chairs. I promise it’ll all make sense when we get to where we’re goin.’”

“Where’s that?” I asked as I rubbed my head.

“You’ll find that out when we get there.”

“You know, this is kidnapping,” said Ethan.

“I’d like to think of it as providing opportunities for all involved.”

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, my mama did raise me better than that. My name is Randall Culpepper. Our driver here is Manny and Luke is driving your fine vehicle. Since I already know who you two are, please sit back and relax.”

Ethan whispered to me “You know Blu set us up.”

I was still rubbing my head, “Right now I don’t know what to think.”

“I wish I knew what they want with us,” said Ethan.

“I don’t think it’s us they want,” I looked at Ethan. “They want you.”

Ethan broke out in a sweat.

Culpepper turned to the back seat. “Why don’t you boys relax. Don’t get worked up... it’s gonna be a long night.”

CHAPTER 72

And so it went, we rode into the night to an unknown destination. Ethan trembled, drunk from the wine of fear. While I, sober in the fact that even though I possessed a God-given gift, I was clueless to the outcome of another misadventure. I was also resolved to the fact that, as always, this misadventure had to end in tragedy. I tried often to get a different flash from Ethan, only to receive the same confusing scene of Ethan with outstretched hands over a cow. My head throbbed in pain. We traveled for three and a half hours only to end up in some wide-open nowhere on the outskirts of Lubbock, Texas.

I stretched to see beyond the set of cowboy hats in the front to follow the car’s headlights. I saw a large wooden gate, across the top I read: **The R.C. Ranch.**

Due to the dense darkness, I never saw where the man who walked up to look inside the car came from.

The gate opened, I focused on the sound of the gravel popping under the tires. We rode into darkness about a half mile. I saw large floodlights in the distance.

Whatever is gonna happen will happen under those lights. I didn't want to believe that Blu was behind this but I had suspicions.

The car stopped under the floodlights.

"Well boys, here's where we dismount," said Mr. Culpepper.

When everyone got out of the car, Ethan and I found ourselves in front of a large barn. Ethan trembled and could hardly stand.

"First I want to apologize to you boys," announced Culpepper. "We didn't mean to 'skin your taters' like we did. We got ourselves a situation here that we needed to keep quiet. We won't hurt you, we need your help."

"You need our help?" stuttered Ethan.

"Well actually we need yours."

"Me? Why me?"

"Well I ain't gonna lie to you and try to give the impression that we are a religious bunch."

Several of the ranch hands laughed at the statement.

Culpepper continued, "We've tried everything but nothing worked. We need a healer. We need you."

Ethan looked at me. I was now starting to understand the flash about Ethan.

"You have a sick cow?" I asked.

"Many," replied Culpepper. "There's only one sick in this barn right now. We got others and we'll have more if we don't head this off at the pass, c'mon."

Culpepper led us inside the barn. A large cow lay over on it's side and struggled to breath.

"We'd like you, Ethan, to heal this here critter. We'll test her then we'll move on to the others but we gotta work fast."

Ethan slowly walked over to the downed cow. He knelt down, stretched out his hands and began to pray.

I slowly backed up to the other side of the barn to lean against the fence where other cows were. I knew Ethan couldn't cure anything, I just didn't know what would happen when everyone else found out. A little mouse of a man walked into the barn. He wore a white shirt and tie underneath a rubber apron.

I was sure he was a veterinarian and the one who would test the cow.

What a mess, I thought. My eyes wandered about the barn noticing the various lofts and stacks of straw. I noticed two other cows behind me, their blank stares reminded me of how fortunate they were to have simple lives. I patted the empty head of the closest animal. *Simplicity is so peaceful,* I thought. I walked to the other cow and touched the animal.

"Ouch!" I yelled as the white hot heat seared my head.

Everyone looked up and Culpepper ran over to me.

"You alright son?"

"I'm better off than that cow," I replied.

"Whatcha mean son?"

"That cow over there will be dead within seven days."

I knew I should've kept my mouth shut just as the words left my tongue.

"You can see death?"

"He sure can!" shouted Ethan as he scrambled to his feet. He's Lawrence Garnier the prophet."

"Ray, come over here!" shouted Culpepper.

The mousy veterinarian marched over.

“Yea Randall?”

“What’s the incubation time of a cow that’s exposed to this virus?”

The veterinarian thought for a moment. “Two, maybe three days.”

“So we could lose the whole five hundred head in seven days?”

“In theory yes, but this disease is caused by a rogue protein called prion. Prions are smaller than viruses and are not killed by chemicals that kill bacteria and viruses. That’s why this organism is difficult to fight. What could’ve been good news is that not all of this herd could be infected. But you can’t take the risk, people could die from eating the meat of the infected. If we had a crystal ball, we might have been able to save some.”

Culpepper smiled. “Ray we got the crystal ball.”

“That’s impossible,” replied Ray.

Culpepper turned to me. “Son, this is the first time I ever got religion. Can you separate the dead ones from the living?”

I looked at the four cows in the barn.

“Yea, sure. I just have to touch each one.”

“Yee haa!” shouted Culpepper, “Slap my grandmama's ass, we’ll save the barn for last.”

“What?” I asked, “There’s more?”

“Over five hundred more. Let’s go, time’s a wastin’.”

Randall Culpepper wasted no time as he rallied his ranch hands into action. After a couple of calls on his cell phone the ranch came alive. Culpepper led me, Ethan and the veterinarian out a rear door of the barn.

“How much land do you have?” I asked.

“About four hundred and fifty acres. I got a Jeep coming for us cause we’re going to the backside. This is gonna be a long night son, but I’ll make it worth your while.”

The backside of the ranch was cloaked in darkness. Ethan was much more relaxed for this ride. For me, it was hard to tell how I felt. The smell of burnt beef overwhelmed our breathing. In the foreground, the silhouette of heavy equipment. Tractors and backhoes glowed against a massive blazing pit.

“That’s where we’re destroying the tainted cattle,” said Culpepper. “I just hope I don’t lose my ass on this.”

Culpepper had a plan and I was at the center of it, literally.

“Get an F-150 over here!” yelled Culpepper. It took about thirty minutes before Culpepper's plan was fully initiated but once it got underway, even Randall Culpepper stood in awe.

“Manny,” he said. “Get on the horn and get the media out here pronto! I just became a believer.”

CHAPTER 73

Maria Gomez slowly nuzzled her full lips against Blu’s neck. The kiss was gently placed. She kissed his shoulder then his back before he stirred. “Sweetheart, you’ve got to get up,” she whispered.

“I give up,” he said. “I call uncle.” Blu rolled over and pulled her closer. “Baby, if I could get up, I’d be up.”

“Well how ‘bout you get in the shower while I make breakfast.”

“Sounds good besides I don’t want the guys to think I had so much excitement that I forgot about their asses.”

Maria went into the kitchen and grabbed a skillet. Before she went to the fridge, she turned on the small TV on the counter.

Blu could hardly stand, so he sat on the side of the bed.

“Honey,” called Maria from the kitchen. “Can you go out and grab the paper and bring in the mail before you get in the shower?”

“Sure thing!”

Blu limped outside and could hardly bend over to get the paper. Getting the mail was much easier. When he went back inside, Maria met him with an odd expression.

“Blu, you need to see this.”

They walked into the kitchen. Maria switched channels until she found the breaking story on CNN. The news anchor stated:

“Breaking news out of Lubbock, Texas. The RC Ranch is apparently undergoing a phenomenon that has been in effect all night long. What is now being dubbed as judgment day, involves the separating of cattle infected by a deadly virus from healthy uninfected cattle. Amazingly the holy man, Prophet Lawrence Garnier, is dividing the cattle through divine touch and vision.”

Blu's jaw dropped as he watched the aerial view that showed Lawrence standing in the back end of an F-150 truck with the ranchers on horseback directing the cattle from a large coral, one at a time, to the truck. With a touch, Lawrence points the cows with life in their future to the right, while the cows destined to die were pointed to the left to be destroyed.

The news anchor continued:

“The visual is both breathtaking and inspiring, for we are witnessing proof that there truly is a prophet in our midst.”

“Oh shit!” yelled Blu. “I’ve gotta go get ‘em. Where are they?”

“You get ready. I’ll get on the computer and get directions to this RC Ranch.”

Ray the vet, ran up to Culpepper. “This is unbelievable, for every five cows sent to be destroyed, I took random blood samples and every one resulted positive for the infection. As for the saved cattle, random sampling confirms no infection. Every time Randall! There have been no variations in any of the results. This is a . . . I mean, this has to be. . . ”

“A miracle,” replied Culpepper.

All over, people were seeing the phenomenon at the RC Ranch. In New Orleans, many of the women of the mission were crowded around the television in the recreation room. The women never heard Sister Virginia as she approached from behind.

“Ladies! I’m sure you all have more important chores to tend to.”

“Sister Virginia, it’s Lawrence on tv,” said one of the women.

The women made way so Virginia could see for herself. She watched for a moment.

She turned to the women. “Get back to work, all of you!” She then turned off the television.

At the Church of Advancing Light, Deacon Stone opened the door to the bishop’s chamber. Through the prism of colored sun rays, from the great stained glass window, he saw Bishop Barnes at his desk with head buried in his hands.

Before Deacon Stone could say anything the bishop spoke without looking up.

“He was never supposed to get out from under my control, not like this . . . in front of the world.”

“The way it stands now, he’s a rogue,” replied the deacon.

“At the rate he’s going, he’ll be the first black U.S president,” said the bishop. “Or even worse . . . the Pope.”

“We need to eliminate him. Although it may be too late . . . he could still become a martyr.”

The bishop looked up. “This is gonna turn my hair completely white.”

It was around two o'clock and I needed another break. Ethan climbed into the truck-bed to give me water and some food. "You're doing wonderful pal, but you gotta eat something. You look terrible. You got dark circles under your eyes and your lips are starting to crack."

At the rear of the ranch there was a secluded gate. A ranch hand with a rifle stood watch outside of the gate. The road that led up to the gate was private, so the ranch hand was suspicious of the tan car with tinted windows that approached. The car stopped a short distance from the gate. The passenger door opened and Blu stepped out.

"Howdy," greeted Blu.

"If you're not a news reporter then you need to git. If you are a news reporter you're on the wrong side, so git."

"Slow ya roll," said Blu as he approached. "Now tell me, do I look like I report the news or do I look like the damn headline?"

He instantly shoved his pistol between the ranch guard's eyes. Blu never noticed the other ranch hand who put a revolver to the back of his head.

"Good work, Emmitt," smiled the guard as he took Blu's gun.

"Take his nice jacket too Jake, so I can whip this boys ass."

"Wee-doggy!" said Blu as he looked at Emmitt. "That sounds like a whole lotta work. Frankly Emmitt, you don't seem quite man enough to do the job. Let me ask you two yay-hoos somethin'. Didn't y'all even notice that I got out of the car from the passenger side?"

Klick-Klack!

The two ranch hands looked to the car to see Maria pointing a sawed-off shotgun at them.

Blu smiled, "Don't y'all just love that sound?"

"He can't take much more of this!" yelled Ethan to Culpepper.

"Hang on kid, we're almost through?" shouted Culpepper. His cell phone rang.

"What is it?"

"It's over," said the voice on the other end.

"Who is this?"

"It's the calvary coming to get our boys. Turn around."

Culpepper turned and saw Emmitt and Jake walking with their hands behind their heads. Behind them were Blu and Maria with all the guns.

"This rodeo is over, Culpepper!" shouted Blu.

"Now hold on there son, this ain't no adversarial situation. These boys saved my ass and I plan to compensate them for it. And I'll compensate you for any inconvenience this caused."

"I need help here!" called Ethan. "Lawrence collapsed!"

Maria ran over to help. "He's unconscious, but he's breathing," she said.

"Ethan, you get everything he owes you?" asked Blu.

"He has our cell phones and the keys to your vehicle."

Blu glared at Culpepper. "You got the keys to my ride?"

At Culpepper's command, Manny handed over the keys and cell phones.

Blu shoved the keys into Manny's chest. "No Amigo, pull my shit around. Pronto!"

Manny ran off to get the Escalade.

"Now all we need is our money."

Culpepper handed over two envelopes. "The thicker one is obviously Lawrence's," said Culpepper.

Blu tossed both envelopes to Ethan. "And for my trouble."

Culpepper emptied his pockets and the pockets of the surrounding ranch hands. He handed Blu three thousand dollars.

"Oh, I don't get an envelope?"

Culpepper just smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Manny brought the Escalade and left it running

as he got out.

“Maria get in the car and follow us. Ethan load Lawrence in the back.”

Blu stood on the running board. “Culpepper, you better hope you never see my face again and that my man Lawrence here gets better. Cause if he don’t, I’ll be back to turn this ranch into a ghost town.”

As the two vehicles pulled out of the gate Jake turned to Culpepper. “He kept our guns.”

Inside the Escalade, Blu couldn’t contain his anger. “What were you assholes thinking, ending up out here? The bishop lit my ass up!”

“Blu, you left us!”

“Y’all was invited! Y’all said, ‘Naw man, we want to get kidnapped and get our pictures on milk cartons!’ ”

“Forget that Blu. We gotta get Lawrence to a hospital.”

“We can’t take him to a hospital, he’s been on the fucking world news performing miracles. I don’t think that’s too good for the medical profession to have patients saying ‘Hey doc, I think I just saw Larry the Sooth-Sayer down in ICU.’ ”

“Blu, he needs help!”

“We’ll go back to the Plaza in Dallas. Maria will get him back on track. . . I hope.”

CHAPTER 75

Mitchell was sound asleep but Rachel tossed and turned. She looked at the clock. “Midnight.”

Mitchell never heard the phone ring, Rachel grabbed it fast. “Hello?”

“Rachel, this is Virginia.”

“Virginia? Oh um hello, Mitchell is asleep.”

“I thought so. I wanted to speak to you. I wanted to see how Mitchell’s child was doing.”

“I’m five month’s along. Everything is going well. I’m ashamed to say, I didn’t know Mitchell told you yet.”

“Oh, something is brewing inside of you also?” Be that as it may, I was asking about his daughter, the one across town, she’s about 3 months old.”

Virginia grinned as she listened to the silence on the other end of the phone.

She continued, “You may have married my brother, but neither you nor your spawn will ever be considered family. So do us all a favor and abort it.”

Click.

Rachel trembled as she gazed at her sleeping husband.

Angela awoke before dawn. She finished her first cigarette and poured her second cup of coffee. Back in her room, she opened her curtains to watch the sunrise. She reached for her journal that was on her dresser. She wrote:

I slept through another night. The visit's seem to have stopped. My strength and the reason I’m still alive is to protect my son.

That entry completed the journal. She reached inside the dresser drawer and placed a new book on the dresser. She took her time tying the violet silk ribbon around the completed journal. In her walk-in closet, on the floor in the corner, sat a large wooden crate. She lifted the lid and placed the completed journal inside with the others.

She lifted something wrapped in a handkerchief. She unwrapped a small loaded revolver. The handkerchief was monogrammed with the initials that belonged to her dead husband. She held the linen cloth to her nose and inhaled deep. A lone tear rolled down her cheek onto the gun. Angela gently wiped the tear from the gun and wrapped it. She placed the sentimental bundle back into the crate and

replaced the lid.

Debbie was almost ready for school. She was adorned in one of her horrendous homemade church dresses. The white-laced gloves she was putting on would complete her outfit. Doreen came into her room.

“What are you doing?” asked Doreen.

“Getting ready.”

“No Debbie, you’ve got to stop this.”

Doreen opened Debbie’s third drawer and pulled out a pair of jeans.

“Wear these today.”

“No, I represent the Lord everyday, not just on Sunday.”

“Stop it Debbie, all this Bible talk and ugly dresses, this ain’t you. What happened to you?”

Doreen pulled one of the notebook pictures from the back pocket of her blue jeans.

“Does this have anything to do with how you’re acting?”

“You stole that from my desk?”

“Maybe I should show this to daddy.”

Debbie jumped at Doreen. Her fingers clawed at her sister’s throat.

“Don’t show daddy anything! Leave me and my stuff alone!”

Doreen quickly crammed the paper back into her pocket. She grabbed Debbie by the shoulders and swung her around onto the bed. Doreen landed on top of her pinning her down. As Debbie kicked, hissed and snapped at her sister Doreen saw desperation in Debbie’s tearful eyes.

“OK Debbie, stop. Calm down, I won’t tell daddy.”

Debbie stopped pitching her fit. Her breathing was heavy while her tears flowed. She had a crazed look in her eyes.

“Shh, baby sister, shh. It’s gonna be alright, I promise.”

Doreen gently wiped the tears from her sister’s face.

What happened to you? she thought. *I don’t know how but I’ve got to fix it.*

The bedroom door squeaked as it opened slowly, Thelma stood at the threshold.

“What are you girls doing?” she asked.

Debbie’s eyes showed terror. Doreen turned to face their stepmother.

“I was giving her a good tickle before we went to school” she said.

“You don’t have time for such foolishness. Go get your books Doreen.”

“Yes ma’am.” Doreen looked at Debbie and gave her a wink and a smile before she got up.

As Doreen left the room, Thelma entered.

“You all ready for school dear?” she asked Debbie.

“Yes mommy.”

Doreen’s whole body bristled and her eyes narrowed when she heard Debbie.

What happened to you, sis? she thought.

CHAPTER 76

Lawrence was breathing steady when his eyes fluttered and finally opened.

“Well look who decided to join the party,” said Maria as she sat on the bed looking down at her patient.

As my eyes focused, a smile spilled across my face.

“Am I in Heaven or am I dreaming?”

“If you think this is Heaven then you are dreaming,” she replied. “You’re in a Dallas hotel room.”

“What’s your name?”

“You’re the mind reader, you tell me.”

“I can’t think of a name pretty enough to match your beauty.”

“In your dreams, if you think you’re gonna seduce my girl with lame talk like that,” said Blu abruptly.

“So, you’re Maria?” I asked.

“Yep, please to meet you Lawrence. I’m glad to have you back with us.”

“How long was I out?”

“I watched over you for two days,” she said .

“Well thank you Maria,” I reached out and shook her hand. I noticed there was no flash. I also noticed Blu pacing back and forth frustrated. I sat up.

“Thank you too, Blu.”

“What?” Blu stopped pacing, “Ringo Rango the Rodeo King has finally awakened and all he has to say is thanks?”

“What am I supposed to say? I didn’t want any of that. Besides, everything worked out well in the end.”

“Except for the fact that I got my ass chewed by the bishop thanks to you and your punk side-kick.”

“Where is Ethan?”

“I sent him to get soup for you,” replied Maria.

There was a knock at the door, then Ethan walked in.

“Speak of the damn devil,” said Blu.

“Hey Lawrence, you’re back!” Ethan handed Maria the soup and gave me a hug.

Blu seemed to turn red as he cleared his throat in anger.

“As I was saying, you two ain’t worth the trouble. Didn’t you see this shit coming Lawrence?”

“Like I keep saying, I can’t see my future.”

“Ethan was there, did you see his?”

“I told you, I saw him leaning over a cow!”

“I thought you called me a cow,” chimed Ethan.

“A damn cow? I got my ass chewed cause you saw a damned cow?” Blu was about to burst. “The bishop told me my success depended on me knowing who the real boss was. That kind of shit pisses me off. I get chewed out cause of you two bozos! To me that goes over about as well as a fart in church?”

“Well, it’s over now,” I replied. “So, we can go home and forget all this happened.”

“We could have two days ago,” said Blu.

“What does that mean?”

“It means on the way home we have to make a stop to do one more show. . . bishop’s orders.”

“Oh hell no! I’m done, I want to go home!”

“Come on Lawrence,” said Ethan, “it’s just one more service. We’ve already made a lot of money and we’ll get paid well on this last run.”

“There ain’t no debating this Lawrence. Like I said . . . bishop’s orders.”

“Well guess what people, I haven’t been getting any flashes. Not from Maria, or Ethan either.” I ran over and hugged Blu.

“Hey man!”

“See Blu, nothing. No flashes, I can’t perform well without flashes.”

“Fake it!” shouted Blu. “I don’t care if you got to drink ginger ale and belch out a rendition of Amazing Grace, you’re gonna get in that pulpit and say something holy. That’s if you want to get home on your feet.”

I just stared at Blu.

“You hear me?”

“Sure Blu. Everybody in this room hears you. Whoever is out in the hallway hears you. You’re Blufield Black, so you have to be heard.”

“Listen Lawrence, it’s one more payday, that’s all. Don’t get in the way of my money and we won’t have problems. Out here on the road, I’m the boss, once we get through the last service, we won’t have to be bothered with each other. Now we’re going down for dinner, are you coming?”

“No, I got soup. Have fun.”

Maria and Ethan left the room while Blu hesitated. “The hell with it,” he said as he turned to leave. He was almost out the door when he stopped. He reached into his pocket and pulled out my phone.

“Oh yeah, while you were out cold, your phone was blowing up. I think it’s your brother,” he tossed the phone to me then left.

I looked at my phone. The calls were from Mitchell’s cell number.

I’m sure he expected me home by now.

His phone rang only twice before Mitchell picked up. “What the hell did you do man?”

“What do you mean?”

“You told Virginia about my baby!”

“No I didn’t. I haven’t talked to Virginia. Which baby are you talking about?”

“The one that’s already here, ass.”

“I’m telling you, I haven’t talked to her.”

“You were the only one who knew. Now Rachel knows.”

“What?”

“You really screwed me this time, Lawrence.”

“I haven’t talked to her. I’m telling the truth.”

“You had to have told someone who told her.”

I hesitated.

“Who did you tell?”

“I don’t think I told anybody. Besides, I know it was nobody who knows Virginia.”

“Didn’t you see this coming?”

“No, I’m way on the other side of the country.”

“As usual Lawrence, you let this family down. You’re a waste.”

Click

I sat on the edge of the bed in shock.

Did I let something slip?

“Now I’m ruining peoples lives long distance.”

I got on the room phone. “Room service, can you bring a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black to room 306? Thank you.”

I walked over to the desk, opened the drawer and pulled out some stationary.

I might as well write this letter so Blu can’t accuse me of not telling him the truth about his sister.

As I began to write, I became frustrated. *This is an overload on me. All this bad stuff I hear, see and feel is killing me. Everyone is mad at me. How did I get into such a fix? Where’s that bottle? I don’t even know who to trust. A gift . . . I got a damn curse!*

Thelma Billups closed the door to Debbie’s room. She was confident in the fact that both girls were tucked away in their beds. In her own room, her feelings as a woman sank as she saw her husband already fast asleep. She walked into the bathroom. A warm shower would be the only source of caress that her neglected body would realize.

She looked at herself in the mirror. She could barely handle the sight of her own reflection. She reached up and touched her hair. She tugged and pulled the dark wig from her head to reveal the parched white hair that seemed to appear over night instead of the two months it took to change. *Once again, another secret I’ll have to live with,* she thought.

CHAPTER 77

Maria, Ethan and Blu enjoyed each others company during dinner. They even went to the hotel bar for a few of drinks. While waiting in the lobby for an elevator, Ethan's phone rang. He looked at the number and knew he had to excuse himself.

"Hey Blu, I'm gonna hang down here a moment and take this call. I'll be packed and ready to leave in the morning. Maria, it's been a pleasure knowing you."

Maria and Blu waved to Ethan as the elevator door closed. Inside she gave Blu a lingering kiss.

"I'm going to miss you," she said.

"You act like the night is over."

"You've got a fifteen hour drive tomorrow."

"I'll sleep in the car," he laughed.

The elevator opened to their floor.

Blu handed Maria the key card to his room.

"Baby, go on ahead, I want to check on Lawrence."

Blu went to room 306. He pulled out another key card and went inside. There he saw Lawrence, the same way he had seen him for the past two days, out cold. But this time was different, he was snoring. On the night stand was two-thirds of a bottle of Johnnie Walker. Blu shook his head and chuckled. *Guess I'll be packing his bags in the morning.*

As Debbie slept, the door to her room slowly opened. It was Doreen. Debbie stayed still as her older sister climbed into bed with her.

"Hey you," whispered Doreen.

Debbie smiled. "The pictures?" she whispered.

"They're safe where no one can find them."

Debbie remained still.

"I love you," whispered Doreen.

A tear rolled down Debbie's cheek. "Love the Lord," whispered the little girl to her older sister.

Doreen's eyes welled with water. "I miss the old you," she whispered.

Debbie touched her sister's face gently.

"We are children born out of sin deserving to be punished."

Doreen held her sister close. Quietly her tears gave way.

Angela sat on the edge of her bed with her journal. There was a knock on her door. It was Julius.

"Mom, I miss Nate," he said.

Angela grabbed her son and hugged him tight.

"So do I honey."

Julius took note of the small book his mother was holding.

"I've lost so many loved ones," she said. Angela held her son's face and looked into his eyes. "I'm not gonna lose you."

"We got each other mom."

The next morning, Blu kissed Maria for the last time.

"I'll be waiting for your call baby," he said.

He watched as she drove away, blending into the morning traffic.

Four hours into our journey, Blu, Ethan and I never uttered a word to each other. Blu looked in the

rear-view mirror and saw Ethan's head bobbing in and out of sleep. In the front passenger seat he saw me. I was a mess, slouched in the seat clutching a partially full whiskey bottle.

"Well, I guess the excitement of this tour is long gone," said Blu.

"I want it over and done with," I croaked.

"Come on man, you've made tons of money. You only got one performance left."

"Where is this last performance?" I asked.

"It's out in the boonies, a small town in North Carolina called Linville...but our accommodations are in Forest City."

I took a gulp of my whiskey. Blu shook his head.

"Enjoy lapping that shit up cause you'll have a day to dry out before you approach the pulpit."

I took another drink. "Mmm, mmm good. This is very enjoyable," I said with a sneer.

Blu just laughed and started singing, "*The thrill is gone, the thrill has gone away.*"

CHAPTER 78

Julius paid the lunch lady with exact change for his lunch and two milks. He saw Doreen sitting off to herself so he carried his tray to eat with her.

"What, you don't have any friends today?" he asked.

"I don't feel like any," she said.

She looked up and saw Julius still standing. "I don't mean you."

He smiled and sat down. "So what's wrong?" he asked as he tore into his hamburger.

"You might want to try chewing," she said.

"You sound like my mom."

"I'm just saying it tastes better if you chew and not gobble."

"Ok." Julius took a little bite and chewed like a rat. "Mmm, you're right, that's very tasty."

Doreen laughed, "You're silly."

"Now are you gonna tell me what's wrong?"

Doreen reached into her pocket and handed Julius two pictures.

"Look at these," she said. "Debbie drew these."

"Looks like she hates your step-mom, but so do you."

"That's just it, now they get along. Debbie's not herself anymore."

"Looks like she hates Bishop Barnes too. Are they beating her in these pictures?"

"It looks like it, but Debbie wouldn't be quiet about anything like that."

"Are there more pictures?"

"Yeah, but I know I can't get 'em now."

Julius thought for a moment, "Ya know maybe she's trying to make like some kind of diary. My mother always tried to get me and my brother to keep diaries but that's like girlie."

"None of this makes sense."

"Did you show your dad?"

"No, I don't think Debbie wants me to show anybody."

"Well what does she say about any of this. The pictures, how she's acting, your stepmother?"

"She doesn't really say anything. But last night she said 'We are children born out of sin deserving to be punished.'"

"She said that? That's the same thing my brother Nate said to me once."

The conversation ended at that point and Julius finished his milk.

When we reached our destination that evening, Blu, Ethan and I all agreed on how run-down the

area of their accommodations were compared to the others we experienced.

"This is the place," noted Blu as we drove upon the vintage looking motel. There were plenty of abandoned buildings and warehouses around. It was like a ghost town in that part of Forest City.

"The Colonial Inn? Damn the bishop couldn't at least book a room at a Ramada?" said Ethan.

The inside looked as vintage as the outside, as we stood in front of a large wooden counter. Blu rang the bell for service. Out from the side room came a lean elderly woman with large cat glasses bearing a silver chain to secure them around her neck when not in use.

Blu smiled broadly, "My my, you are really rocking those glasses, they remind me of a '67 caddy I once had."

"Cut the crap," growled the old lady. "I wear these to see. They keep me from having to wear those new fangled contact lenses."

She stared briefly at us standing at the front desk. Blu was in front, Ethan was behind his left shoulder. I leaned against Ethan for balance.

Blu looked at the woman's name tag. "Well Erma, we've got rooms booked under Barnes Ministry."

Erma pulled out a large ledger, found the name and grabbed keys for room 316.

Blu looked puzzled. "Erma, there's three of us, we need three rooms."

Erma leaned to see me swaying side to side.

"What's wrong with him? she asked.

"He doesn't travel well," said Blu.

"He looks stupid," she said.

"Hell, if you think he looks stupid, check out this goofy bastard right here," Blu pointed to Ethan.

"Not funny Blu," said Ethan.

"All jokes aside, we really need three rooms," said Blu.

"You can't have three cause we had a fire," she said. "The work could've been finished six months ago, but Virgil works kinda slow."

"This is all we get?" asked Blu.

"Yep, most of the other rooms got water damage and now we're fighting mold in those. But that's a real nice room, with two twin beds and a sleeper sofa."

Blu looked confused. "The bishop agreed to this?"

Blu reluctantly took the set of keys. Erma could see his disdain.

"There's plenty to do here ya know," she said. "We got a pool. The Waffle House 'bout a mile down has a dart board. And we do have an in-room porno channel, that's if you like that sort of stuff."

"I would hope the porno was disabled," chimed Ethan.

"Come on, it's regular porno. . . you sicko!" shouted Erma.

Blu laughed, "This is a bad dream."

"Let me get your towels," said Erma. She went into the back.

"Now I know what happened to June Cleaver when Ward left her ass," mumbled Blu.

"Who?" asked Ethan.

Room 316 was clean but totally not what we expected.

"This place looks like a snowflake factory," said Ethan. "What are these things?"

"Doilies," said Blu. "I haven't seen doilies since my grandmother."

"If this is their best room, I'm glad the bishop went all out," said Ethan.

I staggered over to the sofa and collapsed.

"None of this feels right," said Blu. "The bishop is trying to send a message. I just don't know what it is."

"Are you thinking trouble?" asked Ethan.

"I'm thinking something stinks of trouble with this whole detour. Let's get some sleep, we'll start sobering Sloppy Joe up in the morning."

The door slowly opened in Debbie's room, it was Doreen. She crawled into bed with her little sister who wasn't quite asleep yet, and cradled her in her arms. "I know you aren't acting like your old self and I know you won't tell me why. That's OK, I guess you're scared of something or somebody. I want you to listen to me Debbie. You don't have to be scared of nothing or nobody cause I'm here. I will protect you from anything. Nothing can hurt you as long as I'm around...and I ain't going nowhere."

Doreen never saw the small tear that dropped from the little girl's eye, but she swore she felt her sister snuggle a little closer. It felt good.

Mitchell left the bedroom with a bowed head. His expression was one of extreme pain. He stopped in the doorway. "That was a hell of a question Rachel," he never turned around as he spoke. The image of his heartbroken wife's tears were permanently etched in his mind.

"I never wanted to hurt you. I love you." He closed the door behind him and went into the other room for the night.

CHAPTER 79

Saturday, the waitress in Waffle House poured my third cup of black coffee. Ethan had just left the table to take a phone call while Blu was putting butter on his last piece of wheat toast.

"Have you noticed how much that boy stays on the phone?" asked Blu.

"Are you kidding me? I'm just noticing it's Saturday," I replied.

"So you're starting to come around?"

"I always come around."

"Will you be able to prophesy tomorrow?"

"At this stage of the game, I'll fake it if I have to."

"Spoken like a true man of the cloth."

"Hey the show has to go on," I said.

Blu nodded, "Well, for this last time at least. We made it through the tour without killing each other. Truth be told, I had a blast with you guys."

"Wow Bluefield Black is getting sentimental. Damn, now I need a drink."

Ethan made it back to the table.

"For being such a bore, you sure are on the phone a lot," said Blu.

"That should prove to you that a lot of people think I'm interesting," said Ethan.

"No, it just means that you're paid up on your membership to 1-800-dial-a-friend."

I spit coffee laughing.

"Well breakfast is over, now what'll we do?" asked Blu.

[At the hotel pool, Ethan swam the length for five laps before he got out. He toweled off at his lounge chair before collapsing onto it.

"Aaaah!"

In a chair on one side of Ethan laid Lawrence passed out, face down wearing a terrycloth robe and slippers. On the other side, was Blu with no intention of getting in the water. He wore a white tee shirt, swim trunks, black dress socks and his black Florsheim half boots. He pulled a deep drag from his cigarette and even though he wore shades, one could tell he was in deep thought.

"This whole thing just don't feel right. None of this is the bishop's style," he mumbled.

"Let it go Blu," chimed Ethan, "the tour was successful and it'll be over tomorrow. Chill out. Quit expecting the worst."

“Well, who would’ve thunk it, little smoke and mirrors giving sound advice. You’re right.”

“Are you kidding me? You’re giving me credit for something?”

“Don’t act like I haven’t nurtured you both on this tour. I’ve been like a mentor to y’all.”

“More like a tormentor.”

Blu had to laugh at himself with that one.

“What about you Lawrence?” he yelled, “haven’t I been good to y’all?”

Lawrence was as limp as a rag doll and remained just as vocal.

Blu tried again, “Hey you still drunk? C’mon man you got to get it together.”

Lawrence stirred and moaned.

Blu continued, “Man get yo ass up? You got to be able to perform tomorrow!”]

I don’t know how long I had been sleep. I just remember Blu yelling at me about being able to perform.

Like a rocket, I launched off the chair and landed in front of Ethan and Blu.

“I don’t need you asking me shit about what I can do! I did it for three months already!”

“Pump your brakes man, your job ain’t over till tomorrow and you need to be sober,” said Blu.

“Why Blu? So I can predict the fucking future? I can do that drunk. Hell, I can even lie ... it’s the future, whose gonna fucking know?”

Blu remained calm. “You could lie but you haven’t yet cause you care about people. Even if you don’t appreciate your gift, you need to be sober to showcase it.”

“Fuck you, Blu!” I turned around and walked away.

Splash!

“Ha!” screamed Ethan, “He fell in the pool!”

Blu fell back onto his chair laughing.

I struggled to pull myself out of the pool. My wet robe felt like lead.

Ethan pointed toward the pool. “Hey you left one of your house slippers out there floating.”

I looked down and saw I was only wearing one slipper. Then I saw the other one floating toward the edge. I got on my knees and reached for it.

Splash!

“Oh shit! He’s in again!” screamed Ethan.

Blu fell off his chair laughing.

Again I struggled to get out of the pool. I was tired and furious.

Ethan and Blu rolled on the ground laughing.

“Bet he’s sober now,” laughed Ethan.

I shook the wet slipper I was holding, “Fuck both y’all.”

I stormed off to the room.

“Make sure you don’t fall in the toilet,” shouted Blu.

Inside the room, I went straight to my bag. I grabbed the sealed envelope that held the letter I wrote to Blu. I was about to tear it to shreds, but hesitated.

Damn, I thought, Blu was right, I do care.

CHAPTER 80

The early Sunday morning air was unusually still. Blu noticed the stale air while he ate breakfast from the hood of his Escalade. Black coffee, jelly donuts and quiet was his reward for rising early. He cherished any break from his two idiotic traveling companions. His morning calm was soon interrupted as Ethan came out to the vehicle. As usual, he was on his cell phone. Blu handed him a coffee and offered him a donut. Ethan took two and started to climb inside the truck.

“No eating in my ride,” stated Blu.

Still listening on the phone, Ethan slowly walked to the back end of the truck.”

As I came outside, my eyes were fixed on Blu as I approached the truck. “Please tell me, one of those coffees are mine,” I said.

“I got you,” said Blu as he handed me a coffee. “How ‘bout a donut?”

“No thanks, that’s bad for my liver.”

Blu laughed, “Man, you got to love a happy drunk.”

“Hey, I’m sorry about how I been acting.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure the tour and the fact that you see the future can take it’s toll.”

“Some day I’ll tell you just how much of a toll it takes. For now let’s finish this fucking tour.”

The drive on the highway was short. It led us to a peaceful two-lane country road. I slowly sipped my coffee in between sleepy moments as my head seemed to roll along with the hills. Blu was silent with an expression of deep thought, as if he was trying to still figure out why we were here instead of going home. Ethan was also quiet in the back, listening to someone on the other end of his phone.

The route was scenic and headed toward the river for about forty-five minutes. We came upon a paper sign on a wooden post that read: **Revival**. The arrow on the sign pointed right. Blu paused before he turned. He looked at the unpaved road that seemed to disappear into the thick forest. At this point, the three of us had each been in separate worlds, but now, we were all thinking the same thing.

“Who the hell goes to the forest to worship?” asked Blu.

The black Escalade made the turn into the forest.

We drove about ten minutes before we saw any sign of human existence. We came upon three large men with shovels digging a few yards from the road. Blu called to them. Only one man acknowledged the vehicle and headed towards it. The man was wearing overalls with no shirt. The closer he came to the truck, the larger he looked.

“Hey is anybody having church around here?” asked Blu.

The giant man remained silent as he pointed up ahead. The Escalade drove on ahead.

“Were those graves they were digging?” I asked .

“It was only two graves,” said Ethan. “I would’ve been kinda scared if there were three.”

“Did you see the size of that bumpkin?” asked Blu.

We drove almost a mile before they saw three run-down barns with tin roofs. There were a few vehicles off to the side of the road, most of them were wrecks. Blu felt uneasy.

“I’m gonna pull over here,” he said. We’ll walk up from here.”

Ethan jumped out first, then me. Blu was still in the truck.

“Man, it’s hot already,” I said.

“There’s like no breeze at all,” replied Ethan

Inside the Escalade, Blu popped open the glove compartment and pulled out a .38 revolver and a .45. He pondered over both, then put the revolver back. He checked the clip to see if it was full. It was.

As Ethan and I came around to Blu’s side, he had already gotten out and tucked the gun in the small of his back. He grabbed his jacket and put it on.

“It’s gonna be too hot for that leather,” I said.

“Yeah, I’m thinking the same thing but I’m afraid I’m gonna need it.”

“Who are we supposed to meet?” I asked.

“Somebody named Coots,” said Blu. “Pastor Harland Coots.”

The three of us started toward the clearing, Ethan’s phone rang. He answered it and made sure he stayed behind so no one could hear.

“What’s up with that kid and his phone?” mumbled Blu.

“You just answered it,” I said. “A kid and his phone.”

Before we reached the clearing, we heard singing, tambourines and hand clapping.

“Hey Lawrence,” said Blu. “Are you getting a flash on anything that we need to know about?”

“Are you kidding? I just came off of a binge. It takes a while before I can actually get flashes. But don’t worry I’ll put on a great performance.”

“Well that makes me feel better.”

As we reached the clearing, we were near the three barns with tin roofs. Out in the open field, people in out-dated clothing, were sitting in wooden chairs singing, *Amazing Grace*.

A young man trotted over to meet us.

Welcome my brothers! He greeted. We’re so glad to have you.”

“Pastor Coots?” asked Blu as he shook the young man’s hand.

“Oh no, I’m J.D. Tribble, but folks all call me Scooter.”

We tried not to seem repulsed by Scooter’s hideous facial scar, between his nose and his right eye, which had obviously been sewn shut.

“Pastor Coots is about to open with prayer,” continued Scooter. Wait here and I’ll go put a bug in his ear that y’all here.”

Blu and I both heaved a sigh as Scooter headed toward the canvas tent just ahead of the seated congregation.

“I’m going over here for a minute,” said Ethan. Still on the phone, he ran off behind the barn that we were standing near.

Before Blu could complain, he held his breath as he saw Scooter whisper into the ear of a one-armed man. His back was to us but Blu saw the left sleeve of the man’s moist white shirt neatly tucked into the side of his gray trousers.

“Lawrence, you seeing what I’m seeing?”

“Yep.”

Pastor Harlan Coots slowly turned to look at his guest. He put no effort in trying to hide the scowl on his face. He turned back and whispered in Scooter’s ear, who quickly ran out of sight.

Pastor Coots proceeded toward the tent. He raised his Bible in the air and began to pray.

“You know what?” said Blu. “Go get Ethan’s ass over here.”

I went after Ethan while Blu stood frustrated and confused.

I made it to the back of the barn. Ethan caught a glance of me and darted inside the back door.

“Ethan!” I called as I headed toward the door.

Pastor Harlan Coots, finished his prayer. He surveyed his flock seated before him in the field.

“The Lord has truly blessed us! That’s because we listen to his word. We obey therefore we are his children! But sometimes evil enters his house.”

Blu looked toward the rear of the barn, then at his watch.

Pastor Coots continued, “We as God’s children must drive the evil out of his house! Today we have evil in God’s house!”

Blu’s attention returned back to Pastor Coots.

The Pastor’s eyes were sullen and seemed to be staring right at Blu.

Just inside the barn, Ethan was trying to end his phone call, “Deacon, I’ve got to go, Lawrence is coming.”

Pastor Coots eyes never left Blu as he reached below his pulpit and brought up a huge copperhead snake.

“With these vipers, we shall drive evil from our Father’s house today!”

What the ...!” shouted Blu. He never saw the three huge bumpkins as they creped up behind him. One grabbed him from behind as another stood in front of him about to raise his shovel like a bat.

I pushed open the barn door. Ethan hurried off the phone.

“I’ve got to go, he’s coming in!”

“Who were you talking to?” I shouted.

Ethan didn’t see the open pit in the dirt floor of the dark barn.

“Ethan Stop!”

Before he could respond to my command, Ethan stepped backwards and fell.

I lunged and caught him by both wrists.

“Help me Lawrence! Don’t let me fall!”

“Don’t panic! I got you. Just gotta pull you up.”

With my belly against the dry dirt floor, I was losing traction fast.

“Stop fighting! I’m starting to slide.”

“Help me! Pull me up!”

Three gunshots rang out but were ignored as I tried to dig my feet into the ground to keep from sliding.

“Ethan, stop fighting, you’re pulling me in!”

Suddenly Ethan let out a blood curdling scream.

“Aaaaah! I’m bit!”

Ethan swung his legs violently as the numerous copperheads inside the pit struck repeatedly.

“Ahhh!” Ethan’s grip on my wrists tightened.

Pains of white-searing heat pierced through my head. My eyes rolled back and my teeth clenched as if I was being electrocuted.

Foam poured from Ethan’s screaming mouth. His muscles spasmed and he released his grip but I could not release mine. Ethan’s dead weight started pulling me into the pit.

The barn door swung open just as my waist reached the edge of the hissing pit.

“Gotcha!” shouted Blu as he grabbed me by my belt with both hands. He straddled me and dug his heels in the dirt to stop the slide.

“Lawrence let go! He’s gone and we gotta get out of here!”

[Blu shook his head as he pulled out his pistol and gave Lawrence a sharp blow to his kidney with the butt of his gun. The strain of the load instantly lightened for Blu and he knew Lawrence had released his grip.]

“Ow!” I moaned as Blu quickly got me to my feet.

“We’ve got to go, NOW!”

CHAPTER 81

I glanced around the barn and saw several snake pit's. Blu grabbed me by the back of the collar and charged out of the barn just to be confronted by Pastor Coots, armed with a copperhead, as well as all of the congregation each one with serpents.

BANG!

Blu fired a shot in the air. “We’re going but y'all better stay the fuck back!”

He dragged me with him as we kept our backs to the barn.

“KILL THEM!” screamed Pastor Coots just before he was hit with a bullet to the forehead.

“RUN!” shouted Blu.

A serpent was hurled just missing me. We ran past the three bumpkins, now dead from gunshot wounds. The church members were right on our heels screaming, with snakes in hand.

Blu and I reached the Escalade and jumped in. As Blu started the engine he saw Scooter dart out from the side. Blu quickly swung the truck around and punched the gas. He rammed Scooter, hurling him into the woods.

The Escalade sped away for about half a mile then it swerved before it came to a dead stop. Blu and I jumped out of the truck screaming. Blu ran into the brush and came out with a large branch. He opened the back door. “Open the other side!”

I opened the back door on my side and ran toward the front of the truck. Using the branch Blu

pushed the massive snake out the other side. He walked around and emptied his clip in the serpent.

After heaving a sigh of relief, Blu went berserk kicking the bumper of his truck.

“SHIT! SHIT! SHIT!”

Then he walked over to me and slung me against the truck.

“You didn’t see any of this shit, prophet!”

“Get off me, Blu!”

“You got special powers! What good is it if you can’t see a fucking snake storm in our future!”

I wrestled free from Blu’s grip.

“Not our future, Blu! Yours! I can’t see mine, remember!”

“You didn’t do me no damn good either!”

“I just came off a binge! Did you forget I was drunk for three days? It takes a while to come back after a binge. You think I wouldn’t have warned you about this shit had I seen it? Ethan is dead! I never saw it coming!”

Blu ran over to the truck and opened the glove box. He pulled out a revolver. He made sure it was loaded and headed straight for me.

“Shit man! What are you doing!”

He stared straight into my eyes.

“I’ll tell you like I told my sister Angela a long time ago. When it comes to guns, always have a backup cause you’ll never know when you’re gonna lose one. Now here’s a quick gun lesson, same as I told her, the bullet comes out of this end, always stay behind it.”

He shoved the gun into my hand.

“No, I – I don’t want this.”

“Listen up! I got special powers now. I knew this shit didn’t feel right. You’re gonna need this heat. There’s a storm coming and the forecast calls for pain.”

“What are you talking about Blu?”

“You’ll know when the time comes. When it’s right . . . you blow Bishop Barnes away. Now get into the truck.”

Blu and I moved toward the truck cautiously. We looked under the seats, on the side of seats and on the seats before we got in and drove away.

CHAPTER 82

Julius shot baskets in his driveway. Sunday was turning out to be a great day for him. Bishop Barnes and Deacon Stone were out of town, so there was no church. Julius got to sleep late just to awaken to his favorite aroma . . . pancakes. Angela enjoyed her Sunday home also. That is, until she received a phone call, that altered her mood. She had to leave the house to run an errand, but more importantly than that, she had to keep her demeanor in check for the sake of her son. As she came outside, she called for Julius to throw her the basketball. She landed a perfect three pointer.

“Great freak shot, mom!”

“If I had more time, I’d prove to you that that wasn’t a freak shot!”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m gonna take advantage of this church-free day and get some grocery shopping done.”

“Do I have to go too?”

“No, you can stay and enjoy your free day.”

Julius ran and gave his mother a huge hug. Angela pulled out of the long driveway, catching one last glimpse at her reason for living in her rear-view mirror.

I will do whatever it takes to keep him safe, she thought.

Julius missed his three pointer and had to chase his ball. Once he caught it, he stopped to watch his mother's car disappear. He dropped his basketball and ran into the house.

For Julius to enter his mother room was not unusual, he'd done it many times. Her room had been a place of solace for him when he needed a comforting hug or when he wanted to ambush his mom into a surprise pillow fight. He certainly respected her privacy. It was simply curiosity that led him into her room on this particular occasion. He really wasn't looking for anything, but then again he was.

On her dressing table he was a journal. He had seen one before when she'd come in his room to see if he was in bed, or when he'd catch glimpses of her jotting down a note that left her eyes teary. He certainly would never spy on his mother. It was simply curiosity.

He read a few pages, and then a few more. He looked puzzled as he scanned the pages. He took a deep breath then closed the book. He opened a drawer and saw another journal closed and neatly bound with a violet satin bow. They all looked alike and he never gave them much thought before. He walked into her dressing closet and saw several crates packed with many neatly bound journals.

The crates were in the back and neatly stacked one on top of another in short rows. . . except one. It was not with the others and it had several neatly bound journals along with a crumpled brown paper bag. Inside it he discovered a something wrapped in a delicate handkerchief. He unwrapped it to reveal a revolver. He didn't know it was a .38 snub-nose, but he knew it was a gun. Quickly, he wrapped it back up and place it back in the brown paper bag and back in the crate. He left the closet and his mother's room. He was even more curious than ever.

CHAPTER 83

Blu and I pulled into the hotel parking lot. We needed to gather our belongings as well as Ethan's, and put this tour to it's much needed rest. I entered the lobby first.

"Well, looky here, it's the pride of the Bible Belt!"

Bishop Barnes ran to me with open arms. Blu shoved me to the side and planted his fist squarely on the bishop's jaw.

POW!

"You skunk-headed bastard. You set us up!"

The bishop landed hard on his back, then sat straight up. Blu was just about to smash him in the face again, but Deacon Stone caught his fist.

"You're crushing my hand, you big ox!" grimaced Blu.

"JUST HOLD YA HORSES!" shouted the bishop.

Deacon Stone shoved Blu backwards into me. The bishop pulled a handkerchief and wiped his bloody mouth.

"I know y'all ran into trouble."

"Trouble?" I shouted. "Ethan is dead!"

"How did you know there was trouble? And how did you get here so fast?" asked Blu.

"We got word earlier in the week that somebody was gonna try to harm you. We tried to warn you and when we realized you weren't getting the message, we came out here."

I noticed a wire coming out of the bishop's suit coat going into his ear.

"What's that in you ear?" I asked.

"Oh this? Well, everybody knows how much I love gospel music. Hell, I just can't get enough of that James Cleveland."

Blu tried to shake away the pain from his hand. He kept his eyes fixed on Deacon Stone. "Bishop you need to tell that asshole Stone to never touch me again."

"Now Blu, we all go way back. The good deacon wasn't trying to hurt you. He just knows that you

can be a bit hot-headed at times. We all respect each other here.”

“What about Ethan? He’s dead, thanks to that last stop you added on,” I stressed.

“Now you may find this hard to believe, but I don’t think Ethan had y’all’s best interest in mind. In fact, he’s dead due to all his behind-the-back dealing he was doing.”

“Why should we believe you Barnes?” asked Blu.

“You cut me to the quick, Blu. You know me and you know that our relationship has always been ‘bout money. Have I ever stiffed you?”

“No . . . but.”

“But nothing. You’ve made a whole lot of money thanks to me, and I’ve always been on the up and up with you. Even ‘bout your sister, right?”

“Let’s not go there. I won’t talk about her. Not now, not ever.”

I started to sweat. *Maybe I should have told Blu what I knew, instead of writing it in a letter that I never gave him.*

The bishop continued. “Fair enough, but you know I never lied to you ‘bout nothing, especially your money. Speaking of which, I got this for you.”

Bishop Barnes handed Blu a fat envelope. Blu thumbed through it.

“This is double what you owe me.”

“That’s right, cause you got one more job to do.”

The Bishop handed Blu a manila envelope.

“This is very important Blu. It’s so important that you can’t open it now. I need you to leave here, get on the highway going south. Make sure you stay on the highway for one hour, doing the speed limit. Trust me, just take your time. After you’ve driven one hour, get off the highway and head east.

“Now this is important, pull over to the side of the road and take the CD that’s inside that envelope and put it in your player. Listen while you proceed going east. Then this assignment will become clear. On the other side of this assignment is double that amount that I just gave you. Got it?”

Blu thought for a moment. “What about Lawrence?”

“We’ll get him home. He’s in good hands. This is our golden-egg-laying goose.”

Blu remained silent for a moment. Then he stuck his hand out to me. “Looks like this is it for us. I enjoyed knowing you man.”

I knocked Blu’s hand down and gave him a hug. I put the letter into Blu’s coat pocket. “Thanks for everything Blu. I owe you my life.” Then I whispered. “There’s a letter in your pocket. Read it as soon as you get a chance.”

Suddenly I grabbed my head. It was a flash. In it I saw Blu unhook his seatbelt. Instantly there was an impact that threw Blu to the floor amid shattered glass.

Blu gave me a strange look. Then he noticed both the bishop and the deacon were watching. He patted my shoulders. “Love ya like a play cousin. Later.”

Just as Blu reached the exit I shouted. “Keep your seatbelt buckled, Blu!”

Blu turned. “What?”

“Don’t unhook your seatbelt!”

Blu flashed a puzzled smile, waved and then left the hotel.

Bishop Barnes and Deacon Stone stared at each other before they approached. “Let’s go home son. This has been a long three months.”

Doreen knocked twice as she entered Debbie’s room. Although there was no church service, Debbie was dressed and sitting on the bed reading her bible.

“Let’s get our bikes out and ride,” said Doreen.

Debbie sat silently.

“Debbie, we didn’t even have church today. Take a break. Let’s go have some fun.”

Debbie looked at her sister, “If God wanted us to have fun, he would’ve let our mother live.”

Mitchell closed the door to their bedroom, leaving Rachel sobbing in her pillow. His eyes held water as he walked down the stairs. *What have I done?* he thought. He walked into the dining room and sat at the table. He buried his head into his hands, as his tears flowed.

CHAPTER 84

The ride back to Cincinnati was unsettling for me, since it was from inside a hearse. Deacon Stone drove and Bishop Barnes sat facing me in the back.

“I chose to retrieve you in this vehicle so that we could talk,” said the bishop.

“There’s nothing to talk about. I’m through with all this.”

The bishop opened a side console and pulled out two glasses and a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black. He poured a drink, looked at the glass, then handed the bottle to me.

“Son, you just need to relax is all, just like all the prophets of old, you went through trials and tribulations, but no weapons formed against you prospered ‘cause you’re doing God’s work.”

I took a deep swallow from the bottle. “Ahh, that’s it bishop, keep lying. What kind of work was Ethan doing? Why is he dead?”

“Listen son, not everybody who calls unto the Lord’s name is a child of God. What happened to Ethan was wrong and real scary, but you need to take the ruffles off your panties and be a man.”

“That tour was set up by you. Ethan worked for you, now he’s dead.”

“He was evil, alright! You even knew he didn’t like you. He was plotting against you.”

“That’s more like it. Lie to me one more time. And what about Blu? He works for you, not God. You’ve been lying to him about his sister.”

Bishop Barnes sat back and paused silently.

Blu was on the phone with Maria, while heading south on the highway.

“That’s what I’m saying baby, I’ve made plenty of money working for the bishop. It’s time for me to expand my barbecue sauce business. We can set up operations out west. You can put the finishing touches on your Soul-Mex sauce line and we’re on our way.”

Blu glanced at his watch, then looked for the exit.

“Hey baby, I got to get off now, so I can finish this assignment. I’ll hit you up later. Love ya.”

The Escalade traveled east on the side road. He pulled over briefly, reached inside the manila envelope and removed a CD. He inserted the CD and proceeded east. The voice on the CD was Bishop Barnes.

“Lawrence Garnier is a phenomenon. He has the gift of prophecy. This gift is authentic.”

Blu wrinkled his brow in confusion. *This is stuff I already know*, he thought.

The Escalade traveled through a small rural town, that went unnoticed by Blu as he focused on what he was hearing. As he passed a run down building, Blu never noticed the plain white box truck as it pulled out behind him.

The driver of the box truck got on his phone. “I’m behind the mark now, we should be right on schedule.”

Corn fields lined the road after the Escalade left the small town. The road narrowed as it rose and fell across the hillside. Blu started to become bored with the bishop’s CD that told him nothing but facts about Lawrence.

“Lawrence was born in New Orleans. He was born a twin but his brother died tragically. Lawrence lived much of his adult life with his older sister. He assisted her ministry at a New Orleans Women’s mission.”

Blu noticed up ahead that he was approaching railroad tracks. In front sat a stopped white box truck with an extended iron post on the bumper. *Now why is this truck stopped? There ain't no train coming.*

He tapped his horn a couple of times but the truck did not respond. Suddenly, the flashing lights and bells warned of an approaching train. The barrier bar lowered. "Shit," mumbled Blu.

At that moment, the large white box truck in front squealed it's tires and slammed through the barrier bar only to come to a dead stop on the tracks.

"Damn!" shouted Blu. He turned off the annoying CD that was reciting information about Lawrence.

Immediately the truck squealed it's tires again, but this time in reverse slamming into Blu's Escalade ramming the steel extension through the grill of his vehicle. The impact showered Blu with shattered glass. Dazed, Blu unlocked his seatbelt and tried to open his door which was jammed. As he slowly reached to open the passenger door.

Boom!

The other box truck rammed the rear of the Escalade throwing Blu to the floor. The truck in front started to pull, while the truck in back pushed the sandwiched Escalade to the center of the tracks. The whistle of the approaching train brought Blu back to consciousness. He could see the train. Although he was hurt badly, he climbed to the back seat. He could not open the jammed doors. The train whistle sounded again. Frantic, Blu drew his gun, he could see the driver of the rear box truck. He fired through the rear window of the Escalade.

Bang! Bang! He hit the driver in the shoulder.

Bang! He hit the driver in the forehead. Blu heard the train's whistle louder. He didn't have much time left. The train was bearing down on his trapped vehicle. The driver of the truck in front of the Escalade jumped out and ran.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Blu shot more holes through the rear window. He jumped in the rear of the Escalade. While on his back he kicked the glass out all over the box truck that wedged him in. He scrambled to his knees.

BOOM!

The impact of the train ripped the front grill off the truck that smashed Blu from behind and drugged the truck in front right along because of the steel extensions that were embedded in the front of Blu's vehicle. The black Escalade spun continuously in front of the train. With each revolution, metal sheared away under the locomotive. The train continued for a half mile after the impact before it came to a complete stop. The only thing left of the Escalade was a rope-like twisted mass of metal.

The driver of the first truck only appeared long enough to look inside the cab of the second truck. The driver inside was dead.

The hearse continued on the highway. Inside, the bishop's phone rang. With the ear piece still in one ear, he answered the phone.

"It's done, but we lost Joe," said the voice on the other end.

"Was it confirmed?" asked the bishop.

"Believe me, there's nothing left of the target."

"Good job." Bishop Barnes wore a smug expression all the way back to Cincinnati.

CHAPTER 85

It had been three months ago since I was in Cincinnati. Wished I would've been able to see my future. If so, I would've never went on tour for the bishop. Life was worse than ever for me. I looked

out the window of the hearse.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Home,” replied the bishop.

“Looks like we’re heading downtown.”

The hearse traveled toward the river. It entered the garage of One Lytle Place luxury apartments. The deacon didn’t park, he just pulled the tower entrance.

“Let’s go,” said the bishop.

I noticed a beautiful black Mercedes with temporary tags. I glanced inside.

“Nice ain’t it, son?”

“It sure is. Something tells me you bought it.”

“Yep, I did.” The bishop pointed toward the elevator. “Let’s go up.”

We went to the seventh floor. The bishop led me down the hallway and opened the last apartment. I had never seen a cooler pad. I wandered over to the bar. “May I?”

The bishop laughed. “Go ahead.”

I poured a full glass of Johnnie Walker Black.

The bishop walked over to the curtains in the living room and opened them to reveal a breathtaking view of the Ohio river.

“Man, that’s nice,” I said.

“Yeah, it is.”

“How long have you lived here?”

The bishop laughed again. “I don’t . . . you do.”

“What?”

I ran into the bedroom and looked into the closet. I ran back to where the bishop waited.

“My stuff is here. How?”

“Your brother Mitchell allowed me to get your things. I have to admit, he was very glad to get your stuff out of his house.”

“I bet he was.”

The bishop tossed the keys to me.

“This is your new home son. That Mercedes downstairs is yours too. Your Ohio drivers license is in the glove box.”

“I-I can’t.”

“Don’t say it son, this is compliments of the Lord. You did more for this ministry than you realize. We’ve grown leaps and bounds since you became a household name worldwide.”

“I told you, I’m leaving the ministry.”

“You can’t mean that. Why do you think you got the gift that you have?”

“I just want to be happy, and I’m not.”

“Not happy? Boy look around, you don’t have the keys to the kingdom, you are the key. You’re in too deep. You can’t just walk away from this . . . from God’s work.”

“There you go again. This is your work. I haven’t seen God in none of this. On that tour, I almost died. Ethan is dead. No telling what is gonna happen to Blu. I just know it’s gonna be bad. It’s always bad. God is good not bad.”

“Boy, are you that ungrateful, huh? You are alive. You are gifted and you can have everything you desire.”

“Who said you had to have everything you see?”

The bishop walked over to the bar, poured a shot of whiskey, then downed it. He went to the door. “I’m gonna let you simmer with your thoughts. But you better think long and hard. Better yet, you better get your mind right and come to the right decision.

This is God’s work and he chose you to do it. If you turn your back on him, then you just left yourself open to be victimized. You ain’t gonna be some rogue prophet. Just roaming the earth because

you walked away from this ministry. Believe that.”

Bishop Barnes slammed the door behind him. He was furious. In the elevator he punched the wall. *What am I gonna tell Stoney? I wanted to prove him wrong. I don't want to do what I got to do now. What a waste.* He stormed out of the elevator, into the garage and into the hearse. He looked at Stoney. “We gotta call Cottontail.”

CHAPTER 86

I had just dried off from my shower. I was worried. I grabbed my cell phone and hit redial.

“Come on Blu, pick up. Please pick up,” I whispered.

“No answer. Dammit!”

I poured a reasonable drink and downed it. My head ached from worry and alcohol. I walked out on the balcony and watched the moonlight dance on the river. *Ethan is dead because of me and that fucking tour. Now Blu is probably hurt or worse. I can't call my brother cause he hates me. Rachel probably hates me too. I'll always be a mess. God, this view is wonderful. I can't remember the last time I actually heard what quiet sounded like. It's nice. I never had my own place. This is a fucking great place. That Mercedes is a great car. Damn, I can't keep none of this. I can't afford the bishop's price. What did I get into?*

The doorbell rang.

“God, don't let that be the bishop,” I muttered.

I melted at the door when I peered through the peephole. I opened it slightly, just enough to speak. “Sorry, I just got out of the shower and I'm not decent yet.”

“If you plan on being decent tonight, I'll have to leave,” said Angela.

I opened the door and stared as my dark fantasy walked in. With every step she worked her short strapless black dress that clung in all the right places. Her hair was in a French roll. She walked straight to the bar and stood.

“So are you going to pour me a drink?”

I poured her drink, but before I could give it to her, she approached me and gently placed her full lips on my nipple. My eyes rolled as she ran her warm tongue over it. Then she took her drink.

“Will I have to drink alone?”

My eyes never left her as I raised the whiskey bottle and drank straight from it. Angela never took a sip, instead, she sat her drink down and abruptly kissed me. My head began to ache. I saw a flash of Angela standing in front of the bedroom mirror. She was crying. She was totally naked. She was beautiful.

Angela stepped away from me. “I see you really responded to that kiss.”

I looked down at the erect bulge in my towel. “Did the bishop send you here?”

“The only thing Bishop Barnes is interested in is your gift. My interest in you is more physical.” Angela pulled down her dress. Her full breasts bounced as they became exposed. She dropped her dress to the floor.

I gazed at her naked body. *Perfect.* I stared at her snow-white furry mound. She walked to the bedroom. I took another drink from the bottle.

“I'm waiting!” she called. I removed my towel and followed.

In the bedroom, Angela stood next to the bed. I walked in. Angela's eyes immediately fixed on my frozen passion. “I see you are truly gifted.” she sighed.

I gripped myself. “Will you accept this gift?”

Angela slowly backed onto the bed as I approached. I laid down and she got on top. She rubbed my chest and I fondled hers.

“Do you want to make love to me?” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“First, I want you to experience something better than sex. Turn around.”

I slowly turned onto my stomach. Angela kissed the back of my neck. She drug her tongue down my back. I trembled as she kissed both cheeks of my butt. Angela reached under the bed and grabbed handcuffs off the floor.

“Stretch your arms forward,” she said licking my shoulders.

“No, this ain’t gonna work like this,” I said as I rose to get up. She quickly grabbed me and said something that I never heard before. She said something that I always wanted to hear.

“I can free you from your curse.”

I instantly laid back down and reached through the iron bars of the headboard. She gently cuffed one wrist to the other through the bar.

I laughed nervously. “You’re not shoving anything up my ass are you?”

“I wouldn’t do anything like that,” she laughed.

“Then what are you doing?”

She whispered close into my ear, “I’m sending you to a new world.”

I felt Angela erect herself while on my back. I waited for a new experience. I waited for freedom, I waited.

While Lawrence waited, Angela reached within the folds of her French roll. She removed a syringe. She pulled the protective tip with her teeth. She paused and thought, I-I can’t do this.

Suddenly, she got off my back.

“What happened? I didn’t feel anything.”

“I can’t do this.” She quietly freed my hands.

“Why are you crying? What did I do wrong?”

“I’m the one that’s wrong. I’ve lost so many loved ones and I’m still doing things his fucking way.”

“Whose way?”

“The bishop. I’ve lost my husband, my oldest son and even my brother because of that fucker.”

“Yeah, I miss Blu too?”

“You knew my brother?”

“Yeah, from the Miracle Tour.”

“But he’s dead.”

“I knew it, I was the last one to see him alive.”

“YOU BASTARD!!” She stabbed a needle into my neck. That’s all I remember.

[Angela got up and walked to the mirror. The tears rolled freely.

Clap. Clap. Clap. Clap.

Bishop Barnes entered the room. “You did very well Cottontail, and you look stunning.”

“Fuck you!”

Angela lunged at the bishop and tried to stab him in the face with the syringe. Bishop Barnes caught her wrist and twisted.

“Gaah!” she yelp.

SMACK!

Angela hit the floor hard after the bishop delivered a back hand across the face.

“Don’t be stupid, bitch! You still got a lot to lose.”

She left the bedroom, put on her dress and left the apartment.

The bishop stood over the bed and stared at the unconscious prophet. He raised Lawrence's eyelid with his thumb and exposed a dilated pupil. The bishop saw the C D player on the night stand. He pushed the power button on. “Don’t look now, but there’s a monkey on your back.” He pushed play on the C D player and left the apartment.

The music slowly filled the bedroom. The song, Marvin Gaye's, 'Let's Get It On, reached the ears of the unconscious body on the bed, and swirled inside. Lawrence sank deep into his mattress, as if it was butter. Down he sank through the box spring. As he came out through the other side, he fell slowly through the air as he heard every note of the song. Below him was an orange river. The splash he made never stopped the music. He opened his eyes. The orange liquid soothed his vision. This wasn't a river it was a vast orange ocean.

He sank fathoms into the deep past fish of vivid colors swimming to the rhythm of the music. Ahead, approaching through the orange foaming mist was a mermaid who embraced him. She kissed him a pushed air into his lungs. He began to rise. Upwards he ascended. As he reached the surface, he floated onto his back. The sun showered warm rays upon him as Marvin sang. Colorful birds hovered around his head sining, "Come on, come on baby, stop beating 'round the bush!" The music continued as he drifted toward a waterfall. Over he went free-falling through colors and sound. He landed on a fluffy cloud, and gently bobbed to the music. There he slept peacefully. There he floated warm and at peace.]

Angela cleared dinner plates from the table. "Julius, I've got some work to do at the church tonight."

"Aw mom, I thought we were gonna play Monopoly tonight."

"I forgot you challenged me the other day. I tell you what, we'll play for a half hour when I get back."

"You can't get through Monopoly in a half hour."

"No, but you can start a game. We can finish it tomorrow, ok?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Give me a kiss, I won't be long."

Angela hated to leave her son, but she had no choice, at least not yet. She wanted answers.

CHAPTER 87

Bishop Barnes sat straight up in his bed. His sleep was abruptly interrupted by the noise of the doorbell from the resident entrance of the church. "Who the hell is that?" He stepped into his slippers and reached for his robe. "Coming!" He quickly ran through his chambers, out into the hallway. The doorbell continued ringing and pounding began. "Just a minute!" The bishop opened the door.

POW!

Angela punched him square in the nose.

"Ow!" He fell to the floor. Angela punched him again when he tried to get up.

"You son of a bitch! Why did Lawrence mention my brother's name?"

"What?"

Angela snatched off one of her shoes and buried the heel in the bishop's shoulder.

"Awww!"

"How does he know my brother?"

"Stop! Please let me get up, will ya?"

"Where's your big ass body guard now?"

Angela slapped him across the face with the shoe. The bishop rolled into a corner.

"Stop! Talk, just talk." He slowly used the wall corner to stand. "Now, what happened?"

"I went to launch Lawrence and he said Blu's name before he faded out. How is that possible?"

"How is anything possible with him?"

"My brother has been dead for years, how could he know about him? Did you lie to me?"

“I don’t know how he knew anything bout your brother,” he said gasping for air. “But I can assure you that your brother is dead.” At that moment the bishop looked up and looked at Angela.

“What are you staring at?”

“I can see that you fulfilled our mission.”

“What?” She ran down the hall and into the restroom. The bishop followed.

In the mirror, she saw a wisp of snow-white hair in her head. Then she saw the bishop standing behind her. She turned quickly to face him. “I promise you, as soon as I find a way to break free of my enslavement and keep my son protected... I will kill you.”

“Until then,” grinned the bishop.

Angela pushed past him and left.

That night Angela never slept. She simply stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. She knew exactly why she suddenly developed the wisp of white on her head. It was just as before . . . she ruined somebody’s life. She ruined Lawrence Garnier’s life. She knew, just as before, that she couldn’t cut it out. It would hurt, bleed and more would grow back. She was marked, but only to the rare few who actually knew an evil mark.

Still it was a constant reminder of her guilt, as if she needed reminding. She never forgot all the wrong she had done. In fact, if it wasn’t for her commitment to Julius’ safety, she would’ve ended her life long ago. She knew she couldn’t rid herself of the white wisp of hair, so she resigned herself to wear it pulled back from then on.

CHAPTER 88

Doreen grabbed her milk, paid for her lunch and quickly made her way to the table where Julius sat.

“So what did you have to tell me about this past weekend?” she asked.

“I read some stuff out of my mom’s journal.”

“Oh my god, you didn’t!”

“Shh, yeah I did.”

“Was there anything in there about us kids?”

“Yeah, sorta. She’s worried about Debbie’s health and how scared she was when she went missing. I’m gonna try to find out more but there’s lot to go through, this will take some time. My mom writes kinda weird. She wrote things like, ‘finally got some sleep’, page after page.”

“Is that all?”

“So far. Like I said, there’s lots of journals. She wrote she’s worried about me and that I was the only reason that she’s still living. She wrote she was afraid for the kids at our church, but that’s basically us.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s strange that there aren’t more children at our church.”

“She always writes that she hates Ezekiah Barnes.”

“Excuse me sir, you need to take the items out of your cart so I can scan them,” said the cashier.

I snapped back into the moment. My mind was trying to process the fantasy world I experienced. The cashier stared at me as I slowly placed cans of Underwood Deviled Ham and jars of Planter’s Peanuts on the conveyor.

“Sir, you’re drooling,” she said, pointing to the corner of her mouth.

“Sorry.” I wiped my mouth with my sleeve, then placed boxes of Ritz crackers on the conveyor. I paid the bill and pushed my cart out to my Mercedes.

Deacon Stone sat silently in front of the bishop's desk. Bishop Barnes was on the phone with the surviving truck driver, while he reviewed pictures of Blu's train wreck.

"I guess you're right, no one could've survived this," stated the bishop.

"Yeah, it was bad," replied the truck driver. "Did you see the pictures of Joe?"

"I'm looking at them now. You couldn't retrieve the body?"

"There was no time. I grabbed his phone, though."

"Good. Ballistics can trace the shooter, but that'll be a dead end. Where are you now?"

"I'm out here at Coots place now. Man, it's messy. Blu tried to kill everybody."

"Yeah, well we knew he was dangerous, but he's no threat anymore. Although, I wish I had a picture of his body. Oh well, make sure all those dead get buried deep. Pay off any family members who lost someone, and tell Scooter that it's his church now. Tidy up quick and get out of there so you don't end up missing. Good work and God bless you."

Bishop Barnes took a deep breath. "Stoney, that's done. Now, all I need to do is get over to Lawrence for his second application. Cottontail can't be trusted to be alone with him, so I'll have to do it."

"This is getting messy Zeke. Control must be regained. Why not just kill the prophet tonight?"

"He's as good as dead now. Once he destroys his own reputation, our ministry is clear to raise up the Billups' kid. Don't worry Stoney, it's all under control. As for Cottontail, she can be handled."

CHAPTER 89

I sat quietly in my kitchen and snacked on peanuts, crackers and deviled ham. I longed to returned to a world of kissing mermaids and colorful fish that sings Marvin Gaye tunes. I finished my shower and put on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. I was anxious over something but I didn't know what. There was a knock on my door. It was the bishop.

"Am I going to have to get naked for this?" he asked as he held up a small leather case.

I looked at the case then let him in. In the bed room, he stood at the night table, opened the small leather case and pulled out a rubber tube and a syringe. I sat quietly on the bed. The bishop stared at me silently. Then in a low tone he spoke.

"So sad. After all that praying I done. You'll soon find out son, that you took the wrong direction. You started out on the path to Heaven, now you're smack dab on the road to Hell. But you didn't take this knife in your back by yourself, I got the blade as well. You made a mistake prophet. Now you're 'bout to learn that when you show your ass, some mistakes are built to last. That's what ya get for changing ya mind, boy. That's what you get."

Silently, he tied the rubber tube around my arm, remove the plastic cap on the syringe.

"Can you turn on the music first?" I asked.

He did then he injected me. I took a deep breath.

[Lawrence's eyes fluttered and tried to focus. There was movement at the bottom of his bed. He spread his feet apart to see a penguin waving at him. Lawrence sat up and the penguin ran out of the room. Lawrence followed the strange little character, who wore a neon multi-colored scarf around his neck. Lawrence laughed at the way it scurried across the kitchen floor. The penguin opened the refrigerator and beckoned for Lawrence to follow.

As Lawrence climbed into the refrigerator, he was sucked into a swirling vortex. It blew him out on the other side, where he fell neck deep into a snow mound where the little scarfed penguin sat. The little penguin waved at him, then helped him to his feet. Lawrence realized that they were standing on a vast mountain slope. The air blew strong yet he was not cold. He felt refreshed, and with his little friend by his side, he felt safe. He could hear Marvin Gaye crooning "Distant Lover."

The little penguin yanked on his sweat pants, then reached for his hand. The two jumped and slid down the face of the large mountain.

They landed on the back of an awaiting polar bear. The color of the bear was white, more brilliant than the snow-covered landscape. Against the satin blue-black sky the glowing beast ran across the wintry terrain. The little penguin's scarf blew in the breeze, behind him sat Lawrence with his eyes closed and his arms stretched upward. Marvin Gaye's music filled the breezy air that was not frigid to Lawrence. It felt wonderfully refreshing, invigorating. Lawrence cheered in the silent wilderness with his penguin friend as they rode the glowing snow-white polar bear toward the horizon where multi-colored lights danced in the night sky. They were happy.]

At Mitchell and Rachel's dinner table, the silence was deafening. Mitchell didn't eat, he just stared at his wife. "Rachel, we can get through this. I love you." Rachel silently ate. "Will you look at me, please?" Rachel put down her fork and dabbed her mouth with her napkin.

"Now, what would you like to say?"

Mitchell cleared his throat, "Darling, I'm sorry for all that has happened. We can get through this. We just need to commit to staying together."

"As I told you before, I'll make that decision after the birth of our child."

Mitchell took a deep breath. "Well, I think we should seek counseling with someone we both trust."

"Since your sister is cheer-leading for me to abort, I can assure you it won't be her. I don't want Lawrence either. He would just reveal the outcome, making my choices meaningless."

"What about Bishop Barnes?"

"Are you fucking kidding me? Have you ever seen how he looks at me? I trust you more than I trust the bishop, and look where that's gotten me."

Mitchell quietly dropped his head.

CHAPTER 90

The plane landed at the New Orleans airport at 6:00 am. Candice Frye carried her child through the jet way into the terminal. She had no way of recognizing the person picking her up. How could she? She didn't travel, not on what a teacher gets paid. She wouldn't even be in New Orleans if not for the generosity of an aunt wanting to see her niece for the first time. Virginia, however, knew exactly who Candice was upon arrival.

"Hello Candice, I'm Mitchell's sister Virginia. I'm so glad you made the trip safely. How was your flight?"

"Very good," Candice answered nervously. "I want to thank you for this opportunity."

"Don't mention it. This was obviously the only way I would get to see my only niece. My brother can be very stubborn with grudges. Where does he think you are?"

"In St. Louis with my mother."

"And your mother?"

"She doesn't know about this trip . . . out of courtesy to you. I'll explain it all to her when I get back."

"Nonsense, we'll call her once you get settled in. We just have to explain how childish Mitchell can be."

"He's trying. I mean he's there for Kim, even though things are complicated between us."

"I'm sure he is. I wouldn't have it any other way. As his older sister, all you need to do is tell me where he's failing and I'll correct his attitude."

Candice smiled and seemed relieved by reception.

“Now, let's get your bags and get you settled in. I have a car waiting.”

The air was foggy and damp, as the car sped across the back roads along Lake Pontchartran. In the back seat, Candice nuzzled her child who started to fuss a little. Next to the driver, sat Virginia. The large woman turned her attention to the mother and child.

“Candice, have you met your child's uncle yet?”

“No, but Mitchell told me a lot about him. I've followed news about him in the media. I can't wait to meet the Prophet Garnier.”

Virginia forced a chuckle. “Yes, the prophet. Well, one thing for certain little Kimberly comes from very good genes.”

Candice tied to survey the surroundings as the car stopped and the driver unlocked the gate marked: **Restricted**.

“Are we close to the mission?” she asked.

“Not yet. I thought we might to do a little sight-seeing before you get settled in.”

“From what I can see, there isn't much to see around here.”

“That's where you're wrong Candice. This place that we're approaching is very important to the mission.”

The car crept along slowly before it stopped. Virginia got out first. “We're here. Welcome to The Farm!”

Candice got out slowly and clutched her child tightly as she looked around.

“Oh please, I haven't held my niece yet. May I?” Virginia took the little girl from her mother. She held the child up in front of her face and looked intently into the little girl's eyes. She studied her eyes long and hard.

“Is there something wrong?” asked Candice.

“Little Kimberly came from good genes. Thank God, she's got her father's eyes.” Virginia gave the child back to her mother. Out of the fog, an odd looking woman with white hair walked toward them.

Virginia smiled, “Dispose of them.”

“What?” Candice backed up and was stopped cold. Behind her a muscular woman, dressed as a driver, grabbed the mother and child and disappeared into the fog. Virginia got back in the car, this time behind the wheel. She listen as the screaming faded into the fog. A sinister grin spread across her broad face. *That's done*, she thought. “After the other bitch delivers, she'll get the same.”

CHAPTER 91

At school at a back table in the lunchroom Julius was eager to tell Doreen his idea. When she finally arrived, he started right in.

“Dory, I figured out a fast way to get through a lot more journals.”

“How?”

“You can help me read them.”

“What are you saying? Your mom will catch on for sure if we're in her room rummaging through her stuff. Besides my stepmother would never give me enough free time to come to your house for that.”

Julius just smiled. “Does she give you time to do your homework?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Then you'll just have a lot more. I'll sneak about ten journals in my backpack and bring them to you tomorrow. We can cover more ground that way.”

Doreen thought a moment. “Won't she miss ten?”

“Are you crazy? There's about a hundred or more. I won't take the most recent right away we'll start like in the middle. My mom is always leaving the house. I'll get them then.”

Doreen giggled, then composed herself. “We've got to get the most information we can. Let's do this the smart way, by dates. They have to have dates. We'll just focus on certain time frames. Like, start with your birthday.”

“You mean like my first day of life?”

“Duh, yeah.”

“Dory, we don't have that kind of time. Besides, I lived it.”

“This is from your mom's point of view, but you're right on the time factor. I know, let's start at Old Jess' funeral. Things were crazy for Debbie at that time. You read from that date forward and bring me ten books back.”

“Okay, let's do this.”

“Make sure you mark your space between journals or we'll lose track,” she advised Julius.

The next school day routine was the same as always with the children being safely delivered to their places of learning. Angela had no indication of the covert operation that was taking place between Julius and Doreen. She had no clue that ten journals of her personal thoughts were being transported to school by her via her son's backpack or that they were transferred to Doreen's backpack at lunch.

After school, when Julius and Doreen were each home, they rushed through their homework. Afterwards, The children took to their new task and began to read. Doreen started reading:

Today I met Lawrence Garnier in New Orleans. He was unimpressive and handsome at the same time. His sister gave me the creeps, the same way Deacon Stone does.

Julius read:

Living with myself gets more difficult with each passing day. I must stay strong for my son's sake. What would become of Julius if I'm gone? For my child's sake I must do what the bishop demands of me. Lawrence, I'm so sorry.

Meanwhile Doreen read:

As, I watched the casket of my son slowly descend into that cold dank hole, it was as if I could see through to the inside. The remains I saw was not of a troubled young man, but was of my baby boy. The way he was when all was well. When I had a husband the father of my beautiful firstborn. I couldn't save my child, from myself or the bishop. My connection with Ezekiel cost me a brother, husband and now a child. I wish I was dead.

And Julius read:

I destroyed another life tonight. I'm the evil that overpowered good.

And Doreen read:

Oh my god, what have I done? To escape the demon in the dark, I've sacrificed my son.

While Julius read:

The bishop is up to something evil. What is he and Thelma planning for little Debbie? Today they were all in his chamber. I wish I could read the notes Thelma wrote in her large bible.

As Doreen read:

Nate is so glad to have a little brother. I love both my boys but Julius was a mistake. A mistake Ezekiel Barnes is proud to hold over my head . . . our mistake.

SLAM!

Doreen was unnerved. *OK! This is wrong. We shouldn't be doing this.*

The next day at lunch, Doreen sat silently staring at her milk, while Julius slowly ate his lunch. He watched Doreen stare at nothing for a short while, then he spoke.

“Was it that bad?” asked Julius.

“Huh? Listen Julius,” she snapped. “I was wrong . . . I mean, we shouldn't have read those

journals.”

“Yeah, I didn't enjoy it.”

“We can't ever do that again . . . OK? Promise me you'll leave those journals alone.”

“That won't be a problem.”

“Promise me Julius!”

“OK! I promise. But how are we gonna help Debbie and my mom?”

“We'll have to think of something else.”

I got out of the shower and toweled off. My stomach hurt and I felt nervous. I looked at myself in the mirror. I looked tired. I wondered when someone would come by and give me something to calm my nerves. I poured a whiskey. It did nothing for me so I poured another.

Thelma had just sat down for dinner with the family when the phone rang.

“Oh, hello bishop. We just sat down for supper. No, no you're fine. It's always a blessing to hear from you.”

Ed was totally unconcerned that the bishop called. His focus was on the meal. Doreen, on the other hand, perked her ears. Thelma continued to gush on the phone.

“Now what can I help you with, bishop?” She looked around and stepped further into the kitchen. “A meeting? Yes I can make it,” she whispered. Thelma looked over her shoulder and saw Doreen staring.

“Yes bishop, I'll bring Debbie.”

Angela left Julius at home while she went to the store for a few items. Since he made such a fuss about shopping with her she decided to bring a pizza home for dinner. Although he enjoyed it, he seemed quiet. After she sent Julius to bed, Angela could hardly stay awake herself. She wrote in her journal that she received a new mark and although she enjoyed beating the bishop, she expected a visit for what she did to him but nothing came. She set her alarm and went to bed, but before she drifted off to sleep she mumbled, “I'm sorry Lawrence.”

[The frequency of the strange suction sound was about every three seconds followed by a thud, at the One Lytle Place apartment. The beacon of light that blinked every three seconds came from the kitchen. There, Lawrence Garnier stood in his underwear, facing his refrigerator. He opened it, threw open his arms and smiled as if he was welcoming a long lost friend. When he saw no one there, his smile melted away and he closed the door with a thud. Lawrence did this over, and over, and over again.]

CHAPTER 92

The next morning, Angela tended to her son's breakfast then took him and Doreen to school. She noticed how quiet Julius had been all morning. As the kids got out of the car, she called her son back. Julius walked slowly to his mother's window.

“Are you feeling ok?”

“Yes ma'am, I'm still a little sleepy, I guess.”

“Well maybe you need to go to bed earlier tonight.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Well, have a good day today and remember I love you.”

“Okay.” Julius started to turn away.

“Honey, I said I love you.”

“Love you too, mom.”

Doreen ate lunch alone. She looked all over the lunch room for Julius but didn't find him. She knew she had to eat fast and give a try on the playground if she wanted to learn anything, since she couldn't talk to Julius freely after school. She finally found him sitting under a tree on the far side of the school ground.

“Julius, I know you're avoiding me. Why?”

“I should've never started reading those journals.”

“I didn't think it would be easy,” she sat on the ground next to him. “Julius, you're crying.”

The boy crumbled and was overcome by uncontrollable tears.

Doreen grabbed his shoulder. “It's ok, you need to stop reading those journals. That was a bad idea.”

“My brother Nate . . . he shouldn't have died that way. I knew he had AIDS but I never knew how he died.”

“Remember how he lived not how he died, Julius?”

“He was a drug addict, that's how he got AIDS,” sobbed the boy.

“You gotta leave those journals alone and you've got to pull yourself together, we'll have to go back soon.”

“I didn't know he shot himself!” screamed the boy.

Doreen was speechless. How could she comfort a person under this circumstance. “I don't know what to say.”

The boy continued, “And my own mother got him hooked on drugs!”

The bell rang for the children to return class. Doreen was relieved.

“We gotta go back but promise me you won't read any more journals. It ain't worth it.”

Julius remained silent.

“Promise me or we'll have to go to Bishop Barnes. This is too much for us.”

“No! screamed Julius as he jumped to his feet. He was wild-eyed as he grabbed Doreen by the shoulders.

“You can't say nothing to the bishop. Mom wrote that Debbie complained to the bishop about your step mom and he went right to Ms. Thelma. If we're gonna help Debbie, we'll be on our own. You can't trust any adults . . . not even my mom. Promise me and I'll leave those journals alone.”

“I promise,” said a shocked Doreen. The two ran back to class.

CHAPTER 93

Angela arrived in front of the school as she had routinely done for months since Debbie started back to school. As always, she'd picked up Doreen and Julius first then go to Debbie's school. So she was surprised when Thelma Billups pulled up with Debbie already in the car. She walked over to Thelma's car.

“Hey, is everything alright? I thought the program was set for me to pick up the kids.”

“I know Angela, I'm sorry. It's such a wonderful day I thought I'd pick the kids up before I ran errands.”

“No problem. So all is well?”

“The Lord has truly looked upon my family with favor.”

“Good!” said Angela as she looked inside the car to greet Debbie. “How are you little lady?”

“I'm truly blessed, thank you.”

Angela stood up and took a deep breath. “Well, oh here's the kids now.”

Doreen said goodbye to Julius as she approached her stepmother's car. Julius' eyes said much more than goodbye to Doreen. They said, *don't say a word*. Doreen got the message.

“So Thelma, is our routine back to normal in the morning?”

“Oh yes, if you don't mind? I think it's good for the girls to venture out a bit.”

“I'm just glad to help.”

Thelma and the girls left as Angela and Julius got in the car. “So how was your day, honey?” Julius looked straight ahead. “It was OK.” Angela stared at her son for a moment. She knew he was hiding something.

At Angela's dinner table, Julius picked at his food. “Sweetheart, you're usually starving. What's wrong?”

“Guess I'm not hungry.”

She got up from the table and checked her son's head for a fever. “Are you sick? You don't have a temperature.”

“I'm just tired.”

“Listen, a mom knows her child. Something is bothering you. What is it?”

“I'm just tired. Can I be excused?”

Angela shook her head and sighed. “Go on.” She began clearing dishes then stopped and went to the phone.

Ed Billups was on his way to the porch for his after dinner cigar when the phone rang. “Hello? Hi Angela. Doreen? Yes, she doing dishes but I'll get her.” He went to the kitchen, Doreen, Ms. Angela is on the phone for you.”

Doreen dried her hands and went to the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi Doreen, this is Ms. Angela. I didn't mean to bother you. I'm just worried about Julius. Do you know if anything is bothering him?”

Doreen thought hard before answering. “No ma'am.”

“Are you sure Doreen? I know you two are close.”

“Yes ma'am, I'm sure.”

“Alright, thank you. Can I speak to Thelma?”

“She's not here. She had a meeting with Bishop Barnes.”

“She did? Is your sister with her?”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Thanks Doreen. Goodbye.”

Angela ran to the stairs and called for Julius.

“Ma'am?” replied Julius appearing at the top of the stairs.

“I need to make a run. I should only be gone an hour.”

CHAPTER 94

“As you can see by all the renovations around the church, as well as, how fast we're growing, Mrs. Billups, we're on the ground floor of a miracle,” said the bishop.

Thelma and Debbie sat in front of the bishop's desk. Their dresses were hideous as usual.

The bishop continued, “We're on our way to becoming a Mega-Church.”

“Yes bishop, introducing the world to Prophet Garnier did wonders for this church,” replied Thelma.

The bishop held his composure. He couldn't let his anger show. He cleared his throat, “Well yes,

Lawrence Garnier played his role well in doing God's will. Although Ms. Billups, you must realize that roles and talents are seasonal. That's why I asked for you and lovely little Debbie to come today. As you know, God reveals the mysteries concerning his will to me. Prophet Garnier got us started but the season of Lawrence Garnier has passed. The Lord revealed to me that the season of the child has arrived. It's the season of little Debbie Billups."

Thelma's eyes widened as the bishop spoke.

The bishop continued, "The future of this ministry has been revealed. We are moving toward salvation and as the book of Isaiah states, '*A little child will lead*'. It's you Debbie! Born out of sin and spared from the jaws of death. You passed the test. You will be our next prophet!"

Angela's car squealed into the parking lot. she quickly got out and raced into the main entrance of the church. As she ran down the hallway towards the bishop's chamber, her path was suddenly blocked by the massive Deacon Stone.

"What is he planning with that little girl?"

"He is meeting with the child and her stepmother," replied the deacon.

"He's up to no good. Let me by."

"Angela you can not go in," he said as he reached for her.

"No! Don't touch me, Stoney!"

"You must leave."

Angela paced side to side. She knew she was no match for the behemoth.

"Alright," she said, "I'll just wait till they come out."

Deacon Stone grinned, "It's been a long time since you have had a visit. Do not involve yourself with this unless you want them to resume."

Angela's face showed her nervousness. She began to sweat. She went back to her car and waited a moment. She saw the giant man step outside the church. He just stared and grinned. Finally she drove away.

Thelma diligently wrote notes in her large bible as the bishop spoke.

"You really think this will work?"

"Of course it will, Sister Billups. Debbie has already been transformed. Now we must mold her to become an anointed vessel. After we introduce her to the world, she'll become bigger than Marjoe."

Thelma bounced in her seat. "How will we introduce her to the world?"

The bishop smiled. "This ministry along with it's first child prophet will be televised."

Back at home, Angela peeked into Julius' room. He was fast asleep. She went downstairs and out onto the porch. She lit a cigarette. She blew the first draw of smoke out wishing she could do the same with her thoughts. She noticed a light through the trees. She walked to the top of her driveway and saw Deacon's Stone's hearse on the street at the end of her driveway. She hustled back into the house. She closed her blinds and paced the floor. "He's gonna watch my every move." She knew Bishop Barnes was up to no good and little Debbie needed to be protected just like her son who now wasn't talking to her. She had committed many crimes on the bishop's behalf. She was desperate. She was afraid to go to sleep, she didn't want another dreadful visit.

She put on a pot of coffee and sat defeated at the kitchen table. She didn't know how long she could hold on. She wished she could pray but knew she was not worthy of any help from God. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she realized that the only person she knew who had any sign of God's favor was the one person she stripped a god-given gift from. Lawrence Garnier.

A CHILD SHALL LEAD

The next morning, Doreen and Debbie greeted Angela and Julius as they got into the car. Thelma bounced out onto the porch.

“Yoo hoo!”

Angela waved back. “Morning Thelma!”

“God has given us a beautiful day,” replied Thelma. “Thanks for taking care of my girls!”

“Wow, Thelma is really happy today,” said Angela.

“I’ll say,” said Doreen. “She got up early and made pancakes. . . on a school day!”

Angela looked back at Debbie. “Oh, so you had pancakes Debbie?”

“God is good,” replied Debbie as she gazed out the window.

Angela dropped Debbie off first. When she got Julius and Doreen to school, she put her arm around her son and kissed his cheek.

“Have a good day, honey,” she said.

“Bye mom,” replied Julius as he got out.

“Thank you Ms. Campbell,” waved Doreen.

Angela thought for a moment about Thelma. *Maybe I’ll stop by there.*

Thelma was reading her large bible while enjoying her coffee when the doorbell rang. She invited Angela in for a cup.

“I really appreciate your help with the girls Angela.”

“They’re great girls, Thelma. You manage them very well.”

“It’s all with God’s help.”

“How’s Debbie’s recovery?”

“God has truly blessed us all. She’s doing fine. Even Bishop Barnes sees much potential in her.”

“Oh, is that what he said yesterday?”

“Yes he did, among other things.”

“Anything you’d like to share?”

“Of course I would, but the bishop wants to announce this news to the whole church in due time. Believe me, though, it’s glorious news.”

Angela just smiled and sipped her coffee.

Angela didn’t know what to expect when she arrived at the church. She did expect to come face to face with Deacon Stone so she approached slowly.

“I need to speak with the bishop.”

There was no life in the eyes of the deacon as he flashed a sinister grin. “Just to talk?” he asked.

“It’s fine Stoney,” interrupted the bishop. “All she can do is talk.”

Bishop Barnes led Angela to his chamber as the deacon slipped quietly out of sight. “Seeing how you’ve got many reasons to despise me, if your plan was to stab me with another shoe you would’ve done it by now, but you haven’t. So why are you here?”

“I’m here to ask you to leave the Billups girl alone.”

“Leave her alone?”

“You’ve got something planned for her. Something evil, I’m sure of it.”

The bishop laughed, “Your imagination makes me question your sanity, Cottontail.”

“I know you’re up to something.”

“I’m up to doing the will of God.”

“This ministry ain’t got nothing to do with God, and you know it.”

“Do I? What I know is someone with a true god-given gift came to me and this ministry.”

“And you destroyed that gift.”

“I did everything to encourage someone who didn't appreciate his talents. I would've killed for what he could do!”

“You killed for a lot less.”

“My dear, you have no idea the sacrifices I've made for the believers of this ministry. That's why God himself favored me and raised a prophet in my midst. That just don't happen everyday, but it happened here with us. That's speaks to me about the direction of this ministry.”

“Who sold you that bullshit? And why involve that little girl?”

“How dare you get in the way! If not Debbie Billups, then who? Julius?”

“Don't you touch my son!” growled Angela.

“Don't you forget your predicament! Goodbye!”

The bishop walked to his desk and sat down. Angela's eyes welled with tears as she slowly backed out of his chamber. Bishop Barnes waited a moment. He wanted to be sure Angela was gone. He slowly walked out into the hallway. Stoney was already there.

“Is she?”

“Yes she is gone,” replied the deacon.

“I need to drop in on Lawrence. Maybe he's changed his thinking.”

Stoney took a long look at the bishop. “What if it has not changed?”

“Then he hasn't got a prayer.”

CHAPTER 96

The pain I felt made me tremble. It was as if needles were in my bloodstream. I barely made it to the front door. When I opened it Bishop Barnes smiled and entered.

“Wow son, you look like shit.”

“That's how I feel. Guess you're here to kick me out.”

“How could you say such a hurtful thing as that? Your clothes, shoes, bank account, car and this fine place all came from the Almighty. You did such a fine job representing him, you earned his favor. You callin' God an Indian giver?”

“Of course not. I just wondered why you were here.”

“Me? I came just to have a drink with you. I wanted to see how you were getting along.”

The bishop walked over and poured himself a drink. “Can I pour you one?”

“It won't help the pain.”

The bishop swallowed his drink. “I get the feeling you were expecting something else.”

I tried to hide a grin. “You know, there was a time when I could see your next step before you made it.”

“Not if it concerned you, son.”

I dropped my head. The bishop continued.

“You never appreciated your gift. Now it's gone. You're nothing but a broken man wishing for someone to come through that door with a fix so you can escape your tragic life.”

“Where is Angela? Did she bail on you once she figured out you killed her brother?”

“As far as she knows, her brother died a long time ago. You can't kill a man more than once.”

“You managed to do it. How many times did you kill Reverend Robbie?”

“So you say. But who are you? Just a failed prophet on his way to becoming a successful junkie. Who's gonna trust you?”

I wrenched in pain. I managed to make it to the sofa where I collapsed.

“I hate to see you like this son. Stay with the ministry and I'll get you the needed help.”

“I'm done with you.”

“That's too bad.” Bishop Barnes reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small brown leather case.

“This is your last freebie.”

He tossed the case on the sofa next to me.

I closed my eyes and tried to calm my nerves. The bishop saw me sweating.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Have at it.”

I slowly opened my eyes and stared directly at the bishop, then I clawed into the case like a rat on a block of government cheese. I took the rubber tube and tied off just above the elbow. Bishop Barnes shook his head in response to my desperation. He slapped my arm to raise a vein. He checked the prepared syringe for bubbles, then he shot me.

“Ahhh!” my eyes rolled back as that wonderful warmth rushed in.

While in the car, the bishop was on the phone with Deacon Stone. “I'm telling you Stoney, don't fret, he's worse than dead. His reputation is lost. I'll admit, it makes me sad. A real gift wasted. We could've taken more advantage of a gift like that. What? Yeah, I know it set the tone for the little Billups girl, but she ain't gifted. Lawrence was real. A real gift wasted.”

Suddenly, the bishop pulled his car over. “Stoney, I gotta go. I just thought of a gift I wasted a long time ago.” Moments later, Bishop Barnes sat in his car in front of Angela Campbell's house. Through the trees he could see the light from her bedroom window and the silhouette of her pacing back and fourth. He wanted to go inside to her, even more so, he wanted to be welcomed by her to do so. He sat for a moment, then drove on.

CHAPTER 97

My eyes opened and I took a deep breath. It was hard for me to focus. I needed a drink. I turned to my right.

“Fire!”

There to the right of me was a dense rolling black cloud. I couldn't see the kitchen or the hallway that led to the bedroom. I jumped and quickly opened the glass doors that led to the balcony I needed air, or did I?

“I'm not choking,” I realized. I took a long deep breath. “This isn't smoke.”

“LAWRENCE!”

I dropped to the floor. The voice I heard was heavy and deep.

“LAWRENCE!” the voice sounded as if something enormous was having trouble breathing.

My whole body trembled as I kept my face buried in the floor.

“W-Who's there?” I was hoping no one would answer.

“LAWRENCE!”

“Stop! Stop it! Bishop Barnes is that you?”

“HOW DARE YOU GIVE CREDENCE TO A MERE HUMAN FOR MY EXISTENCE!”

“Who's there?”

“LOOK UP. I WONT TELL YOU TWICE!”

I rattled like a bag of tin cans and looked up at the cloud.

“STAND UP!”

Struggling, I managed to get to my feet. I shook at the sight of the rolling cloud.

“SO YOU ARE THE GIFTED ONE.”

“Please, who do you want?”

“YOU!”

“Why?”

“I HATE YOU.”

“H-How did you get here?”

“YOU INVITED ME.”

“I never invited you.”

“YOU OPENED THE DOOR TO YOUR WORLD FOR ME TO ENTER.”

“H-How?”

“YOU ALTERED YOUR STATE OF BEING THROUGH NOSTRUM.”

“You mean you're just a figment of my imagination?”

“I AM VERY REAL AS YOU SHALL SEE.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I WANT TO DESTROY YOU.”

I pissed where I stood.

“NOW JUMP FROM THE BALCONY.”

“W-What? Don't do this, please.”

“JUMP.”

“No. Please, don't.” I began to back up.

“JUMP.”

“Please, stop it!” I backed out onto the balcony. I noticed that the rolling cloud never proceeded forward.

“JUMP!”

I trembled but I didn't move. “Are you God?”

“NO. NO. NO!” Lightening flashed inside the cloud.

I tried to compose myself and sound firm. “I'm not jumping and I'm coming back inside!” I stepped into the room and slowly approached.

“VERY WELL. STEP INTO THIS DARKNESS.”

“Shit, that ain't happening.”

“YOU THINK YOU WILL WIN AGAINST ME, GIFTED ONE? YOU WILL NOT! YOU WILL TREMBLE BEFORE ME AGAIN. I WILL RULE YOU!”

Instantly the cloud was gone. I stood alone sweaty and spent. I saw the bottle of whiskey on the bar.

Empty bottles of hair dye stained the sink in Angela's bathroom. She toweled her hair for the third time. As she stood in front of the mirror, she closed her eyes and removed the towel, “Damn.” The white streak was as bright and clean as ever.

I sat up in bed with eyes as big as griddle irons. Every light in the place was on and my bottle was empty. Pangs of sickness were replaced with shutters of fear. Old childhood fears arose within me. The terror of waiting for my father to deliver brutal beatings to my mother. Beatings that I foresaw but was too young to convince her to hide. Also the fear of waiting for the impending gunshot that finally freed me from the brutality of my father became apparent. That bullet ushered inside me the fear of my unknown future. Far worse though, was this present fear of what I just experienced. Was this demon real or was my mind gone? Either way, it was real to me and I was terrified.

Deacon Stone was at the church early. As he left the room marked, '**No Admittance**', he wasn't sure if Bishop Barnes was awake yet. He went to his chamber to find out. He opened the door to see the bishop, still in his pajamas and robe, sitting at his desk with his head down. Steam rose from the coffee mug on the desk. Within the reflective rays of light from the grand stained-glass window, a rare grin appeared and dissolved across the face of the stoic giant. He approached the desk.

“Angela will be in today to make communion loaves.”

“Oh, Stoney. I didn't hear you come in. I have such a headache.”

“It's apparent that you were with the prophet and you were successful.”

Bishop Barnes slowly raised his head. “What?” The bishop got up and walked into his bathroom. In the mirror he saw his entire head of hair had turned white.

Angela arrived at the church. She was concerned at how quiet the kids were on the way to school. She didn't want to have to deal with the bishop or the deacon, so she went directly into the door marked, '**No Admittance**', and closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER 98

When Sunday's service was about to begin, Thelma and many of the other church folk murmured over the fact that Bishop Barnes was not in the foyer to greet the crowd as usual. Was he going to preach? Why was he nowhere to be found? With the choir in place and everyone in their seats it seemed that the service would indeed proceed.

Deacon Stone approached the pulpit and in his deep creepy voice greeted the congregation and gave the announcements. He also read off names from the sick and shut in list and encouraged the church to remember these ones in prayer. Then he turned the service over to the bishop.

As Bishop Barnes approached the pulpit the crowd gasped. He was wearing a full white robe trimmed in gold and his hair was completely white. He surveyed the crowd for a moment then he spoke.

“Last night God came to me. Not in a dream, or a thought or even a vision. I was awakened by a breeze that not only caressed me but brought me to complete awareness. I walked out of my room and in the middle of my chamber was a pillar of light. Then a glorious sound, a voice comprised of millions of angels spoke to me. I am your Creator, said the voice. I fell upon my face in awe, and the voice said, Rise my son.”

There was complete silence in the church. Bishop Barnes had everyone's attention. Deacon Stone watched from behind the curtains and saw wide eyes and opened mouths as the bishop continued.

“My God told me to STAND UP! When I made it to my feet he lifted me off the ground and said, Well done my child. You have forged a ministry worthy of my favor. Tears fell from my eyes as I basked in the glory of my Lord. Then he said to me, Continue in this manner and I will lift your church as a model for all. Then I spoke to my Lord and told him that I am so weary.

“I told him I didn't feel like enough people were getting the message. Not enough people believe what I say. Then he told me to STOP! He said, I will bless your efforts. I will send help to you by way of many prophets. As long as you keep my word and continue this ministry in this manner, prophets will continue to rise among you. Then he said, For those who doubt you I shall place a mark upon your head that will not go unnoticed. All who follow you shall be blessed. Then my Lord left me. Now I asked all of you. Will you follow me? Will you follow this ministry?”

The crowd rose to their feet and roared with applause and cheers. Deacon Stone's face widened with a rare grin as he proceeded to roll out the large gold kettles to receive money. Unlike the bishop who was all about the money, for the deacon it was about the number of new followers that was important. This ministry had to spread. It had to grow. It had to infest the world. The ushers dispensed collection plates throughout the crowd. As the choir sang and the money flowed, a snow-white headed Bishop Barnes stood in the pulpit with outstretched arms and he knew that the Church of Advancing Light was his house.

CHAPTER 99

Weeks past and I was still scared whenever I went from one room to the other. I couldn't get that gruesome voice out of my head. That slow drawl and hissing sounded like a giant, croaking in agony due to a lack of oxygen. I felt that since the trash in my brown leather case was all used up, my fear would dry up also. It had not. In the kitchen I placed a fresh bottle of Johnnie Walker on the table as I sat down.

I covered every inch of one side of my cracker with Underwood Deviled Ham, *my favorite*. Before I attacked it, I knew something was missing. I opened the cabinet and grabbed one of the many jars of Planter's peanuts. Back at the table, I poured a double Johnnie Walker to wash my lunch down. I popped the cracker in my mouth and slowly savored it. I took a long drink of whiskey. "Ahh!" For a moment, I had forgotten how rough my last two weeks had been. Suddenly, I felt dizzy and my right hand went numb. I shook it to regain feeling in my fingers but knocked the jar of peanuts over and it rolled off the other side of the table.

From the other side of the table, I saw a black top hat rise up. There he stood, Mr. Peanut, his name was printed plain as day across his hat. I was amazed, not because a peanut man with a monocle and a top hat was in front of me, it was his size. I was amazed that with his top hat, he stood every bit of six feet. He tipped his hat, twirled his cane and began to dance. Suddenly he stopped to tap his cane on the floor then the music started. It was big band music. I think the song was 42nd Street.

Mr. Peanut danced around the kitchen, I mean he really was good, actually great. He moved like Fred Astaire. I was amazed at his talent. How does a peanut learn to dance that good? I even wondered where the big band music was coming from. It wasn't the radio and the TV in the other room was off. Where was the music coming from? Who cares, Mr. Peanut was putting on one hell of a show. When the drum solo began he jumped on top of the table and I swear he was better than Fred Astaire. I started clapping to the beat as he moved. I was happy to have a front row seat to my own private performance from, in my opinion, the most understated performer ever, the great Mr. Peanut.

I was startled by the sudden burst of laughter that came from behind me. I turned to see The Walking Man, from my Johnnie Walker bottle. He was laughing and enjoying the show. He slapped me on the back and poured me another drink, and sure enough he was not on the label. He was life-size in my kitchen. I mean, this was the fucking V.I.P. section of my own private club. The party was going fine but it was starting to get warm, actually hot really fast. Even Mr. Peanut was starting to sweat oil, so he stopped dancing and started fanning himself with his hat.

The Walking Man stopped laughing and began pointing as he was backing up. I could hardly breathe, as I glanced at my can of deviled ham and saw that the label was blank. There before me stood the Red Devil with his three prong trident. He stood about six feet, although he was in a crouched position. From across the table the devil set his hollow eyes upon me totally ignoring Mr. Peanut.

The refrigerator door flew open and my friend the penguin with the colorful scarf was waving us in. The Walking Man wasted no time diving into the fridge, while the devil moved closer towards me. Mr. Peanut bashed him in the head with his cane which disintegrated from the heat. The Red Devil turned toward Mr. Peanut and hissed. The giant peanut quickly ran and jumped into the fridge. I took that moment to race toward the fridge, but the hissing devil was too fast for me. He drove his trident into my chest. I screamed in agony as I could feel my organs searing. He pulled the trident out and I dropped to my knees. I looked up and gasped as he impaled the molten fork into my head.

The household of Rachel and Mitchell continued to decline. Stress heaped such an emotional toll on them, that conversation was reduced to screams of rage.

“I KNOW I WAS WRONG!” screamed Mitchell. “I know, I know! I'm lower than dirt, I know, but there's a child involved. MY CHILD! I can only say I'm sorry so many times.”

“WELL, SAY IT AGAIN! Every time you see my face say it. SAY IT!”

“I'm just worried, Rachel. I don't know where my child is.”

“I'm pregnant with your child. I don't give a DAMN about that bitch you laid down with or her baby!”

Mitchell didn't flinch, he just drew back and slapped his wife.

I couldn't sleep. My bed was sopping wet and so was I. Wet from the sweat the pain inside me produced. I didn't make it to the toilet in time and threw-up on the floor. I was too sick to clean it up. I needed my leather case. I clamored through the drawer near the bed. There it was, full of everything I needed to shoot-up with, but not a trace of anything to shoot. I staggered to the kitchen and swallowed as much whiskey as I could choke down. I needed stuff. I had plenty of money and even more pain, but what I needed was stuff, junk, garbage to put into my veins to stop the agony. I had to go to the streets.

CHAPTER 100

Once again I embarked upon another tour, but this time it was without my only true friends. This time I wasn't riding in a big black Escalade following the country contours of the bible belt. This time I was on foot and descending into the belly of the city. This was no Miracle Tour. This tour was tragic. This time I didn't stand out, didn't wear tailor made suit's and expensive shoes. Dark sweat pants and a hoodie caused me to blend into the background and allowed me to melt in and out of the shadows. I moved quietly in my gym shoes not disrupting the sounds of the street, the occasional passing car and distant voices in the rustling of wind-blown trash.

Instead of traveling from state to state, I went street to street by way of dark alleys ripe with the smell of garbage and despair. I could've really used my two best friends. The cautious counsel of Ethan and the hardboiled streets smarts of Blu. They're both gone now. Both of whom the great prophet with the God-given gift could not save.

I had no clue as to where I was going, but the painful sickness in my veins acted as divining rods leading me to my well-spring of artificial reality. Every alley I approached was darker than the next. Vermin of every size ran across my path. Wails and moans drifted from the shadows. Behind a dumpster, two silhouettes expressed their love through sexual violence. Finally, I heard the merchant calls from the shadowy market place I was seeking.

“Psst, I got that chronic.”

“Jelly beans and Sparklers.”

“Hey baby, want a date?”

“You got the lettuce, I got the Sopers.”

As I continued, I realized that there was so much to choose from and I didn't have a clue of what I needed. Then, from the shadows came a figure.

“Hey bro, you shopping but you ain't stopping. You a narc?”

“No, I'm sick and I need something.”

“Then go to the clinic man, we're clockin' paper here.”

“I approached slowly. “Listen, someone gave me something and I need more. I just don't know what it was.” I pulled out my small leather case and opened it. The man looked inside.

“Well you ain't a narc carry this kit. You a base head? Then you might be doing smack. You shoot

so you ain't piping. I can do you an Eight ball for forty but you need artillery. Needles, a spoon, that's another forty. You got it?"

"Money's not the problem. You need to show me how."

There was a long pause. "You mean, somebody took the time to give you wings and just left you? That's fuckin' bullshit. Well, the whole bundle gonna cost you a buck twenty since I have to provide a tutorial."

I agreed and we walked down the side steps of a nearby building. He used a key and in a basement lit with only one bulb, he taught me how to fly. He told me that most vendors would've just knocked me in the head but he was different. He wanted to provide a full service to ensure a repeat business.

And repeat I did. I was back to fully charge my flight kit every other day. In the privacy of my own place I was base commander of my very own launching pad . . . and I flew. I flew for weeks, then for months. I shot so much money into my veins that my wealth began to dry up. So I shot my expensive suit's, shoes and most of the furniture. Once, on my way to cop a fix, I was jumped and robbed. If only Blu had been with me, that would've never happened. Thanks to Blu though, it would never happen again. The gun Blu gave me would assure that no one would ever interfere with my habit again.

CHAPTER 101

Doreen finished her journey through the lunch line by grabbing two cookies and a apple.

"Dory, back here!" waved Julius. Doreen approached the last table by the window.

"Only two more bells till the weekend," she said.

"Yeah, that's what we need to talk about. Can you get out of the house for a few hours?"

"I have chores on Saturday and if I don't get done I won't have any free time on Sunday."

"I need you to buy me some time, before my mom gets suspicious."

"What's all this about?"

Julius looked around then reached into his pocket. He slid a folded piece of paper to Doreen.

"What's this address?" she asked.

"Lawrence Garnier, the prophet, I found it in my mom's room."

Julius, I told you to leave those journals alone, it's too upsetting. This is killing you and it's scaring me."

"Yeah, it's upsetting but we did read some of them. All I know is that the bishop really pissed my mom off. He obviously did something wrong. She stays sick and needs help. Debbie too. What is the bishop planning for her? Why is she your step mom's favorite all of the sudden? We need to save them. The Prophet Garnier can give us answers. He's the only one left to help us."

"You're right but I can't get away. It's a twenty minute bus ride to downtown."

"We can figure this out. You can still buy me some time if I start early enough. If the phone rings can you get to it first?"

"Sure, I always do."

"I'll tell my mom that I'm gonna ride my bike and will probably ride to your house. I'll call you and tell you when I'm leaving for the bus. The whole thing will take about three hours. If mom calls you within a hour, tell her I'm on my way to your house. If it's two hours before she calls tell her I just left. If she doesn't call, cool. I'll fill you in on what I find out when I get home, but you've got to get the phone every time it rings."

Doreen thought and nodded. "This could work."

Saturday, around nine am, Julius set his plan in motion by hiding his bike. Thirty-five minutes later, he was in front of Lawrence Garnier's door.

CHAPTER 102

I staggered to the threshold of my bedroom and held on to both sides for dear life. I would've never crawled out of bed if that pounding hadn't hurt so bad. I wanted to kill the source of that painful noise, so I staggered on. "Stop hammering my door you asshole!" I shouted as I swung open the door.

"I was just knocking, sir."

I blinked a few times to focus on a kid at my door. *Why would a kid be at my door?* I thought. "I'm not interested in any cookies, son."

"I'm not a Girl Scout, sir."

"What?"

"Girl Scouts sell cookies. I'm not a girl or a scout."

"So, no cookies?"

"Not a Thin Mint . . . nothing."

"Damn, that sounds pretty good right about now."

"I came to talk to you."

"You got business with me?"

"I think so."

"Oh . . . well, come in." I suddenly realized I didn't have on a shirt. I felt embarrassed Strange, I felt this young man deserved a better image. "Let me get a shirt on. Have a seat."

The young man looked around. "Where?"

"Um, I'm re-decorating, so I got rid of a lot of stuff." I ran into the kitchen and grabbed the only chair I hadn't sold yet. "Here you go. I'll be right back." I quickly threw on my hoodie and returned. "Who brought you here?"

"I caught the bus, it was easy."

"How'd you get my address?"

"That was even easier." the boy said nothing else.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Julius Campbell. I'm in the choir at the Church of Advancing Light. My mother is Angela Campbell."

Bingo! I thought. *Angela, the woman I most wanted to fuck but never got the chance.* "Oh yeah, I think

I know your mother. Well, what can I do for you?"

"I want you to tell me about the future of two people. My mother, I want to know what's wrong with her and Debbie Billups. What does the bishop have planned for her? I think she's in danger."

Once again, I felt embarrassed as I stood in front of this young man. "Wow, that's a lot to digest."

"Mr. Garnier, why are you sweating?"

I touched my forehead and found myself to be a well-spring of perspiration.

"Do you have to hold my hand to get a reading on my future?"

As the boy reached out to me, his hand transformed into a venomous snake. I jumped away.

"What's wrong Mr. Garnier? You don't look so good."

"Sorry. I don't . . . I mean, I lost the ability of foresight."

Just then I heard the refrigerator door open in the kitchen. I turned and saw the penguin with the colorful scarf wave at me. "Um, Julius I'd like you to meet a friend of mine." I went to the fridge to reveal to the boy what I'm sure he saw from where he was sitting. I opened the fridge and saw the penguin standing in the distance. "Come on," I said. "I want you to meet Julius." The look on the boy's face made me stand straight up.

“I'd better be going now. Sorry I bothered you.”

The boy sprang to the door in a panic.

“Hey wait!” I yelled. “Beware of the bishop!”

The boy left, slamming the door behind him. The penguin left too. I was alone again and embarrassed

When Julius got home, he raced straight up to his room. From the kitchen, Angela heard the door slam and shook her head in a comfortable disgust on how he entered. She kept cleaning and was glad he was home. When the time felt right, Julius went out to the hallway and used the phone. Doreen picked up.

“Dory, I'm home. I'll fill you in at church tomorrow.”

“Is everything alright?” she asked.

“No, we got problems.”

CHAPTER 103

Sunday morning, Julius' efforts to explain his visit with the prophet proved frustrating. First he tried to explain how Mr. Garnier was living. “There was no couch, TV or even pictures on the wall. He brought out a kitchen chair into the empty living room for me,” he told Doreen before being prompted to take his seat in the choir row. All through the service, Julius' mind shifted from Mr. Garnier's strange behavior to the warning, *Beware of the bishop*. After service and between the usual interruptions, Julius managed to inform Doreen of how Mr. Garnier tried to get him to meet someone who was inside the refrigerator.

“What was wrong with him?” asked Doreen.

“I don't know but he's really messed up. He can't see the future anymore either. Dory, we can't let that happen to Debbie. The last thing he said to me was to beware of the bishop.”

Doreen looked worried as she watched her sister in the midst of Bishop Barnes and Thelma. *Beware of the bishop*, she thought. Julius could see the worried look on Doreen's face as she watched her sister being made over by those two evil adults.

He watched helplessly at the bishop and Ms. Billups as they laughed and patted poor Debbie on the head. *What were their plans for her?* he thought. He watched as Ms. Billups held her large bible so proudly. *Her large bible*. He almost choked as he remembered reading in his mother's journal about notes in Thelma's large bible.

“Dory, he whispered. “Her bible.”

“What?”

“In my mom's journal, I read that she wish she could see the notes in Thelma's large bible. You've gotta get that book and read her notes.

“She keeps that close to her at all times.”

“I don't care. Whatever the bishop has in store for Debbie is written in that large bible.”

For the rest of the day, the only thing Doreen could focus on was Thelma's large bible. As usual Thelma kept it close by. *This is gonna take some doing*, thought Doreen as she laid awake in her bed. She couldn't sleep knowing, that at that very moment, Thelma was downstairs reading out of the very book that she was certain held all the answers concerning her little sister.

She didn't know when she fell asleep, but she was awakened by the sound of her father knocking around as he was getting ready for work. She heard him go downstairs and heard Thelma as she followed. *She's getting his breakfast and making his lunch*, she thought. Doreen quietly slipped out of bed and slowly opened her bedroom door. She looked and saw that Debbie's door was closed. She

knew her sleepy-head sister was sleep.

She slowly walked down the hall toward the room that Thelma shared with her father. As she past Debbie's room she felt nervous. It would only take a moment to at least grab a quit glimpse at the notes in the large bible.

“Doreen, Debbie! Time to get up for school! yelled Thelma from downstairs.

Doreen almost jumped out of her skin. She stayed quiet for a moment. She heard Thelma resumed her conversation with Ed, so she proceeded to go ahead with her mission.

“What are you doing, Dory?” Debbie was standing in the hallway rubbing her eyes.

“Um, I wanted to asked daddy a question, but he's not in the room. He's already downstairs and I don't want Ug-moe to hear what we talk about.” Doreen quickly closed the door and walked past her sister and went into the bathroom. “Come on, let's get ready for school.”

CHAPTER 104

I stretched out on the bed and listened to the quiet. *What was that?* I thought I heard something. I sat up. I heard it again. I got up and walk into the living room but I couldn't see it. What I saw was a dense fog.

“LAWRENCE.”

The voice from the fog made me tremble. I tried to appear strong and show no fear.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I'VE ALWAYS BEEN HERE. YOU WERE NOT CONSCIOUS OF MY EXISTENCE,” replied the voice from the fog.” I'VE BEEN AROUND SINCE MANKIND BEGAN. I WAS ONCE ONE OF THE MORNING STARS THAT APPLAUDED AT THE CREATION OF MAN.”

“Do you have a name?”

“YOUR TONGUE CANNOT PROPERLY PRONOUNCE MY NAME. IN YOUR TONGUE IT SOUNDS LIKE CHIMELOC!”

It sounded like a roar when the voice said it's name and I started to shake again.

“What do you want with me?”

“FOR YOU AND ALL MANKIND TO CEASE EXISTENCE.”

“Why?”

“ALL OF THE MORNING STARS WERE IN FAVOR, UNTIL MAN CAME TO BE, THEN THE MOST POWERFUL ONE AMONG US BECAME ENVIOUS. HE ROAMED THE EARTH WATCHING AND DECEIVING THE WEAK CREATION. ONCE HE UNDERSTOOD, HE CHALLENGED THE CREATOR'S RIGHT TO GOVERN A SPECIES THAT COULD NOT SURVIVE ON it's OWN.”

I heard sounds resembling heavy cinder blocks being dragged, coming from within the dense black fog. “That horrible dragging sound, what is it?”

“A THIRD OF THE MORNING STARS CHOSE TO FOLLOW THE ONE WHO CHALLENGED THE MASTER. A GREAT WAR BROKE OUT AND WE WERE BOUNDED WITH MANY BURDENS AND EXILED FROM OUR DWELLINGS. IT'S MY BURDENS THAT YOU HEAR. WE NOW DWELL AMONG THE VICINITY OF THE EARTH UNTIL WE ARE CAST INTO THE ABYSS FOREVER. TILL THEN WE INTEND TO DESTROY MANKIND. . . ESPECIALLY YOU, PROPHET.”

“Then why haven't you killed me by now?” I asked.

No answer came, only that horrible dragging sound. “I want you to leave now!” I screamed.

“SO YOU WANT TO BE RID OF ME PROPHET?”

“More than anything!”

“THEN YOU MUST OFFER ME ANOTHER.”

“What?”

“ALLOW ME ENTRANCE INTO ANOTHER'S REALM. SOMEONE UNMARKED AND PURE.”

“I don't know what you mean.”

“SURELY YOU KNOW OTHERS LIKE YOURSELF. ONES WITH SIMILAR TALENTS. THE GIFTED. OFFER THAT TO ME AND FREE YOURSELF OF MY PRESENCE.”

“I can't do that, I don't know anyone like me.”

“NO PROPHET? YOU, THE GREAT SEER? HAVE YOU SEEN YOUR FUTURE, PROPHET?”

“No, I unable to see my own future.”

“I HAVE SEEN A GLIMPSE OF THE ABYSS TO WHICH I AM CONDEMNED. THE AGONIZING HORROR THAT AWAIT'S ME BEARS MORE WEIGHT UPON ME THEN ALL OF THE BURDENS I CARRY. ALL BECAUSE I MADE A CHOICE. YET YOU AND THE LIKE CAN BE FORGIVEN, BECAUSE MANKIND, WITH ALL it's FAULTS, IS LOVED. YOU ALTERED YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS AND ALLOWED ME TO REACH YOU. NOW, YOU MUST LOOK UPON MY FACE. ENTER THE DARKNESS AND BECOME WISER.”

I backed away, “I'm not coming any closer. You wont kill me because you don't have the power, so leave!”

“BRAVE PROPHET, TO APPROACH ME WOULD PROVE MOST BENEFICIAL FOR YOU. APPROACH ME AND BE RID OF ME AND YOUR GIFT FOREVER .”

“What? You can rid me of my foresight?”

“IT WOULD BENEFIT US BOTH IF YOU WERE FREE OF THAT POWER . . .COME. LOOK UPON MY FACE JUST ONCE THEN YOU WILL LIVE OUT YOUR YEARS QUIETLY.”

I knew these were only words to trick me, yet I felt compelled the cross the plane that separated the lightness from the dark. To enter probably meant death, which would finally free me of my curse. Curiosity gripped me and even though the danger was imminent, I had to die knowing what truly lurked in the realm of the dark fog. I slowly took a step back, but the steps that followed were forward.

“YESSSSSS!” hissed the voice inside the fog, “WALK DEEP INTO THE DARKNESS.”

As I crossed the threshold from light of my apartment to the darkness of the unknown, I was instantly overwhelmed with feeling of despair and profound sadness. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I took another step into the fog. I felt heavy and the atmosphere around me was thick. My breathing was labored and my ears were clogged yet I could hear the approaching sound of enormous cinder blocks dragging. I looked behind to see a view of my apartment as if through a sheer curtain and wept because of my lost desire to return. I stepped forward slowly moving deeper into the dense fog. I became washed with hatred. I could feel my heart begin to harden.

“COME DEEPER INTO THE DARKNESS, PROPHET,” howled the voice of Chimeloc. “DO NOT BE AFRAID.”

I was fully afraid as fear overpowered the hate. My stride started to stiffen with the paralysis of terror.

“DON'T STOP!” the roar was deafening.

I could not move as the sound of dragged burdens got closer. Then I heard a faint sound from behind me. It was a baby crying. I turned and saw an infant on the floor of my living room crying alone.

“IGNORE THE TRICKERY FROM THE PAST. THE TRUTH IS IN FRONT OF YOU!”

Although I couldn't see him the sound of heavy cinder blocks being dragged was getting louder, and I knew Chimeloc would be in front of me very soon. The cry of the infant back in my living room became louder and clearer and the familiarity of his sound rushed in on me as sharply as a thousand needles in my brain. I heard the honking of a car horn hammered upon by a frantic driver. Then I knew for sure...*it was my brother Lyle*. I tried rushed back to save him, maybe this was how I was gonna

make everything right. My movement was extremely slow and laborious, but I had to reach my brother in time.

“DON'T MOVE!”

The thunderous voice was right on top of me. I hesitated and turned around and out of the darkness a hideous portion of Chimeloc appeared. I gasped. What I saw resembled a sort of wing or fin that was covered in tar or thick crude oil.

“LOOK UP AT ME, PROPHET!” I kept moving backward and I didn't look. I had to save Lyle and I was almost to the membrane that went from darkness to light.

“LOOK UP AND BEHOLD!”

The voice echoed the thick atmosphere around me. I was almost to the edge of the dark when I raised my eyes upward. Abject fear engulfed me as my eyes bled effortless streams of tears. Time seemed to stop and I could feel the warm loss of my bodily functions. My jaw gave way for a frantic scream but only shocked silence bellowed out. Then as if time grabbed hold of me the sound of Lyle's cry brought me back into the moment. I jumped through the veil of fog into the light of my living room.

“Lyle! I'm here it's alright!”

Lyle was not there. I was alone. I dropped to my knees and sobbed.

CHAPTER 105

Julius sat with the choir during Sunday service as usual. Although, instead of watching Doreen throughout the service, he paid more than the usual attention to Rachel Garnier. Since his weird visit with her brother-in-law, he seemed to have developed pity for Rachel. In fact, his pity included Lawrence as well. Strangely, Julius felt that Rachel and Lawrence needed each other in some way. Lawrence definitely needed help, but he wasn't sure why he felt concern for her. *I haven't seen her husband around for many Sundays*, he thought. He thought back to a couple of Sundays ago when he was at the water fountain in the church foyer. *Rachel Garnier was on her way out, until Sister Oates caught up to her.*

“Rachel! Hold on a minute!”

“Oh, Sister Oates.”

“Child, you had me running. I always seem to miss you every Sunday. You just run out so fast after service.”

“I'm sorry, I've just been so busy and I-”

“How's your husband? I ain't seen him in I don't know how long.”

“He's fine. He's just so busy also.”

“You can't be too busy for the Lord. Are y'all alright?”

“We're both fine, thank you.”

“Well, tell him his church home misses him.”

“I will. Good bye.”

“Hold on a minute, child. I really wanted to ask you about your brother -in-law, the prophet.”

“I'm sure he's fine and very busy.”

“I needed to ask him about my finances. You know the healer blessed my wallet. Cost me seventy-five dollars, but I ain't doing much better. Don't get me wrong I got plenty of faith, but I got a lot of bills too. I just figured Prophet Garnier could tell me when my blessings were gonna start coming. He told Shirley Mason, and she won two thousand dollars within the week.”

“Well, I wish I could help you, but I haven't seen Lawrence since he left for the Miracle Tour. He doesn't live with us anymore.”

"Where does he live?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know. Guess I'm losing touch with a lot right now. Sorry, I have to go."

She was so sad that day as she left the church. She seemed so alone, thought Julius.

He reached inside his choir robe and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He stared at the address on the paper for a minute, then put it back into his pocket.

After service, Rachel quickly headed out. Julius caught up with her just outside the church. "Miss Rachel!"

"Julius, how are you?"

"Good ma'am. I wanted to give you this." He handed her the paper with the address. "He needs your help ma'am."

Julius quickly turned and ran back into the church, leaving Rachel bewildered. She unfolded the paper and stared at the address.

"Thank you," she whispered.

CHAPTER 106

I felt as if I was breathing hard but I was sure I heard a noise. On my knees with my face to the floor I surveyed underneath my bed again. I knew it wasn't my penguin friend. I saw him go into the fridge earlier. I just had to make sure it wasn't that awful demon. Sweat was dripping from my head and I was shaking like a wet chihuahua. *What was that?* I heard a knock, there it was again. I stood up in the middle of the bedroom. I knew the knocking was coming from the front door, but I was afraid to go out there. I reached the living room but was too scared to approach the door. *What if that horrible cloud was right outside my door.* The knocking started again. I opened the door slightly to peek out.

"Lawrence?"

I could not believe it. "Rachel?"

"Can I come in to talk?"

"Quick, come in!"

Inside I bolted the door and took a deep breath. There Rachel stood. Although, she was wearing sunglasses, she was pretty as ever and very pregnant.

"Lawrence are you alright? You look very sick."

"No, I'm not sick. I'm actually doing real good. I getting lots of rest and I'm fine. How are you?"

"Trying to endure." She looked around for a place to sit but no such place existed.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Let me get you a chair."

I hustled into the kitchen with the only chair left in the place. "Here you go. Have a seat."

"Aren't you going to sit down?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I really like standing . . . really."

"Lawrence, I'm sor--"

"Shh! Did you hear something?"

"No I didn't. Lawrence, I'm worry. What happened to you? What are you scared of?"

"Rachel, I'm trying to endure also. My whole life has been one long endurance test."

"Lawrence, I'm sorry we had words and I'm sorry our whole family has fallen apart. I didn't know what I was gonna say to you when I got here, I just felt that I had to humble myself and connect with you. I feel like I'm dumping more on you to tell you that your brother isn't doing well either."

"Mitchell is obviously still being Mitchell. Is it too bright in here, Rachel? You still got your sunglasses on."

Rachel dropped her head and removed her glasses and revealed a solid black eye. I stayed silent. I

don't know how long I stayed silent. I don't even know when I took my next breath. By the expression on that beautiful pregnant woman's face, my tears must have been screaming. The tears that spilled from my weary eyes must have been the same tears that used to flow from my childhood as I watched my mother tend to her cuts and bruises that my father inflicted.

“Mitchell?”

“He hadn't heard from the mother of . . . his daughter for about a month. No answer at her home, no phone calls. Last week, the police paid him a visit because her mother doesn't know where she is either.

I realize he's worried but it hurt so bad to see my husband so broken up over another woman and child. I told him that he still had a wife and unborn child right in front of him. That's when I got this eye. I'm not mad, actually I pity how fucked up his life turned out in such a short time. I thought maybe he needed you but I see you don't need him and his burden. I think I'm gonna be sick.”

Rachel ran till she found the bathroom. She barely made it but she did. I stood with my hand over my mouth frozen, frightened, furious.

She came out of the bathroom and went into the kitchen for water. I heard cabinet doors open and close. I heard the refrigerator open then close. Then I heard the tap water fill the glass. She slowly returned to the living room.

“Lawrence, do you need me to take you to the hospital?”

Silently, I shook my head no.

She approached me and gently touched my face and kissed my cheek. “You have removed every label from every can and bottle. That's not normal, sweetheart. You are very ill. I have to leave now. I have to stay sane for my unborn child.”

Rachel opened the door to leave. She stopped but she never turned around. “I love you Lawrence. I want you well. You and your brother are all each of you have left.”

Alone and humiliated, I stood and cried.

CHAPTER 107

As I made my way through the city maze of darkened alleys and littered street, I quietly made an assessment of my life talents. I guess I was an alright child, though Virginia, never let me forget that the wrong twin died. I wasn't very good as an adult. I am a womanizing drunk.

On the Miracle Tour, I guess I was a good prophet, by celebrity standards. Standards that are based on falsehoods. I failed my only two true friends who I couldn't save. As a bearer of a god-given gift . . . well, I'm glad I'm rid of it.

As a junkie, now there is where I'm truly talented. I know where and how to get a fix and for the most part I never had to steal or hurt anyone to get it. Although my sister-in law would be heartbroken to learn that I sold the Swarovski pineapple, but it was for a good cause. In fact, it enabled me to stay ahead of the game and keep extra in my case so that I'm not always out in this drug environment more than I need to be. So I haven't amounted to much, but I'm good at being a responsible junkie. As I made my way home. Happy to be able to rationalize lies about my habit, I heard a voice cry out from the darkness.

“Please, don't hurt me!”

“Shut the hell up, old man! sounded another voice.

It ain't none of your business Lawrence, keep walking, I thought to myself. I kept moving even though I heard the scream alerting me that somebody was getting hurt.

“Hit his old ass again!” sounded even another voice. “I want a piece of him too!”

I stopped. *An out numbered old man is my business.* I walked back and eased up to the corner and

saw two men taking turns pounding on an old man with a cane while another man watched. I secured the grip around my brown leather case, *Whatever happens don't lose the case.*

I reached in the small of my back and pulled out my gun. I took a deep breath and prepared to pull off the best imitation of Blu I could. I quietly stepped behind the watcher and cold-cocked him with the butt of my gun. He was out cold.

“Party over fellas.” I leveled the gun on the two men beating the old-timer.

“Hey, be careful with that,” said one of the men.

“Come over to me, old-timer.” The old man shuffled over next to me. He had a natty beard and looked like he needed a bath.

“I don't care that you get your kicks from beating a homeless man, just get your friend and get out of here.” Before I could step aside, the one that I thought was out cold, blind-sided me with a metal trash can. I went down, and another scuffle began. By the time I got back on my feet the homeless guy was the only one around. “What happened?” I said rubbing the back of my head.

“You scared them off, thank you.”

Confused, I picked up the old man's cane and handed it to him. “Maybe you better get out of here before they decide to come back.”

“That's a good ideal. Can you help me around the corner . . . please.”

The old man looked concerned, so I agreed. “Lead the way.”

We cautiously slipped out of the alley and made it over to what seemed to me to be an abandoned building. We went down to a cellar entrance on the side of the building. He opened the door with a key.

“I thought you were homeless.”

“What made you think that?”

“I just assumed.”

“You shouldn't do that. Come in.”

Inside the place was dark, When he turned on the lights, the place was small and cluttered.

“You are safe now,” he said.

“I'm safe? I thought I helped you.”

“Oh yes. I'm grateful. I noticed you are holding that small case securely. Would you like to hand it over to me for safe keeping?”

“No I would not. Score your own junk.”

“I am not an addict.”

“Oh, that was another assumption, I guess. I don't even know you?”

“I know you. You are the Prophet Lawrence Garnier.”

“Wrong. I'm not a prophet anymore.”

“You see the future.”

“No, not anymore. That was all just hype to sell empty promises and put butts in pews. You never told me your name.”

“It is Guy.”

“Guy what.”

“Just Guy.”

“Well, so long, Guy. Been nice knowing you.”

“Please do not leave. Stay a while. I do not get to talk to many people. Stay and make sure all the riff-raff outside is gone. May I offer you a drink?”

“Got any whiskey?”

“No, but I will bring you something better.”

The old man slipped out of the light and rattled around in what I supposed was a kitchen, at least I hoped it was. I looked around in the cluttered room. This place is depressing. *I rather be outside getting my ass kicked, at least the scenery's better.* He returned with a warm cup of something without much of a smell. I took a sip.

“Yuck, what is this?”

“Never make a taste judgment based on one sip. Three, always. First sip prepares the taste buds. Second sip identifies approval. Third sip verifies the decision.”

“Ump, that actually makes sense.” I took another good sip. It was as rough as the first. Finally, the third sip. “Ugh, no. Here take this shit it's definitely nasty.”

“That judgment I can accept. It was warm water and nutmeg.”

“Why didn't you just say that in the first place?”

“It is good for you. It flushes the bloodstream.”

“I don't want my bloodstream flushed.”

“You don't understand. You were once great. You had a God given gift. Now, like a rodent, you roam the street devouring the easiest nourishment you can get . . . trash. Please, will you hand over your case to me?”

“No! Listen Guy, I wish I could say it's been fun meeting you but that would be a lie. I'm leaving now.”

“On your way out may I please show you something?”

“As long as it's on my way out of here.”

The old man led the way out. I noticed that he didn't have his cane and he went out the steps with ease.

“Didn't you have a cane.”

“Yes.”

“Well don't you need it to walk?”

“You never lack assumptions, Lawrence.”

Outside on the darkened street, Guy led me around the corner. He walked me out into the middle of road on Vine street.

Open your eyes and look around. Look on the corners. Look way down the street as far as you can see. Tell me what you see. Tell yourself.”

I looked on the corners and down each side of the street. In and out of the shadows were zombie-like figures without faces. I knew these figures of the street. I watched them every journey I made in order to fill this small leather case. I could see them clear as day.

“They are the same,” continued Guy. “Every living creature is given gifts, but they are the same as you.”

As if a light had shone on every person on the street, I saw them more clearer. They had faces with expressions of sorrow and despair.

Guy kept speaking to me, “Like you, they had gifts beyond compare to others. Like you, their gifts would have set them apart.”

I could see them all but this time I could see their eyes and all of their eyes were on me. They were watching me.

Guy went on. “Like you Lawrence, these great gifted people are addicts. Most of them never knew how great they were to become. Like them, Lawrence, you have become.”

As they all watched me I saw that they had tears in their eyes. They were crying, not for themselves, but for me. My head began to spin. My legs became weak. That's all I remember.

CHAPTER 108

Doreen was the first one in the house dressed for church. This Sunday was Debbie's big day, *whatever that meant*. Everything had been so secretive. All she knew was that her father was going to church with them today and Debbie was being treated like royalty because Thelma, the woman who

was ugly as sin, was so happy.

“Oh the Lord has truly blessed this family.” said Thelma about every fifteen minutes. When she wasn't rushing Ed, or fussing with Debbie's hair, she was singing every gospel hymn she knew. Doreen just sat in the living room, nervous about what this day was gonna do to her sister. *What was Thelma and the bishop really up to?* She had to get to Thelma's large bible.

At the church, Bishop Barnes stood regally in the pulpit in front of a much larger audience than ever before. The newly expanded church was nowhere near capacity but the attendance was the most ever. As he surveyed the crowd he knew after today's service the church would receive a bumper crop of people, some devoted, some curious, but all interested and that meant money. He began his sermon.

“Recently, the Lord has seen fit to work overtime blessing this church.”

The massive crowd stood and applauded.

The bishop continued, “I have been pummeled with sustained signs and visions from God Almighty! As you can now see by my hair I have been radiated by God's presence, not for myself, but for you all. You know the scriptures say that you can move mountains if you only have faith the size of a tiny mustard seed. Well, today I'm gonna move mountains for all of you.

“What I'm about to present to you is a little bigger than a mustard seed, but the faith it imparts to you will be powerful. I give you The Church of Advancing Light's smallest evangelizing prophet, Little Debbie Billups!”

Back in the room marked, '**No Admittance**', Angela gasped as she watched what was unfolding on the monitor. “Oh my god, no.”

The crowd rose to their feet as Debbie walked from behind the stage and over to the pulpit, where the bishop stood. She wore a dreadfully overdone pink chiffon dress, with pink laced gloves and matching pink laced ankle socks neatly packed in tiny black patent leather shoes. In one hand she held a microphone and a bible in the other.

“Debbie, we are all so glad to have you here with us. If anyone here is not aware, we almost lost this lovely treasure, but as you can see God had other plans!”

The roar of applause was deafening.

“Debbie,” the bishop continued, “is there anything you'd like to tell the folks?”

“Yes, thank you everyone for your prayers, and thank you Bishop Barnes for your guidance.”

As Debbie began to speak, she started slow but quickly gained the excited cadence of a baseball announcer just after a grand slam hit, with the tone and rhythm of a horse race announcer moments before the photo finish.

“Yes everyone, I walked through the darkest of valleys but I was not alone... **THE LORD HELD MY HAND AND LED ME TO THE LIGHT UNHARMED!**”

Doreen sat up in her seat with her mouth wide open, she never knew her shy sister could even speak up in public much less perform. She made eye contact with Julius who was seated with the choir and whose jaw was hanging just as low.

“As I walked hand in hand with the Lord through the darkness he spoke to me. He said, '**FEAR NOT, CHILD! For I know what's in your heart and POWER IS MINE TO BESTOW UNTO YOU BECAUSE OF LOVE!**'”

Everyone in the church was on their feet, amazed as the child testified. Bishop Barnes grinned ear to ear as he looked out into the spellbound faces. He mumbled under his breath, “Bingo!”

Little Debbie paced the stage and pointed her bible towards the crowd. “Brother and Sisters, I will tell you that even a child like me knows that the Lord don't love me more than you!... you!.. or anyone of you! The Lord loves me, saved me and infused **POWER UNTO ME**, because **HE KNOWS I love HIM MORE than I love myself!**”

The applause rose like thunder as Debbie handed the microphone back to the bishop. She walked to the edge of the stage and with both hands she raised her bible up over her head and yelled, “**GOD**”

BLESS THIS CHURCH!”

Bishop Barnes proudly marched toward the little girl. “Ladies and gentleman! God has revealed unto me that this child is being set apart for the work of the gospel ministry. And here's the best part, three weeks from today, we will be nationally broadcasting our ministry live from this church.”

Silence fell over the church. Shocked faces turned and contorted in confusion. The bishop laughed and continued. “ WE GONNA BE ON TV Y'ALL!”

The crowd cheered and applauded.

“This ministry is going to the next level and this small young child will lead us. I introduce to you, The Church of Advancing Light's newest and youngest prophet . . . DEBBIE BILLUPS!”

“That's my baby!” cried Thelma, adorned in a monstrosity of a dress and over-sized hat, as she clapped, and almost fainted.

CHAPTER 109

Angela wasted no time leaving the church as soon as the service was over.

“Mom, what's the rush?” asked Julius, as his mother practically pushed him into the car. “I didn't even get a chance to talk to Doreen.”

“You can talk to her tomorrow at school. Right now I'm taking you home and I'm going back to church to have a few words with the bishop.”

“Do you have to drive so crazy mom.”

“Son, pray you never see how crazy I can get.”

After the Service, inside the bishop's chamber, Deacon Stone sat quietly in front of the bishop's desk. Bishop Barnes was in a joyful mood. “I tell you Stoney, God has shone favor upon this ministry. So many churches are already on the next level, but they won't stay there. Not after all our plans fall into place and they have fallen into place quite nicely.

“This little Billups girl is gonna put us in a league all our own. And I swear, I'm gonna squeeze all the holy out of that little brat until the next one shows up. I never thought it would happen this way, though. Funny how dreams really do come true, and the reality is always wilder than the dream ever was.”

“But will the dream last? Can it last with him around?”

“Stoney, you really need to lighten up. You're so stuffy and depressing, but you're also right. The prophet contributed well to our cause. I just wish he would've bought into his gift all the way. We had the golden goose right in our hot hands. All those golden miracles could've been ours. He did all the work for us, people now know that this is the ministry that delivers.

“Folks for miles around will continued to come to the great Church of Advancing Light where prophets are raised and we'll never have to make good on another promise. Easy money. All that's left to do now is to cut the goose's head off at the neck so it don't quack no more. I'll make the call now.”

Bishop Barnes picks up his phone and calls. “Hey, this is Zeke. Yeah it's time. Kill the prophet.”

A rare grin flashed across the deacon's broad face then faded in an instant as the bishop hung up the phone and gave a sigh.

“What a waste.”

Suddenly Angela burst inside the chamber through the unlocked door. “You son of a bitch! I'm not gonna let you damage that little girl. She's too fragile!”

“She was chosen to do God's work and you're not gonna stop a damn thing!” yelled the bishop as he rose from behind his desk.

Deacon Stone rose quickly and used his massive body to block her from coming any closer.”

“Please, Zeke!” she cried. “She's just a child!”

“Wake up bitch! There ain't many kids at this church. When folks see how we elevated that little girl, actually raised her up as a child prophet, every snot-nose in the country will be lined up at the door singing gospel songs and reciting bible verses just to get noticed. That's good for the future of this ministry. The parents will spill their wallets for the glory we can give their kids. You ain't stoppin' progress, Cottontail!”

Angela, side-stepped the deacon and fell on her knees in tears. “Not that little girl, she's too young and she's been through too much!”

Deacon Stone's face grew wide with a smile. He was glad to see the bishop stand up to her and he loved the sight of her weakness.

Bishop Barnes walked up close to the kneeling woman. He ran his hand through her hair. He wiped the tears from her cheek. “If I don't use that frail little girl, I will use Julius.”

Bam!

Angela drove her fist squarely into the bishop's crotch and he dropped to the floor like a crippled gymnast.

“I told you that I'd kill you the next time you threatened my child.” She reached into her purse for her gun but the deacon picked her up by her shoulders and started to squeeze.

Home alone, Julius flopped onto his bed. He was tired and had a lot on his mind. He thought for a moment, *I promised Doreen that I'd leave those journals alone.* He laid there for a few seconds before he sat straight up. “She won't know if I don't tell her.”

At the Billups house a battle was in full stride. During Sunday dinner, Ed was very unhappy over the news of what was planned for Debbie.

“And I telling you my little girl ain't gonna be on the damn television!” hollered Ed.

“She's been chosen by God to do his will! It's not about that. it's about the message!”

“Don't let them do it daddy!” yelled Doreen.

“No Doreen!” screamed Debbie with the look of fear on her face.

“Go to your room Doreen!” snapped Thelma.

“But I...”

“Go now! You too Debbie, upstairs!”

Doreen saw the large bible on the table in the living room. She stared Thelma down for a moment then she took her sister upstairs. Thelma turned her attention back to her husband.

“Ed, Bishop Barnes told to me . . .”

“Well, nobody asked me! Not you, Barnes, not even God. This is not gonna happen, Thelma!”

“You chose me to raise these girls. God chose this child. It's done Ed!”

“Then it's done without me.” Ed jumps up from the table and heads towards the door.

“Oh so I guess you're gonna go on a drinking binge now!”

Ed stopped dead in his tracks and turned toward Thelma. “I was on a binge when I took that damn bishop's advice to choose you to raise my girls. Now I'm gonna make sure he stays out of me and my girls life for good.”

He slammed the door behind him. The hairs on the back of Thelma's neck stood on end. She had fire in her eyes as she walked toward the stairs and saw Doreen at the top glaring back at her.

“Arrgh!” Angela let out a blood-curdling scream as the deacon crushed her with a smothering bear-hug.

“Stoney NO, STOP!” shouted the bishop.

Deacon Stone released Angela and she crumpled to the floor.

Bishop Barnes knelt down and cradled her. "Sweet Cottontail," he whispered. "You shouldn't get so emotional over my ministry. Now you go home and soak in an Epsom salt bath for about a week and you'll be good as new and hopefully a lot smarter. I took the clip out of your gun, but it and your gun is in your purse. Run on home and remember you or nobody else is gonna stop the success of this ministry."

Julius sat on the floor of his mother's walk-in closet and wept. He was heartbroken. He should have heeded Doreen's words to leave the journals alone. He should have never searched for any secret truths that were neatly packed away in crates. Truths that were too devastating to be disturbed and too shameful to be tossed out into the unknown places that discarded secrets go. A young boy should never have known such things.

CHAPTER 110

Monday morning Thelma sipped coffee at her kitchen table and jotted notes inside her large bible. She had gotten the girls off to school and had the breakfast dishes already washed. There weren't as many as usual since Ed never came home for the night. Was he at work? Maybe. Was he somewhere drunk? Probably. Her life had always been a struggle but now that Debbie's mind had been made over she would finally be viewed by others as a success. She was not expecting the doorbell to ring when it did and when she answered, she was shocked to see Angela in such a nervous state.

"Angela let's go in the kitchen to talk and I'll get you a cup of coffee. Are you sure the children are alright?"

"Yes, I mean no. What I trying to say is I think you should reconsider letting Bishop Barnes use Debbie in such a major way."

"I don't understand. How is Bishop Barnes using Debbie when God has called her to service?"

"She's so young and fragile. I don't think you know the bishop the way I do. Quite frankly, Thelma, I think getting caught up in the bishop's mess would be very dangerous for her."

"I look at the good bishop with the same favor as my lord does."

"Thelma listen to me there is nothing holy about this ministry, the bishop or his intentions toward Debbie."

"I've always heard folks say that you are such a beautiful woman. But you don't wear jealousy well. It's makes you look ugly and cheap, you know, from the inside out. Like a used up harlot who's the last to know that she past her prime."

"What? Excuse me?"

"You and Diane. You two wanted nothing to do with me in all the while we been going to church together. You just looked and whispered . . . you two would always whisper. What was all the whispering about? The pretty girls always talked behind my back. I was too ugly for you.

"First, you got married. Then Diane married Ed and it was all just one happy pretty ball of wax. No place for the ugly girl who nobody wanted to marry. When your husband died you still never needed me or even thanked me for the pies I baked for his funeral. Well, I got Ed and the girls now. God and the bishop looked upon the Billups family in favor because of me and you can't stand it."

Angela stood up from the table and headed for the door. "I think I'd better leave. I was just looking out for Debbie's well-being."

"She don't need you! She got me and the bishop's got her cause God saw to it to be this way. Instead of being jealous take care that you don't lose Julius like you did Nate."

Angela stopped in her tracks with fists balled tight. She turned but hesitated, "I'm gonna forgive you for that statement, Thelma."

Thelma's eyes blazed hot.

Slap!

She slapped Angela's face. "Don't you dare forgive me for a goddamn thing. Who do you think you are? You're just a used-to-be pretty girl nobody needs. Get out."

Angela's tears fell hard as she trembled and walked out of the house. Thelma followed her out to the porch. "I'll pick the girls up from school and I'll take 'em too. Your services are no longer needed. You and your boy need to stay away from my family."

As Angela drove away, Thelma smiled in full satisfaction.

CHAPTER 111

At One Lytle Place, two unknown men stood in the hallway in front of Lawrence's door. With a key, one opened the door and both entered quickly.

The bishop's cell phone was on the night stand next to his bed. As it rang, the bishop's hand swiped and missed twice but grabbed it on the third attempt. "Hello?" his voice was groggy. "What do you mean, he's not there?" he was now wide awake. "Most of the furniture is gone? Suit's and shoes gone but his car was still in the garage? Watch the place like a hawk for a few days till he gets back. Bye." Bishop Barnes quickly dialed another number.

"Stoney, we got a problem."

At lunch, Julius never drank his milk or touched his food. He just stared blankly. Doreen was concerned.

"Julius, you've got to tell me what's wrong. You're really scaring me now . . ." Doreen looked around and leaned forward with a forced whisper. "Dammit say something."

Julius' blank stare shifted focus to her. Quiet tears streamed down his face.

"No, say you didn't read any more journals. God, Julius, I told you to leave those alone."

"The bishop is behind everything. He's the reason my mom and me are alone. He hurts everyone."

"Julius please don't lose control. Everyone needs you to be strong, your mom, Debbie. I need you to be strong."

Julius suddenly seemed to actually see Doreen. He wiped his eyes, opened his milk and took a drink.

"Dory, you've got to promise me that you'll never ask me what I found out in those journals."

"I promise," she said. *I already know Julius and I'm sorry*, she thought.

"Now listen. I promise you that Bishop Barnes is gonna pay."

"I'm sure of that. When and how is the question. How can you make a promise like that? We tried every thing possible."

"I'm not sure yet, but I promise he won't hurt my mom, Debbie or you anymore."

"What are you thinking, Julius?"

"Promise to never ask me that either."

Deacon Stone entered the bishop's chamber. Bishop Barnes paced the floor as the deacon slowly walked through the colorful prism of light rays that speared through the grand stained glass window.

"Stoney, there has been no sign of Lawrence. He hasn't been home in weeks and his car never moved. I've even had eyes posted outside his brother's home but no sign of him either."

"Maybe Lawrence is dead. It is possible he over-dosed or some scum might have killed him."

"Come on Stoney, I know most of the scum around here, I would've heard something. If he is dead I need to see the body. Everything else is coming along fine, I don't need him popping up just in time to

fuck all this up.”

“Well, we can not question Rachel Garnier. That will just raise suspicions toward us when this is all over and she finds out he is really dead. We do not need another situation like Angela.”

The bishop sat down at his desk. “We've got to get to his brother Mitchell. He could find him for us and we can dispose of both of them together.”

“I would not worry too much Zeke. We know he had visit's and he can not escape that. Even if he is still alive, he is probably already driven insane by now. I think the time has come for me to search for him. You know what skillful resources I have at my disposal. I will find the rogue and bring him here.”

“You're right Stoney, I'll call off the dogs and let you handle it from here.”

CHAPTER 112

I felt my eyes flutter and I tried to focus. I didn't recognize my surroundings. I was on a cot in a dank shit hole. My mouth was dry and I began to cough. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye I saw him.

“He awakes,” said Guy.

He handed me a cup of something. I sat up and remembered.

“Do not worry, it's just water. Your mouth is probably very dry.”

I grabbed the cup and downed the water. “More.”

As he went for more I remembered my leather case. I went into a panic, then found it at the foot of the cot. *I bet that bastard robbed me.* I opened it and saw that everything was there. None of the drugs were missing.

“More water.” said Guy holding two cups.

I drank them both. In that hole, I couldn't tell if it was night or day. “How long was I asleep?”

“Off and on, about seven days.”

“What, a week? I remembered I made it out of here once. How did I get back in?”

“I brought you back. You collapsed outside and I brought you back. I could not leave you out there.”

“You could hardly walk yourself. How did you get me back here?”

“Do not worry about that. Just always remember that I got your back.”

“I gotta get out of here.” I stood up and secured my leather case. “Why didn't you take this from me while I was out?”

“I could not do that because it would not count. You have to give it up willingly. Do you want to give it to me now?”

“No.” I left Guy's place and the outside daylight blinded me for a moment. I rubbed my eyes, focused and headed home. I got about half a block away and realized I didn't have my gun.

“Shit! That nut is not gonna keep the gun that my best friend gave me.”

So I went back. I knocked on the door, but got no answer. I banged hard again. I heard a voice from deep inside say, “The door is open Lawrence, come in.”

How did he know I was at the door if he's in the back? I turned the knob and went inside anyway. It was very dark inside. Not even the dim light bulb was on.

“Arggh!”

Someone grabbed me from behind, someone very strong. Then a cloth was placed over my nose and mouth. That's all I can remember.

Rachel just finished her phone conversation with her dad. “I love you too daddy. I know. I will, I promise. I'm tired and I'm going to bed. Goodnight.” She took a warm shower, put on her gown and

robe. She made a cup of Chamomile tea and went off to her bedroom. As she turned off the light and pulled the shade, she saw a lone hearse slowly drive down the street.

Strange, she thought then went to sleep.

For the next three days Thelma took her girls to school and back, while Angela took Julius. Thelma never explained to the girls why Ed had not been home. She didn't have to. They had endured their father's binges before.

Angela could not understand where Julius' out-pouring of emotions were coming from. Although she welcomed the hugs and I love yous, he kept telling her that things were going to be alright.

The Church of Advancing Light was near completion as the finishing touches had it wired for live television broadcasts. A technician explained to the bishop how things would work.

“So you see bishop, all anyone who is on stage or at the pulpit has to remember is when that red light, straight ahead on that back wall, is lit we're on the air. There's one behind us also so that the church audience knows. This keeps the broadcast in sync with the breaks.”

“Well praise the lord! When the light is on we're national?”

“That's right sir.”

“Nice, heh, heh.”

No one knew where Lawrence Garnier was . . . except one.

Throughout the rest of the week, Doreen's emotions were pulled in every direction. Thelma's stage-mother approach with Debbie was making her sick. Worrying about Julius' somber mood was too. She felt completely helpless. If only Thelma would let her large bible out of her sight, she might be able to get some answers.

By the time Sunday rolled around, Bishop Barnes had the news media and the church excited about the launch of their first national live broadcast that was only one week away. After service the church was buzzing as brand new choir robes were being distributed as well as brand new instruments. In the bishop's chamber Deacon Stone was detailing plans.

“So you think this is the best decision Stoney?”

“Yes. I covered every place he could be and nothing has revealed it'self. I fly out for New Orleans tonight. His whereabouts will come to light after I speak with his sister.”

“Well, there will be so many technicians around that it does free you up to make sure there's no outside interference. Cottontail isn't a problem anymore. she's so broken down and humble now, she might be fun for me again.”

“Zeke, our mission will succeed. Goodbye.”

I sat straight up and focused. I was still at Guy's place. I smelled food cooking. My leather case was still with me. I checked inside, everything was still there. *My gun*. I checked around for my gun. There it was on the floor by the cot. I checked it. *Loaded*.

“Well, how is my favorite house guest?” said Guy.

I jumped up and leveled my gun at him. “How long was I out this time?”

“Also a week. Did you know that you snore? Are you hungry?”

“I don't want shit from you. Why don't you just let me leave?”

“I have not stopped you from leaving. In fact you left and came back.”

“For my gun that you stole.”

“What is that in your hand?”

“My gun . . . you know what I mean.”

“You do not trust me Lawrence, why? You helped me and I was returning your hospitable gesture. I would never cause you any harm. I got your back. I really do.”

“Well I want to leave and I don't want to come back.”

Do you have all your things? Your gun and your drugs?”

I checked. I had everything. “Yes, I got it all.”

“Would you like to hand your drugs over to me? They are just going to add to your problems.”

“No I don't.”

“Okay then. Goodbye Lawrence.”

“Well, good. Goodbye.”

That evening at the Greater Cincinnati Airport, the massive figure of Deacon Stone silently made his way to the gate. Anyone who saw him always took a second look, and was left feeling quite chilled.

CHAPTER 113

I was glad to be back at One Lytle Place because Guy wasn't there. My mind needed a rest from him and I didn't need him trying to take my leather case away. It was completely equipped with everything I needed to keep the pain away. I put it in the drawer of the table next to the bed. I needed a hit bad. I sat on the edge of the bed and prepared a syringe. There was a knock on the door. *Oh no, Guy better not have followed me here.* I walked to the door. *Wait he's still after my drugs.* There was no place to put my syringe, so I set in on top of the refrigerator. I went to the door and opened it.

“Mitchell!”

“Hello brother. I need help. Can I come in?”

Before I could answer he pushed his way in. He was frantic and looked weary. I'm sure I didn't look much better. I was really tweaking for a hit and was very nervous.

“Lawrence, Candice is missing.”

“Who is Candice?”

“The mother of my child.”

“You mean the mother of your other child.”

“My daughter is missing too! I need you to look and see if I find them.”

“Mitch listen. I'm sorry but there's nothing I can do about that.”

“Yes you can! Here, grabbed my hand, tell me what you see.”

“I can't Mitch. Not anymore.”

“What do you mean not any more? You get fucking rich off of doing it for strangers but you can't help your family? That's what you're the best at, letting your family down.”

“What I mean is I lost the ability.”

Mitchell stared at me for a moment. “Just hold my hand and see if you can get a flash.”

“I can't.”

Instantly Mitchell lunged at me. There was rage in his eyes as he grabbed me round my throat. I punched him in the face and he went down.

“You ain't shit when you're fighting a man are you? This is harder than beating your wife!”

Mitchell growled as he rammed my gut with his shoulder. He drove me into the wall knocking the wind out of me. He picked me up and slung me near the kitchen. I stood up and he bashed me in the face with his fist knocking me into the kitchen. I staggered to my feet. He tried to ram me again but I caught him with a knee to the face. He fell backwards to the floor. I reached on top of the fridge, grabbed the syringe and dove onto my brother and stabbed him in the neck with it.

“Ahhh!” I screamed. “You muthafucker!”

I watched my brother's eyes flutter. I pulled the empty syringe out and threw it to the floor. I got back on my feet. I watched as my brother sank into an altered state. I grabbed my head and screamed, “GOD! What have I done?”

By mid-week, I felt like I was losing my mind. Mitchell's reaction to the drugs was worse than mine. I had to give him more just to keep the screams down. He was sleeping now. I reached for a bottle of whiskey and downed a third of it with one swallow. I felt a burn on my chest. It burned and itched at the same time. It was actually keeping me from getting comfortably numb. *What's on my chest?*

I went into the bathroom. My face almost scared me. I looked bad. My skin was dry and dark. I took off my shirt and was shocked to see a burst of snow-white hair on my chest just over my heart.

I grabbed some scissors and began to cut. “Ouch!” it hurt and the hair began to bleed. The spot that I tried to cut grew more right before my eyes. It was horrible.

I cut a wash cloth in half and used it to cover the hair. I grabbed first-aid tape and taped it in place. It's looked like I was recovering from a knife wound. That would be something that I could explain. Snow-white hairy nerve endings growing out of one spot on my chest was unexplainable. Suddenly, Mitchell began to scream again.

It was a rainy Thursday night and Bishop Barnes was in his chamber going over his sermon for Sunday when the church doorbell rang.

“Who the hell is that this time of night?” He hustled down the hallway and looked through the peephole. *Oh my God.* He opened the door. “Lawrence, my boy come in. You're all wet. I've got whiskey in my chamber that'll warm you up.”

Inside the bishop's chamber, I walked slowly past the great stained-glass window. I focused hard on the face of the angel that held Abraham back from killing Issac.

“What can I do for you son?” The bishop handed me a double whiskey.

I downed the drink immediately. “Help me.”

“What's that son? Speak up!”

“HELP ME! screamed I, as I fell to my knees.

“What's the matter boy? You refused my help way back when. Why now?”

“I can't go on like this,” I cried. “Everything is all fucked up. Everyone around me is fucked up. Please help me and my brother Mitchell.”

“What's wrong with Mitchell?”

I pulled off my sweatshirt and tore off the patch to reveal the snow-white hair on my chest.

The bishop approached me and stared. “You mean, Mitchell is . . . hooked?” he began to howl with laughter.

My shameful tears fell to the floor like rain, as I hung my head.

“This is priceless!” shouted the bishop. He clapped his hands and skipped around the room. “Lord, you are truly good to your children. The blessings just keep on falling in my lap.”

I held up my glass. “Can I have another?”

“Yes you can, son.” The bishop poured me a tall drink. “I'm gonna give you something else son, but it ain't free. You've got to do something for me. Now get off the floor and plant yo ass in this chair.”

I sat down in front of his desk. He opened a lower desk drawer and pulled out a strongbox. It was full of money. He started counting.

“First off son, Deacon Stone has been searching for you, and he ain't happy. He's out of town right now and we're gonna let this little transaction be between us. You need something . . . my help, and I want something . . . your talent.”

“I don't have the gift anymore.”

“I know that, but you had it. And the whole world knew you had it. So Sunday you are going to

pass the torch. You are going to anoint the little Billups' girl.”

“What?”

“That's right. She is our new prophet, and you set up everything perfectly for this ministry to launch her evangelizing career.”

The tears flowed again. *My curse is now ruining another child. My death is the only answer. I've got to end this but I must help my brother first.*

“Here's some money for you and your brother's habit's.” The bishop tossed three hundred dollars in front of me. “Now this is for your suit and shoes for Sunday. It ain't much but you don't have to look as polished as I had you when you were with the ministry.”

He tossed five hundred dollars in front of me. “Give me a twenty minute performance Sunday and then we'll talk about the help you need. You haven't been too reliable lately so you better not fuck me on this. Be here bright and early Sunday, ready to perform.”

I picked up the money. “I want my brother clean, and I want to be done with this ministry with all the hell that has come with it once and for all.”

“Be here bright and early Sunday, ready to perform. Then we'll discuss the help you need. Have a good night.”

I left the church feeling worse than I did before I came. Bishop Barnes was pure evil and he was going to destroy a child and most likely her whole family. If there's one thing I've always learned from the past, it's that my cursed life always gets worst. It's time to personally carry my curse to the grave. But I've got some unfinished business. As I walked back home all I could think about was what I had to do . . . *Kill Bishop Barnes.*

CHAPTER 114

Sunday morning was very hectic at the Billups home. Early baths and curling hair, all before breakfast. Thelma was a nervous wreck as she barked orders at Doreen in order to hurry things along.

Angela and Julius had to be at church even earlier. She was responsible for monitoring all the backstage activity since Deacon Stone was away. Julius had to be prepped along with the rest of the choir. They were going to have one more rehearsal before the service began. They quietly gathered their things and headed out to the car.

“Did we forget anything sweetie?” asked Angela.

“No mom, we didn't forget a thing,” replied Julius quietly.

Indeed they had everything they needed for this Sunday service. What Angela didn't know was, the gun that had been packed away among her journals, was with Julius.

Bishop Barnes had an early breakfast and laid out a most regal new robe for the service. He was very calm and very happy. He opened a bottle of champagne and poured it over fresh-squeezed orange juice and enjoyed a couple of Mimosas and a cigar in his chamber.

“Let's go girls now! yelled Thelma as she grabbed her hideous over-size church hat out of the hall closet downstairs. Debbie was equally hideous as she came down the stairs in a dress similar to Thelma's monstrosity.

“Oh baby, you look beautiful. Doreen let's go.”

Doreen reluctantly came out of her room. As she past by Thelma's room, she saw her large bible on the bed. Outside Thelma helped Debbie into the car.

“There sweetheart, we can't afford to get this dress dirty, even though I got a back-up in the trunk

just in case. Where is your sister?" She looked in the front seat and noticed her purse was there but no bible.

"Wait here baby, I gotta get my bible and your slow sister."

Thelma ran back into the house. "Doreen, are you ready?" She walked up the stairs and saw Doreen reading the notes in her bible.

"What are you doing?"

Doreen looked up with eyes on fire. "You hurt my sister you ugly BITCH!" She swung the large bible around.

WHAM!

She smacked Thelma dead in the face. She stumbled backwards and fell down the steps. Doreen marched forward down the stairs as Thelma clamored to her feet.

"I'm gonna kill you!"

WHAM!

She hit Thelma again.

"STOP!" Thelma screamed at the top of her lungs. Debbie ran into the house and screeched. "NO DOREEN!"

Doreen looked over at her sister who was crying. She ran and hugged her tightly. "It's gonna be alright, sis. Nobody will ever hurt you again.

"LOOK OUT!" screamed Debbie.

Thelma grabbed Doreen in a headlock and started to strangle her. She drug Doreen over to the couch and pinned her down.

Angela and Julius made it to church, parked and were walking in when her cellphone rang. "Hello. Debbie! What's wrong? They're fighting! Thelma's bleeding! Debbie honey, I'm on my way right now!"

"What's going on mom?"

"There's trouble at the Billups' house. You go on inside. I'll be right back!"

Julius walked Angela back to the car. Angela frantically jumped in and started the car.

"Mom! MOM!"

"What Julius?"

"I love you mom, and I'm sorry."

"I love you too, son. Now go inside and we'll discuss what you're sorry about later."

Back at the Billups house, Doreen was being strangled. "DIE YOU BITCH!" howled Thelma. Her wig was completely off revealing snow-white hair.

"GET OFF HER! YOU'RE KILLING MY SISTER!" Debbie jumped onto Thelma's back. She bit her on the ear.

ARRGH! screamed Thelma and she released the choke hold on Doreen. She slung Debbie off her back onto the floor. Doreen coughed and fought hard to breath. Thelma grabbed her by the hair and yanked her across the cocktail table. Debbie scrambled on the floor and viciously bit Thelma on the ankle. Thelma yelped and Doreen grabbed the large bible.

WHAM!

Thelma was hit across the face again. She lunged for the front door but Debbie caught her leg and she slammed hard to the floor.

BAM!

With a down stroke Doreen connected the large bible to the back of Thelma's head. She scrambled out onto the porch.

At the New Orleans Women's Mission, Virginia sat behind the desk in her dimly lit office. She was not alone. Deacon Stone's massive form stood before her. The shadows thrown from these two large forms added to the fullness of the room, blurring limits between wall and space. Light only appeared as fragments that reluctantly washed over the facial features of each of these ominous beings. The discussion that engaged them was just as stoic and dark as the scene.

"I have worked tirelessly at containing my dear brother so as not to have his power grow and spread," said Virginia. "Respectfully, you chose to remove him from my control."

"Yes, you served the cause very well," replied the deacon. "You have achieved many successes during this ageless war. The fact still stands true, you didn't kill the right twin. Multitudes of successes never lead to victory if one failure is so vital."

"His seeds have been vanquished, and soon the seed of his bloodline will come to an end."

The lifeless grin of the deacon appeared from the shadow then quickly dissolved. "Of that I am sure of. The ancient strategies of our enemies were to produce agents of power without notice as in the manner of Melchizedek, one without record of coming forth. As well as using undetected virginal vessels as means to blur the trail of entrance onto this earth. Strategies have since changed. Vessels of less noble means are being used. You have done quite well in your tracking and extinguishing. One of our greatest advances, has been in our setting up systems of worship and appearing as sources of light, attracting true agents of power into our midst like moths to a flame. There we have infiltrated circles of believers using irritations and aggravations for them to rise above and thus revealing those with true power. . . yet."

The pause from Deacon Stone made Virginia uncomfortable. He gave out a deep, low sigh.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I feel a presence. A presence of great strength and power, but the source is unknown."

"Is it a child?"

"No. It is fully active and wise. It knows how we search and is staying well hidden. I fear that it has in some way found your brother, Lawrence."

"How can that be? You yourself just explained how his gift had been extinguished. You just told me that Chimeloc had entered his realm with frequent visits of torment."

"Yes, of which Lawrence has shown resistance. Something that not even he could do on his own."

"Then simply destroy Lawrence."

"That goes without saying, but we must reveal the source of his aid first. Bishop Barnes has elevated his ministry so that the environment for exposure is in place. Barnes is completely under my influence, although he is slow to react in some matters, due to his excessive hedonistic greed. Yet, his hesitance in completely destroying the Prophet Garnier has allowed this matter of unknown assistance to come to light. Barnes has proven to be a valuable asset to our cause, and now his mark has been completed. I sense him reaching status similar to yours very soon."

"I hope he wears his mark as proudly as I do."

Deacon Stone's sinister grin reappeared from the shadow. "We shall embark upon a new strategy that will lead us to ultimate victory. Reveal your mark Virginia!"

Virginia reached with both hands and removed her wig and revealed a head full of glowing snow white hair.

The deacon's eyes blazed from the glow. "Yes, yes."

Angela arrived at the Billups' house just as Thelma stumbled out of the front door, wailing in agony. Doreen ran out and whacked her in the back of the head again with the large bible.

“No Doreen!” Angela screamed, “Stop!”

“She hurt my sister!” Doreen roared.

Blood gushed from Thelma's nose and streamed down the side of her face from the gash in her forehead. Angela's face froze in shock at the sight of Thelma snow-white hair.

“Oh child, what are you doing?” Angela tackled Doreen, who was about to deliver another blow to her stepmother.

“I'm trying to kill her!”

Debbie ran out of the house, “I called 911!”

“Listen girls, we're gonna fix all of this but Doreen you've got to calm down!”

Doreen violently pulled away from Angela. Her eyes were wild with hatred.

“It's all in the back of this bible, what she did to my sister. Bishop Barnes told her to do it! I'm gonna kill him next. Julius was right about everything! I've got the proof right here in this bible and Julius has all of your journals.”

“My journals?”

“Yeah, Julius has read through them all and Barnes is gonna pay just like this bitch!”

Angela took two steps backwards then grabbed her hair in distress. *All my journals? They were packed in a crate with the loaded gun that I was gonna use on the bishop.* “I gotta get back to the church!”

Leaving the girls behind she raced back to her car and sped off.

“Wait don't leave!” screamed Thelma as she laid helpless in the front lawn.

She continued to scream as both of her stepdaughters resumed their attack.

Angela, headed out of the neighborhood, careened around the corner onto a main road. At this point, whatever happens at the Billups' home was of no concern anymore, not if her hunch was right about her only child. *How could I have been so stupid, leaving those journals in the house? Now, the loaded gun meant for the bishop, is gonna cost me another son.* She tried to dial her cell phone to call the church but dropped it when she almost rear-ended a service truck. A red light forced her to a screeching halt. She was wild-eyed as her mind raced. *The gun, it's not the only gun.* She reached into her purse and pulled out her personal protection piece. . . a Colt .45. *It's too late to matter now, I should have killed that fucker years ago.*

Four years is a long time, but reflection takes no time at all. Look at me now, strung-out. Looking and feeling like shit. My brother is a junkie because of me, and my sister-n-law is a battered single parent. Two of my best friends are dead and I'm still at this fucking sink in this fucking church. All because I had a gift. A gift that only the bishop has benefited from. Now I have to go out and preach to folks who believe any lie I tell them cause I had a gift. Not today. Today I'm gonna speak the truth no matter what happens.

Inside his chamber, Bishop Barnes strolled to his desk, “Today's a big day for the church, son. We're going on the air live in a few minutes, but I always have time for my young ones. Besides the shows intro was prerecorded,” he turned to see Julius still standing by the door. “Well come on son, take a seat and let's find out what's on your mind.”

Julius was trembling, but managed to place one foot in front of the other and slowly move through the colorful light rays coming from the great stained glass window. His mouth was dry and his palms were wet, but he never took his eyes off the man standing behind the desk.

Prophet Lawrence Garnier stood in the pulpit and waited. The red 'On Air' light came on “I want all of you to ask yourselves, Why I'm I here? I don't just mean the folks in this church, I want all of you watching on TV to ponder that question also. I asked myself that very question in the bathroom a few minutes ago but my reason is a lot different than yours. I'm here

for the very first time to tell you the truth. . . ”

Julius refused to sit as he faced the bishop. “You're an evil man, who hurt a lot of people including my mother. The boy's sweaty hand shook as it started to move under his choir robe.

Angela squealed tires as she sped into the church parking lot. She grabbed her gun and jumped out of the car.

“You all are here because you believed God was in this ministry. You've been tricked, hoodwinked and bamboozled. The truth is, the only place God is in this church is the word printed on all that money YOU folks poured into this house of lies. Bishop Ezekiel Barnes has done the work of the Devil and so have I. Here I stand before you today to say, I'm sorry and I am being punished. This is what it looks like to have taken everything for granted until everything is gone. LOOK AT ME!”

CRASH! BANG! BANG! BANG!

“STAY IN YOUR SEATS!” yelled Lawrence.

The Choir Director and one of the TV crewman ran backstage.

“Please, everyone stay calm!” shouted Lawrence.

The Choir Director ran on stage, “The bishop is dead! The police have been called!”

Silence hovered over the audience. A figure slowly walked up the aisle toward the exit. Lawrence noticed, but didn't see the face. . . until. Before exiting the auditorium, the person stopped, turned and smiled.

Lawrence wanted to shout with joy, but knew he couldn't. The Lord certainly does work in mysterious ways, he thought. He addressed the nervous crowd.

“Listen please. Today, we faced the truth about what we believe. Today, we will realize what was wrong about this ministry. Just now, what was wrong with this ministry was removed. This is a sign! Will we give up now? We can make our minds over to get back into God's favor. Together, and I mean everyone of us in this church and all of you out there watching and listening to this live broadcast, **TOGETHER WE CAN GET BACK TO A TIME WHEN THE MIRACLES WERE REAL! LET US ALL MAKE IT OUR RESOLVE TO SET THIS MINISTRY BACK TO A PLACE OF HOLINESS! I, PROPHET GARNIER, PROMISE TO LEAD THIS MINISTRY BACK TO GOD!**”

The crowd stood, cheered and applauded. For the first time in his life, Lawrence Garnier felt hopeful of things to come. Although he couldn't see it, he felt that his future was bright. As he looked out among the cheering crowd, his expression changed instantly. A thought washed over him that made his blood freeze. *What about Deacon Stone?*

. . . To Be Continued.

Who killed the bishop?

Who was the mysterious person leaving the church?

Will Lawrence and his family survive their impending doom?

What about Deacon Stone?

The answer to these and other secrets will be revealed in. . .

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