



Chapter 1

Attack of the Dust Devil

The old man awakened to the sound of music and rolled over on his side to glance at the bedside clock radio. It was six o'clock, Saturday, July 8, 1995.

He laboriously got out of bed and started his morning regimen, all the time wary of the day ahead. As the morning wore on he could not shake the foreboding feeling, for he sensed something afoul was in the air.

The skies over Denver were clear, blue, and sunny, but he knew a storm would soon gather over the mountains. He could always tell by the dull ache that came to his left leg—a remnant of the malady he suffered in World War II. Today the throbbing pain was more bothersome than usual, and the memories it resurrected were more disturbing than ever. *Will I never escape that day?* he wondered.

It was late morning when Pastor Desmond Morehouse left his home. Driving westward toward the mountains, he saw white, billowing clouds forming over the Front Range. The sight confirmed what the ache in his leg had been telling him: Denver was in for a bigger than usual thunderstorm.

Not that late July thunderstorms were unusual in Denver, but today's would be different—much different. Unknown to Pastor Morehouse, high in the atmosphere aberrant forces of nature were plotting a devastating attack on Denver. The onslaught would come in two waves. The first was a monsoonal flow, swirling up from Mexico, and the second was an unseasonably cold front swooping down from Canada. More than bringing severe weather to the Front Range, these fronts were, for the Pastor, the harbinger of something that had never been and never would be again.

Pastor Morehouse had lunch alone at the Coco's restaurant, not far from his Church. It was his custom every Saturday. This respite from the busy affairs at the church provided him a time of solitude to work on the next day's sermon. As always, the two-hour lunch passed all too quickly. And now he was perturbed with himself for having made such little progress on his sermon.

The Pastor walked briskly from the restaurant across the parking lot toward his car. Heat waves were radiating from the sun-baked black top. With his back to the mountains and the gathering clouds, he was oblivious to the approaching storm's little precursor, sneaking up from behind.

He was a step shy of reaching his aging, white Cadillac when the dust devil's swirling wind struck him with a vengeance. He lunged for the car's door handle as the shrieking wind hurled stinging sand at his face and into his eyes. Blinded and choking on suffocating sand and dust, he tugged on the door. But the twister's invisible force pinned it closed. He widened his stance and, with greater exertion, pulled again. At the same time, the dust devil abruptly changed directions and the door flung open. It threw the Pastor off balance and sent him sprawling to the pavement. Pain shot through his left leg. He clambered into the car and slammed the door closed.

The angry, invisible predator struck again and rocked the Pastor's steel lair from side to side. Gasping for breath, and with watery eyes smarting from the sand and dust, he watched the tiny twister zigzag on across the parking lot, kicking up a cloud of swirling dust and debris.

Then it subsided to a blustery breeze. The Pastor's heart continued to pound. Perspiring profusely, rumped and covered with dust, he brushed the sleeves of his suit, then dabbed his watery eyes with a handkerchief. He adjusted the rear view mirror and watched his fingers comb his thinning gray hair back into place. Strange sounds caught his ears. He froze, listening. Faint,

fleeting sounds rode the restless wind. Muted, shrill voices painfully moaned an eerie dirge.

An image flashed in his mind—a long ago sight from the war, a haunting scene of fog and drizzle and death that lurked in the dark recesses of his memory. Would he never forget? Would he never forgive himself? He shuddered from the foreboding memories. Oh, how he detested clouds!

The Pastor started the car's engine and began the drive to the church. As his car sped down a tree-lined boulevard, he kept an apprehensive eye on the skies. The contemptuous clouds were lowering, closing in around him, and he felt the suffocating sensation of claustrophobia coming on. His palms were moist and slippery on the steering wheel, and the throbbing pain in his leg had spread to his temples. His disposition was deteriorating as rapidly as the weather.

Chapter 2

The Mask of Deceit

By television rehearsal time, Pastor Morehouse was in a cantankerous mood. The approaching storm and the pain in his leg were bringing out the worst in him. Mounting anxiety over the rehearsal and an unprepared sermon were souring his disposition all the more.

The Pastor's dark mood hung heavily in the air as singers and musicians gathered at Mile High Community Church. But this was not unusual; a storm of sort had been brewing for years within the church.

For decades the church building had stood as a landmark of serenity and stability in the once upscale neighborhood. The towering rock façade of the sanctuary, topped by a traditional white cross, was a reverent and reassuring sight along the tree-colonnaded boulevard. Yet, on close scrutiny, cracks could be seen here and there in the mortar, and old paint on the eaves was weather-worn and starting to peel.

In the spacious front lawn of the church was a majestic oak tree, standing proud and tall. Yet, here and there were small, dead branches, stark in their nakedness. They were telltale signs that the old tree was failing from disease, rotting from within.

The church's sanctuary was large and contemporary in design, having been expanded and remodeled four years ago to seat three thousand worshipers. The architectural focal point was a giant wooden cross centered on the four-story, rock wall behind the semicircular stage (or chancel altar, as the Pastor preferred to call it). It afforded excellent viewing from any seat in the sanctuary, including those in the balcony. Symmetrical rows of plush, red velvet, theater-style seats fanned out from the stage and up the slightly inclined floor toward the back.

On the side walls were long and narrow stained glass windows that depicted scenes of well-known Bible stories. When the sun radiated through, it swathed the sanctuary in rainbow hues. But today, clouds hid the sun.

Artificial lighting in the sanctuary consisted of huge chandeliers, suspended some distance from the high ceiling. Nearer the stage were hung obtrusive grids of multi-colored television lights. Though there was no video taping today, the rehearsal would nevertheless take place under the glare and heat of the lights. "It's all part of proper preparation," the Pastor told the musicians.

The costly new state-of-the-art sound and lighting systems were the envy of any concert hall. But the lights, along with giant speakers that flanked the stage were an aesthetic blight about which nothing could be done, much to the Pastor's consternation.

The combined choir and orchestra were rehearsing "Onward Christian Soldiers" for tomorrow's worship service. The tiered choir loft at the back of the stage was filled to capacity with one hundred singers. In front, the orchestra pit overflowed with sixty musicians, and the timpani was squeezed in, off to the right.

Tomorrow's special television production would mark the Pastor's twenty-fifth year on television, which was why he felt the necessity of calling today's special rehearsal. Everything had to be just right. Perfect! Not only must the orchestra and choir sound impressive, they must look impressive. The Pastor considered the visual and musical impact to be as important as the sermon. It called it "balancing style with substance." The choir would wear new robes for the occasion—white, with golden collars. The orchestra would be formally attired in basic black—long-sleeved, neck-hugging dresses for the women and rented black tuxedos for the men.

Dress for today's rehearsal was casual, of course. "Casual," that is, by the Pastor's definition. Men were required to wear dress trousers and shirts and

women were restricted to dresses. Pants were strictly taboo for women at all times at the church. Polo shirts were permissible for the men, but T-shirts, shorts and tennis shoes were below the standards of the Pastor's rigid dress code, even for a television rehearsal.

Two men on the platform were not so casually attired. They were Pastor Morehouse and his nephew, Curtis Nelson. They wore conservative dark suits and subtle ties. No one ever saw the Pastor when he wasn't wearing a suit. He even wore a coat and tie when relaxing at home, which was seldom.

At the moment, the sounds of "Onward Christians Soldiers" filled the sanctuary. The Pastor was not at all pleased with the rendition. It sounded ragged and pompous.

He was seated on the largest of several high-backed chairs (which some of the staff called "thrones"), all of them skillfully carved from oak and upholstered with lush, red velvet. He sang along with the choir, sporting his customary stage smile, though in recent years it could not mask the strain of vigorous singing which gave him a red face and swollen veins in his forehead and neck. Despite being in his early seventies, his baritone voice was as deep, rich, and full as ever.

He stopped singing to again listen to the music. The stand-in pianist just isn't cutting it, he thought. But tomorrow, Geno will give it vitality. Yes, a concert pianist will bring it alive.

The choir and orchestra neared the end of the hymn's final chorus. The Pastor motioned with a nod for Curtis to follow him. The old man rose from his throne, extending his six-foot, three-inch frame. He had always been as stout as the mighty oak in front of the church. Only his thinning gray hair and bushy eyebrows betrayed his advancing age, for the smooth skin of his face and his physique were more youthful than one might expect for a man well past retirement age. He stepped over to his place at the center of the brightly lighted platform. The slight limp of his left leg was almost imperceptible.

The Pastor relished the moment, even though it was a rehearsal. Standing there, listening to the last stanza of the hymn, he basked in the television lights and prayed silently that the Lord would look upon him and his ministry with favor for work well done.

The choir refrained from singing as the orchestra softly repeated the chorus. This served as background music to maintain the solemn mood through the

closing solicitation for donations.

The Pastor's silvery hair and bushy eyebrows were shiny in the bright lights and his penetrating, steel-blue eyes glistened. He cast a stage smile at the center aisle where a television camera had been placed as a prop for rehearsal.

Speaking over the muted music, he said to an imaginary television audience: "It's been a blessing for all of us to have you join us in celebrating our twenty-fifth anniversary on television. I want to thank you for your continued prayers and financial support of this ministry. With your help, we will continue to reach hundreds of thousands of souls with the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Remember: You cannot out-give God!"

The Pastor paused for dramatic effect and listened to the subdued music of the orchestra. He was smiling inwardly with confident anticipation that tomorrow he would capture the hearts of his congregation and television audience.

Curtis stepped up to his uncle's side and smiled as the Pastor had at the lifeless television camera and its imaginary audience. "Write to us, will you?" asked Curtis, as the orchestra played on. "Let us know your needs and concerns so we can pray for you. And remember: It is only through your generous contributions that those of us at Morehouse Ministries are able to bring you this weekly telecast from Mile High Community Church and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to millions of lost souls, from coast-to-coast. Thank you, and may God bless you for standing with us!" "Amen and Amen!" chimed the Pastor.

The orchestra approached the end of the chorus and the music director swooped his arms in wide arcs to rouse the singers to join in for a repeat of the chorus.

The Pastor smiled, thinking what a good show it would be and that it would pull heavy mail-in donations.

The music concluded in grand style with a majestic "Ahhhmennn" from the choir that reverberated throughout the sanctuary, then faded into empty silence.

The music director looked over at the Pastor for his approval. "Wonderful!" proclaimed the Pastor. "Thank you all very much!" Satisfaction came to the faces of the musicians. As they gathered their

scores and packed away instruments, the Pastor stepped down from the stage. He winced from a jab of pain in his leg, then started walking up the center aisle. He stopped and turned. Curtis was still on the platform, having become engaged in conversation with a choir member. "Curtis!" bellowed the Pastor.

Curtis broke off his conversation and scampered toward his uncle. Despite his limp, the Pastor took long, rapid strides up the aisle toward the exit door. When Curtis caught up, the Pastor said, "Tell Bert not to over do it on the flowers."

"Why, Uncle? I mean, they're from his greenhouse—he donates them." The Pastor stopped in his tracks and spun around to face his nephew, who almost bumped into him. Curtis braced himself for a tongue-lashing. One simply did not question the Reverend Desmond Morehouse.

"Austerity, Curtis! Austerity!" spat the Pastor. "Won't you ever get it? When you ask a television audience for money, you can't look like you don't need it! You, of all people—our church administrator—should know that!"

The Pastor took a message slip from his coat pocket and handed it to Curtis. In a low voice, so as not to be overheard, he said, "The loan officer from the bank has been calling—wants a payment on the television equipment, no doubt. Call him back on Monday and tell him we're going through an audit or something. You know how to snow him."

This greatly troubled Curtis, who was an honest man. He couldn't lie to the banker, yet he had to stall him—and pray the TV show would yield generous donations.

The Pastor breezed into the front office and over to the desk of his aging secretary, Annabelle Forbes. She was on the phone.

"Oh, rehearsal is over, dear," she hurriedly said to the party on the line. "I'll see you tomorrow." Hanging up, she shook her head sorrowfully. "That was Mable Albright. Poor old woman. Her hip is bothering her again. I offered to pick her up for church in the morning."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said the Pastor. "I wish you could help her out, but, unfortunately, I'll need you in the office early tomorrow. I'm sure Mable can find a ride from someone else. It is our twenty-fifth television anniversary, you know."

"Oh, my!" said Annabelle, with a frown of deflation that added more wrinkles to her face. "I'll have to call her right back."

The Pastor walked into his study. The old busybody, he thought. As he closed the door, he heard thunder rumbling in the distance and the faint drumming of rain on the roof.

"Pastor?" came Annabelle's frail voice over the intercom.

The Pastor pushed the talk button: "Yes, what is it?" he snapped.

"Curtis and Roberta Richardson are here for their appointment."

It had slipped his mind. He glanced at the grandfather clock by the door. Being crunched for time, he was irritated that Curtis was thoughtlessly imposing on his time to introduce another new lady friend.

Chapter 3

An Unforgivable Sin

"You want me to join you in Holy Matrimony? A divorced man and a divorced woman?" The Pastor's voice boomed across his antique mahogany desk and stabbed at the hearts of the young couple seated in front of him. "Curtis, we just got over all that sticky business of your divorce!"

The Pastor's defiant, icy glare bore the legalistic conviction of a man who had filled the pulpit for most of his life, defending the faith, leading, exhorting, and admonishing. Mostly admonishing.

Curtis stirred uneasily in his chair. He glanced at Robbie. She was pale and visibly shaken. Curtis cleared his dry throat and spoke in a soft, controlled voice, as diplomatically as possible: "Uncle, let's be reasonable about—" "Reasonable!" The Pastor's voice boomed again. "It's absurd! Out of the question!" His face was beet red and an eyelid twitched, as always happened when he was agitated. "I'm a third generation pastor, and neither I nor my father nor his father before him ever performed the sacrament of marriage involving a divorced person—certainly not two divorced people! Not one time in all my years as pastor of this church has such a sacrilege been suggested, let alone performed within these sacred walls. And as long as God holds me

personally accountable as shepherd of this flock, such a travesty will never be permitted. Never! Do I make myself clear?"

Curtis felt hurt and anger swelling up within his heart.

Robbie bit her lower lip to keep from sobbing. She took a tissue from her purse and dabbed with little effectiveness at tears that refused to be held back. She brushed back a shoulder length lock of auburn hair that cascaded over her eyes.

Curtis was proud of her. Despite the highly-charged emotions of the moment, she sat straight, prim, and proud. He mustered the courage to try once more to reason with his uncle: "Sir, I know what your policy is against divorce—"

"My policy?" interrupted the Pastor. "It's not 'my policy'; it's *God's* policy. You would know that if you would spend some time in the Word. Anyone who even casually reads the Bible will tell you that God hates divorce. It's a sin—and so is remarriage. It's a plain and simple, black and white, clear-cut issue with no room for compromise. Don't you have any regard at all for the integrity of scripture and this ministry?"

Curtis's knees trembled from anger. He glanced at Robbie for reassurance. "I'm—I'm not in total agreement with your interpretation of scripture on divorce, Sir."

"Is that so?" asked the Pastor, condescendingly. "Now you are telling me that in the two short years you attended seminary you became such an authority on scripture that you are qualified to sit in judgment of my exegesis?"

The Pastor smiled a twisted, sarcastic smile that was all too familiar to Curtis. "What I mean, Uncle—"

"But, of course," continued the Pastor, "it is within the realm of possibility that I, having earned two doctorates, that I, in my lifetime of studying God's Word, preaching, teaching and writing a handful of best selling Bible commentaries, just might have overlooked some profound verse of scripture that does, indeed, sanction divorce for a church leader."

For many years Curtis begrudgingly condoned his uncle's intimidation, but now the time was at hand to stand his ground and speak his mind and defend his beliefs. He leaned forward in his chair and said, "I know where you're coming from, Uncle—Paul's teaching that a deacon should be the

husband of only one wife. But Robbie and I meet the biblical conditions for permissible divorce and remarriage. It's not God who objects to our getting married, it's you!"

"Curtis!" Robbie cautioned in a whisper.

The Pastor banged his fist on the desk. "This is the most outrageous—" "Why can't you put aside your idealism?" Curtis interrupted. "Why must you force your legalistic expectations on me? I made a mistake and it ended in divorce. God has forgiven me, why won't you?"

The Pastor slumped back in his chair and looked at Curtis with sad, moist eyes. "Forgiveness is not the issue. It's a matter of obedience to God's Word. You take it so lightly. Your whole generation takes obedience too lightly. Understand, Curtis, that I have devoted my life to try my best to humbly and obediently follow our Lord's commandments." His voice was low and deliberate, feigning deep-felt hurt. "And you—a self-appointed judge of my spirituality and exegetical integrity—accuse me of behaving in a misinformed and unchristian like manner."

In years past, Curtis would have fallen for the diversionary play on his sympathy, but over time his uncle's dominating and intimidating charades had become too painfully familiar: The disarming appeal for sympathy, the dramatics, the evasiveness, the guilt trips he laid on people—all sorts of mind games and power plays.

Curtis reached out pleadingly to his uncle and said, "All I'm asking is for you to listen—an uncle to his nephew—and to understand."

"And what I'm trying to get through to you," insisted the Pastor, "is, indeed, understanding—understanding of a very simple theological imperative! Divorce is sinful! And for a divorced person to remarry is to commit adultery! —To heap one sin upon another!"

"I'm sorry you see it that way, Uncle."

"Well, let me remind you: Your job is to solve problems for this ministry, not create new ones."

Curtis threw up his hands in frustration. "You know what the problem is with this ministry, Uncle? Huh? Do you? I'll tell you: You are the problem!"

The Pastor bounded from his chair, incensed with rage. All he could do was sputter and shake an admonishing finger at Curtis. The protruding veins on

his reddened forehead and neck seemed about to burst. "Not only...not only are you...are you spiritually immature and foolish, you are...you are impertinent and...and grossly disrespectful!"

Curtis got up from his chair. "C'mon," he said to Robbie, "let's get outta here."

Chapter 4

Through a Mirror Dimly

The Pastor sat alone in his study, listening to the pounding rain and fuming with anger over Curtis—*righteous anger*. In a queer sort of way, he did not want it to subside too quickly. *The young fool!* he thought, pounding his fist on the desk top. *This ministry could be his someday! But he'll just throw it all away by marrying that divorced woman!*

He got up from his desk and paced the floor, his mind deep in thought. He had long been concerned over the changing values of younger generations. He considered most of today's youth irreligious, humanistic and narcissistic. He knew of pastors who were spiritually prostituting themselves by compromising the scriptures in order to please their spiritually immature congregations. "Ear-ticklers!" he called them out loud. "Purveyors of fluff for bucks, that's whet they are! Dream merchants who peddle a sugarcoated gospel of peace and prosperity and personal pleasures! Whatever happened to consecration, sacrifice and obedience?"

In his mind, he was and always would be a staunch defender of the faith. His reputation hinged on his unquestioning belief that the Bible was inspired by God. He considered his exegesis of scripture to be of the highest intellectual, academic, and theological integrity.

He returned to his chair and propped up his feet on the desk. He reached over and turned on the radio, hoping that some Christian music would soothe and inspire him while he worked on his sermon. And it would help drown out the dreary and monotonous patter of falling rain. Even with the music, it took several more minutes for the Pastor's anger to subside.

Thinking of Curtis brought to mind memories of his nephew's parents, Michael and Shirley. Curtis was only a totter at the time it happened. His mother was Amanda's younger sister, and Michael was fresh out of seminary

and a member of the Pastor's staff. On top of that, Michael was the Pastor's protégé. What high hopes he had had for Michael's career. But Michael had a mind of his own, and over the Pastor's protests became an Army chaplain. He was in Vietnam little more than a month when word was received that he had been killed in a Viet Cong mortar attack. Six months after Michael's death, his distraught wife took an overdose of sleeping pills.

Why, God, why? the Pastor still questioned after so many years.

Little Curtis was only two years old, orphaned and left to be cared for by Aunt Amanda and Uncle Desmond, who were childless. Amanda insisted they adopt Curtis. It was unthinkable to allow him placed in a foster home. She loved Curtis and raised him as her own son. In a short time he was calling her "Mother," which greatly pleased her. But the Pastor continued to think of the boy as his nephew. He was adamant that Curtis address him as "Pastor" or "Uncle."

As Curtis grew into adulthood, the Pastor groomed him to fill Michael's shoes, with the aim that he would someday "inherit" Morehouse Ministries. But Curtis fell short of measuring up to Michael. He was only an average student and lacked his father's charm, intellect and aggressiveness.

At age nineteen Curtis had eloped with a woman of twenty seven. The Pastor and Amanda met her only once, so they knew little about her. As expected, there came a divorce.

The Pastor shook his head, thinking, *Only by the grace of God was I able to work through Curtis's divorce from that adulterous no-good and salvage his reputation and career. And now he wants to place everything in jeopardy again by marrying that divorcee! What a blemish to the family name! How wrong for Curtis to expect God to honor such a sinful union!*

The Pastor swung his legs off the desk and leaned forward, resting both arms on the desk top. He wrung his hands in anguish.

The grandfather clock struck the quarter hour. The Pastor looked over at the old timepiece. The relic had always been a faithful companion that alerted him to the time every fifteen minutes. Lately, however, he had come to resent the old clock because it was a constant reminder that time was moving on, running out, and never to be recovered.

The Pastor sat back in his chair and admired his study. It was a monument to his years of ministry. He was satisfied that it properly reflected the image of his personality and position—the roominess, the polished oak paneling,

the massive fireplace, the glorious trophy wall, and the expansive shelves of books. His collection of scholarly tomes on theology and history numbered more than six thousand. And there were scores of rare classics, most of them secular novels.

In the early years of the Pastor's marriage, he and Amanda never missed an opportunity to browse through a used book store. They spent countless evenings in front of the glowing fireplace at home, reading new acquisitions and discussing them, often times well into the night.

Prompted by the remembrance, the Pastor looked at his study's fireplace. It was crowned with a mantle made of imported Italian marble. "The gift of a friend," he was always quick to explain to first-time visitors, to dispel any notion that church money might have been spent on such opulence. Mounted above the mantle were large, gilded-framed oil paintings of his mother and father, grandfather, and, of course, Amanda.

Grandfather Morehouse was a stern looking man, bald and sporting mutton chop sideburns. He was outfitted in a black suit, which was customary for men of the cloth back then. The Pastor remembered his grandfather as a great man of God. Years before the Pastor was born, his grandfather was a circuit-riding preacher, traveling the eastern plains of Colorado and western Nebraska and Kansas, holding evangelistic crusades and prayer meetings in Limon, Burlington, Goodland, North Platte, and other small farming and railroad towns.

The Pastor always regarded his grandfather as his role model, more so than his own father, who was also a preacher. His grandfather had been a coldhearted, insensitive man, but the Pastor overlooked this and thought of him as being strong in the Lord and obedient—totally uncompromising when it came to God's commandments. That's the way hellfire and damnation preachers were in those days, rationalized the Pastor. As one might expect, by the time young Desmond entered adolescence, he learned that measuring up to his grandfather's expectations was the only way to earn acceptance. He parlayed that to his relationship with others, even with God.

There were vast differences between the Pastor's grandfather and father, especially in their philosophies of ministry. Grandfather Morehouse started his ministry preaching the gospel on the hot and dusty dirt streets, then graduated to preaching in saloons on Sunday mornings. Eventually, he gave up his horse and wagon for a Model T Ford. In the last years of his ministry, he traveled with two assistants in a caravan of three Model A pickups and held revival meetings in tents. Entire farm communities turned out to hear

him preach. Wherever he went he was the house guest of well-to-do farm families. His assistants slept in the tent. Offering plates overflowed and there were brisk sales of heirloom Bibles and inspirational books written by Billy Sunday and other popular preachers of the day.

In contrast to the Pastor's grandfather, his mild-mannered father started his pastorate in an unimposing storefront church near downtown Denver. Years later, the growing congregation built a small church building a few blocks away.

Pastor Morehouse could not remember any display of affection between his father and mother. He attributed this to their advancing ages. When he was born, his mother was in her early forties and his father was approaching sixty.

His father spent a great deal of time visiting church families, usually at dinner time, so he was rarely home until late evening. The Pastor considered his father's portrait over the fireplace to be as nondescript as his personality and life had been.

By contrast, the Pastor's mother was a strong-willed woman who ran the household and managed the family finances. She also served as the church secretary and administrator.

The Pastor took after his mother's side of the family. He became a visionary, like his grandfather before him. Ambitious and aggressive, he was not content to merely sit back and let people come to his church. Instead, he went out to the masses as his grandfather had done. Not by horse-drawn wagon, of course, but by radio, by television, and in recent years over the Internet. He often wished that his father and grandfather had lived to see him go on television and to witness the incredible growth of Mile High Community Church.

Amanda's portrait was the Pastor's favorite of her. A brunet with warm brown eyes, she was captured on canvas with a lovely smile and sparkling eyes that, to this day, caused the Pastor's heart to quicken. Oh, how I miss you, Amanda, he thought, his eyes glistening. Your pretty face and sweet, soft voice.... You kept our home so tidy—always had supper waiting for me when I was late. And all those tireless hours you spent doing little things around the church. You were always helping people. And they loved you for it. Everyone loved you. No man was ever blessed with a better helpmate! We had a perfect marriage, Amanda; indeed, a marriage made in heaven!

Not wanting to slip further into melancholy, the Pastor sought to divert his thoughts. He again looked at the fireplace. Gracing its sides were two small, round end-tables made of elephant's feet. Mounted on teak wood bases, their highly polished toe nails glistened, even in the soft lights of the study. They were gifts from a tribe in Ethiopia. Its leaders gave them to him in appreciation for food and clothing the church provided to the tribe during a time of devastating drought.

Ah, what publicity my mission to Ethiopia brought, remembered the Pastor. And what a shot in the arm for my television ministry!

He smiled to himself and basked in rekindled pride over the great amounts of money he raised on television.

His eyes scanned the bookshelves. Most of the books were purchased from the church's research budget. Except for the rare ones, which were either purchased by himself or given to him by admirers.

A section of the bookshelf framed a large-screen Sony, on which he previewed his television programs. *It was the best TV set money could buy*, he prided himself. *The Lord deserves the best!*

Another wall was devoted to a display of framed and mounted certificates, citations, medallions, honorary doctorate degrees, and sundry other awards given to him over the years. Among them were plaques presented to him by-the National Religious Broadcasters for his television and radio ministry, and by the Christian Booksellers Association for his several best-sellers. But it all seemed so long ago.

His pride and joy was a small collection of autographed photos of himself with Richard Nixon and every President since. The Pastor had preached for every one of them at White House chapel services.

There were three other autographed pictures of which he was particularly proud. He was in all of them, posing with some of the most respected preachers and evangelists in the world at that time; men whom he considered his contemporaries: Billy Graham, Robert Schuller, Pat Robertson, and Jerry Falwell.

Other photos were of the Pastor with rich and famous corporate moguls, movie stars, and politicians. Several had spoken before his congregation and appeared on his television program. Celebrity appearances always drew more viewers—and more donations.

In years past the Pastor received many personal gifts from admirers. A church member who once owned a Cadillac dealership donated a new model every year to Morehouse Ministries for the Pastor's personal use.

Another executive routinely arranged for his company's Lear jet to fly the Pastor around the country for speaking engagements. Other wealthy friends—with second homes in Aspen, Scottsdale, and Orlando—made their retreats available to the Pastor for holidays, vacations, and sabbaticals for writing books.

But now the gifts weren't as plentiful or as valuable as in earlier years. Times had changed. People had changed. And Pastor Morehouse had changed.

Almost lost in the clutter of celebrity photos was a small oil painting given to him years ago by a now-deceased church member. Though it lacked in artistic quality, the Pastor was intrigued by the subject. It was a crucifixion scene that portrayed Christ, flanked on both sides by the two criminals.

What intrigued the Pastor was that one of them was pictured in the foreground and sported a saintly, glowing halo like Christ's. "Praise God," he often commented to visitors, "even the worst of sinners can become saints."

The Pastor's thoughts snapped back to the present and he realized he had been wasting precious time when he should have been working on his sermon.

The radio's music crackled with static, then thunder rumbled in the distance.

Chapter 5

The Man with One Arm

"Pastor?" Annabelle's voice interrupted over the intercom.

"Yes?" he answered curtly.

"I'll join you momentarily to start on the sermon. I have one more phone call to make."

He shook his head. *Absent-minded old woman.* He slumped back in his chair. Despite Annabelle's shortcomings, he wondered how a new secretary would ever become as efficient as she when it came to helping with sermon preparation.

Annabelle had been his only secretary over all the years of his ministry. He hired her when she was in her early thirties, a few years older than himself. She was a clear thinker with an almost photographic memory, and had an uncanny way of anticipating his needs. From the time Amanda died until Curtis joined the staff, she handled much of the administrative details for the church and Morehouse Ministries. She still worked six and seven days a week, usually from early morning till well into the evening. Her challenging responsibilities and an inordinate work load would break the back and spirit of most women half her age. But it never seemed to bother her. Most of all, she knew how to handle the Pastor's personality fluctuations. There was no one he could depend on more.

The Pastor had to face reality: The years were taking their toll on Annabelle. She was frail and often succumbed to moments of absent-mindedness. Fortunately, Curtis had relieved her of many administrative duties.

"Pastor," came Annabelle's voice over the intercom, "Bert is here to see you."

Before the Pastor could answer, the door opened and Bert Samaran walked in.

Will I ever get to my sermon? the Pastor fretted.

Bert was a portly man, two years older than the Pastor. His red beard was streaked with gray and a Veteran's of Foreign Wars garrison cap covered the bald crown of his head. The cap was encrusted with VFW and military medals, preeminent among them being a Purple Heart he received after losing an arm in combat. But he never let on that it was much of a handicap. People agreed that he did more things with only one arm than most could manage with two.

The deacons once offered Bert a reserved handicapped parking space near the rear entrance of the church, but he turned them down in his own inimitable way. "I lost an arm, not my legs," he told them.

Though Bert had a big greenhouse behind his home, he was never one to admit being the fine horticulturist that he was. He often quipped, in his

usual, self-depreciating manner, "I lost my green thumb in the war." He was a handyman, too, always tinkering with gadgets at home and fixing this or that around the church. He referred to himself as "half a handyman."

Bert walked over to the Pastor's desk. Two packages were tucked under the stub of his left arm, and in his right hand was a gold foil-wrapped pot that overflowed with a colorful assortment of yellow and purple flowers, the varieties of which the Pastor did not know or care to know.

"Boy, we're gettin' a doozie of a rain!" said Bert. "And more's on the way. "Here," he said, setting the flowers on the Pastor's desk. "I brung these along to brighten up yer day, Desi."

The Pastor cringed at being called by the shortened version of his name. Bert had tagged him with the moniker when they met in the Army.

"Of course, they ain't as pretty as the flowers my Rosie used to grow, rest her soul. More'n likely they'll die in a few days, like all the other flowers I bring ya. Can't live without sunlight, ya know. Darned if I'd ever build a study without winders."

Bert had a point, for the Pastor's windowless study did need a touch of the outdoors. Not that the Pastor would ever agree to that; his study was the way he wanted it—built and furnished to his exact specifications. Windows would only expose him to views of the detestable outside world, and he didn't want such distraction.

Bert brought cut flowers to the church every Saturday. One arrangement was for the Pastor's study, another for Annabelle's desk, and a larger one for the chancel altar.

"I brung somethin' else for ya, Desi. Here, unwrap 'em," Bert said, fumbling with the packages and handing them to the Pastor.

Despite Bert's cheerfulness and thoughtfulness, the Pastor maintained his sullenness. *Always bringing me junk*, the Pastor thought, sighing with resign. He dutifully began to unwrap one of the packages.

Bert smiled with anticipation. "Remember that snapshot of me an' you when we got our medals?"

The Pastor stiffened.

"You remember," Bert prompted. "The one they took off the wall when they redid yer study, and it got lost."

The Pastor removed the last of the wrapping paper from the framed black and white photo. He hardly glanced at it. He didn't need to—or want to. It was all too familiar: he and Bert, both young and wearing U.S. Army uniforms. It showed the heavily bandaged stub of Bert's left arm and a cast on the Pastor's left leg. They both had Purple Hearts pinned to their chests. The Pastor tried for years to erase it all from his memory, but now the photo was bringing it back again.

"Too bad we never got a picture of Tony with us," said Bert. "Anyways, I got this one here made up for ya from the little one."

The Pastor winced at the mention of Tony's name. The picture of himself and Bert was bad enough. "Little one, what?" he asked.

"The little picture—the snapshot they took of us after we got our medals. Well, I took it down to Walgreens and they blew it up real big fer yer wall. Here, let me show ya," he offered, taking the picture from the Pastor.

Bert walked over to the trophy wall and pointed to a spot. "Ain't this about where the old picture was?" asked Bert, "Yeah, this is the spot. You can move some of these pictures and squeeze it in right next to you and Billy Graham."

The Pastor grimaced. *Now, how am I going to get rid of this one?* He was disturbed by the thought that important visitors would see the picture and start asking questions. Tony wasn't in it, but it made no difference; it still brought back horrible memories of that night.

"Well? Open the other one," said Bert, nodding at the package on the desk.

The Pastor unwrapped it. It was a book, an obviously old, but well-preserved edition of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

"I was nosey'n' around one of them old book stores on East Colfax the other day and ran across it."

The Pastor studied the book's cover. Though the story continued to have common popularity, he considered it overly sentimental and written in an elementary, all-too-revealing style for today's more sophisticated literary tastes. He opened the book to the title page and took note that it was an

early edition, printed in 1915. *It could be rare.*

With no response coming from the Pastor, Bert asked, "Maybe ya already got that one, huh?"

"No, in fact, I don't," said the Pastor, admiring the book. "It's a fine book. I appreciate it. I truly do."

Bert beamed with satisfaction. "Sorry I can't stay and visit longer, but me an' Annabelle's goin' visitin' out to the VA hospital."

The Pastor frowned, angered that she had failed to remind him.

After Bert left, the Pastor leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He sighed long and deep. Fatigue was coming on and he still had to prepare his sermon. And Annabelle wouldn't be there to help him.

He looked around for his brief case. Then it occurred to him: *My car. I left it in my car.* He banged his fish on the desk. *Confound it!—I forget what I want to remember and remember what I want to forget!*

Chapter 6

Thunder and Darkness

The Pastor walked back from his car, brief case in hand. The storm had brought on an early darkness. He watched Bert's van pull out of the church parking lot and head off through the evening's pelting rain. Blue exhaust mixed with swirling ground fog. He watched until the van's tail lights faded into the rainy darkness. He stepped onto the sidewalk. Though the relentless rain was mercilessly beating on his umbrella, he paused to watch the runoff flow into a dizzy whirlpool at a storm drain. He was mesmerized by the whirling water disappearing into the dark cavity.

Lightning ripped the darkened sky and there was an immediate report of deafening thunder. In the instant the flash lit up the evening, movement at a distance caught the Pastor's eye. He squinted through the rain and darkness toward the street intersection a block away. In the glow of a street light, he saw a shadowy figure running toward him.

Panic gripped the Pastor's heart. He turned and walked hastily toward the

main entrance of the church. Pain shot through his left leg and caused him to slow his gait. He limped on toward the church, several times glancing over his shoulder.

Once inside the foyer, he frantically locked the double glass doors, then anxiously peered outside. Seconds later, a man came into view, running along the sidewalk that bordered the street. And he kept on running until he was past the church and out of sight.

"Only a jogger!" The Pastor sighed with relief. *In this rain, too! Crazy people these days.* He turned around and leaned back against the glass door, his heart still pounding. His leg throbbed with pain. *Will I always be haunted by that night?* The recurring, tormenting nightmare was all too real. It was always a rainy, foggy night, and he was running through a muddy battlefield—running for his life from a German rifleman.

Having caught his breath, the Pastor limped across the foyer toward the hallway leading to his study. Something new on the bulletin board caught his attention. Amid the clutter of tacked-on announcements were two large posters, one of which he did not recognize and therefore had not authorized to be posted.

He walked over for a closer look. The authorized poster pictured Geno, tomorrow's guest concert pianist. The handsome young Italian had become a celebrity through his CDs, concerts, church appearances, and many guest appearances on Christian television.

The unauthorized poster was a bit larger and promoted a contemporary Christian music program at the Convention Center tomorrow night. It pictured a singer named Jonathan, whom the Pastor did not recognize. He thought the guitar-wielding young man looked like a lowbrow, long-haired hippie folk singer from the 'sixties or 'seventies. *What a contrast,* he thought, *a concert pianist and a guitar-playing hippie.* He prided himself that Mile High Community Church was hosting Geno and not the hippie. *I wonder who put up this awful poster.* He would remember to look into it.

Back in his study, the Pastor brewed a pot of tea and neatly arranged some cookies on a saucer. He settled down at his desk and turned on his primitive computer. Faint green light came to the small screen, then turned brilliant.

It had been a trying day: His painful leg, the encounter with Curtis, the annoyance of Bert's visit, Annabelle, the storm, the panic over seeing the man outside....

One more obstacle stood in the way of starting on the sermon: the discomfort and distraction of the throbbing pain in his bad leg. He reluctantly did the only thing he knew to do: He took a vial of tranquilizer tablets from a desk drawer and downed two of them with a gulp of tea. He rarely resorted to the pills because they had a tendency to bring on drowsiness and even nightmares. On the other hand, the troubles of the day just might be setting himself up for a sleepless night. Regardless, the preparation of his sermon took priority over a good night's sleep. He opened his brief case and took out his sermon notes.

Bong! chimed the grandfather clock. He glanced at the antique timepiece: It was seven o'clock. He looked around his dimly lit chambers. An eerie feeling came over him. He listened as the clock chimed a total of seven bongs and watched the pendulum swing back and forth. One second at a time was slipping away, gone forever.

Enough of this, he thought. He was pressed for time to prepare his sermon. His mind was troubled, his leg ached, and his whole body was weary and begged for rest.

He switched on the radio, hoping for some soft classical music to soothe his nerves.

Wagner's "Gotterdammerung." *Hardly soothing.* "Twilight of the Gods." That future time in German mythology when pagan gods are destroyed in a final battle with evil powers. The Pastor once had an interest in mythology and even enjoyed some of Wagner's music. Then he heard that Wagner had been an adept of theosophy, and ever since held the composer and his music in contempt. But it went still deeper. Another theosophist—Adolf Hitler—had been a rabid fan of Wagner. The Nazi madman had been fond of enjoying the mystic solitude of listening to Wagner while sitting on an outcropping of rock, high in the Bavarian Alps, surrounded by dense clouds, and immersed in esoteric thought.

Listening to Wagner and thinking of Hitler chilled the Pastor. There was nothing at all he liked about them—or clouds. The thought of suffocating clouds triggered remembrances of *that night*. He angrily switched the radio to a Christian music station.

The Pastor would do little research for his sermon. In earlier years he devoted twenty hours a week to preparing a message. But anymore, he rarely gave more than an evening's effort, and usually at the last hour on

Saturday night.

Over the years the Pastor developed a formula for his sermons. His approach was to attack a specific act of sinfulness, then preach an emotional call to repentance and godly living. His sermons were all structured in the same way, only the topic changed from week to week. It did not take a great deal of time to prepare such sermons. Especially with Annabelle doing much of the research for examples gleaned from magazines and newspaper exposés of wayward people.

But tomorrow's sermon was special because it was the ministry's twenty-fifth anniversary on television. The Pastor was resigned to spend a long evening preparing his message.

How do people think they can be good Christian soldiers when they 're disobedient to God's Word? the Pastor lamented. *Look at Curtis! He intends to disobey the Lord by marrying a divorced woman!* The more the Pastor thought about it, the more he felt inner confirmation that the urgent message of the hour was a fresh, new denouncement of divorce. It was a timely message for his flock. Particularly for Curtis.

A weather bulletin came over the radio: A tornado watch had been issued by the National Weather Service for parts of Denver.

The Pastor groaned. *What more could happen to make things worse?* First Curtis, then Annabelle, then Bert, then the man running in the rain...and now a tornado watch!

Of all times for Annabelle to visit the VA hospital, the Pastor fretted. She knew exactly what was in the research files and where everything was located. *Now, where would she keep clippings on divorce?* It was ironic, he had to admit, that, after all these years, he was not the least bit familiar with her filing system. Regardless, he had to have some titillating clippings from the supermarket tabloids on divorce among the rich and famous. Juicy tidbits of gossip about celebrities were always a hit with the congregation.

He went to the outer office and began searching through file drawers. To his surprise, he soon found the subject files, and then a file labeled "Divorce." It brought a smile to his face. Annabelle had everything so well organized.

The Pastor returned to his desk with the file folder, pleased to see that it contained some recent magazine clippings. *Good!—has to be timely stuff.*

He spent the next half hour scanning the stories, making notes on his computer. The pain in his leg was subsiding, and he felt more relaxed— weary, but relaxed. He credited the tranquilizers.

There was a sudden crash of thunder and the soft lights in the study flickered, then went out. The image on the computer screen dimmed from green to total blackness.

The Pastor waited for a moment, anticipating the lights would come back on. But they did not. The seconds ticked away. Still no lights. Cursing the darkness, he blindly fumbled through a lower drawer of his desk. His probing fingers found a flashlight. He turned it on and started to rise from his chair, when lightning flashed against the trophy wall. There quickly followed another peal of thunder, much louder than before. A gentle breeze stirred the papers on the desk. Then the study was still and nearly silent again in the darkness. The only sound was the muted *rat-a-tat-tat* of rain drumming on the roof and the ticking of the grandfather clock.

The Pastor froze. *Lightning? A breeze? In a windowless room?* A chill swept over him. He searched the darkness with the flashlight. All appeared normal—dark, but normal. Small beads of perspiration formed on his forehead. His heart was pounding. It had been along day, he reasoned, and he must be more tired than he realized. Or maybe it was the tranquilizers.

Yes! The pills are playing tricks with my mind!

He left his study and walked into the hallway. The lights were out everywhere.

Making his way with the flashlight, he went into the sanctuary. He walked down an aisle to the front and up onto the chancel altar. It was pitch black, except for the dim yellow beam of his flashlight. The dark sanctuary was eerie. He had never before seen it darkened like this. As best as he could see, nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary. He took candles from two ornate candelabra on floor stands that graced either side of the stage, then left the sanctuary.

Back in his study, the Pastor lit a candle and dripped hot wax onto an inverted teacup, then mounted a candle on it. He made a half dozen more of the crude candle holders, then placed them around his desk. He lit them all and was satisfied they gave off sufficient light.

He sat down to work on his sermon. He could not remember ever working by

candlelight. It would be time-consuming and laborious without the computer. But he found pleasure in the notion to mention it in his sermon. *It will be a warm, human interest touch*, he thought, smiling.

The minutes passed. The day's toil, combined with the tranquilizers and dim, flickering candlelight, found his fatigued eyes begging for sleep. He decided to recline on the sofa and close his eyes for a few minutes. He had all night to finish the sermon. But it was his mind more than his eyes that needed rest. It occurred to him to read for a few minutes to get his thoughts off the day's troubles. He went to his desk for the book Bert had given him.

Reading about Ebenezer Scrooge for a few minutes might clear his mind, he thought. And he took *A Christmas Carol* back to the sofa with him.

Chapter 7

The Unwelcome Stranger

Knock, knock...knock, knock....

Persistent rapping sounds stirred the Pastor's sleep. *A Christmas Carol* slipped off his chest and fell to the floor with a thud. He opened his eyes. Flickering candlelight was dancing on the ceiling of the study.

Knock, knock....

He looked at the door. *Couldn't be*, he thought. *No one would come by at this late hour.*

Knock, knock....

Maybe it's Bert. Of course! That's who it is. Bert has come back to check up on me!

Confident in his assumption, the Pastor rose to his feet and started walking toward the door. Then he remembered from earlier in the evening: the shadowy figure he saw running toward him.

Knock, knock....

The Pastor stopped in his tracks, flinching at each knock. He intuitively retreated a step backwards from the door. With a start he realized the

rapping sounds were not coming from the door, but from somewhere behind him. He spun around to look, and when he saw, a loud gasp escaped his mouth. There, sitting on the edge of his desk, was a young man with a guitar slung over his back.

Knock, knock. The man rapped his knuckles on the desk top. "I thought you'd never wake up," said the stranger, smiling.

"Who are you?" asked the Pastor, his voice faltering. "How did you get into my study?—into the church?"

The unwelcome stranger stood up. There was something vaguely familiar about him, but the Pastor could not recall ever meeting him. He guessed the intruder was in his late twenties. He had long sandy hair and wore faded blue jeans and a black T-shirt. The Pastor's eyes were drawn to the graphics on the T-shirt. There was a macabre montage of skeletal beings. Above them was a white cross and below was printed a blazon admonition: "SURRENDER!"

I've met him somewhere, thought the Pastor. "This is the last time I'll ask you: What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"How 'bout a cookie?" asked the stranger, nodding toward the saucer on the desk.

"What?"

"A cookie. You don't mind sharing, do you?" The man reached over and helped himself to not one, but three.

"This is an outrage!" bellowed the Pastor, assuming his most belligerent and authoritative aire.

The stranger's smile faded. "It sure is an outrage. That's why I'm here."

"I demand to know who you are and why you are here!"

"It's time you asked yourself the same questions. As for who I am, you can call me Jonathan."

"What do you want from me? Money? Do you want my money?"

"No, no," said Jonathan. "I want you to surrender and enter in to God's rest."

"Surrender? Is that a threat? Are you going to hurt me?"

"No, Pastor. I'm here to help you. Here, take this," he said, handing the Pastor a slip of paper with some writing on it, "keep it in your Bible, and read it often."

"Humph!" the Pastor responded, as he placed the paper in his Bible.

"Maybe if I shed a little light on your darkness you'll see things more clearly." He raised his right arm and pointed his finger to the ceiling. Here and there on his arm appeared tiny bolts of spiraling blue lights that emitted a faint, low-pitched hum.

The Pastor watched with fright and fascination.

The lights orbited Jonathan's arm like the electrons of an atom. Circling ever faster and growing brighter, they merged into a blurred ribbon of light. It spiraled up Jonathan's arm and concentrated around the tip of his finger, becoming a single point of brilliance. It grew brighter and brighter, then exploded in a flash of lightning and crash of thunder.

It blinded the Pastor for a moment. As the thunder continued rumbling in the distance, his sight returned. *But is it thunder?* he wondered. It sounded more like...like an organ!—an organ simulating the sounds of thunder. Now, the sound was changing. The rumbling was giving way to cacophonous sounds—eerie and discordant minor bass chords and shrill high tones—faint, at first, then louder.

Then he recognized the sounds. *After lunch! Outside the restaurant! The wind, the crying wind!*

The Pastor stared wide-eyed around his study, anticipating that he might next see flying banshees, for the wailing cries were other-worldly. But he saw nothing. The music or crying—whatever it was—seemed to be coming from the sanctuary. The Pastor turned his eyes toward the door of his study as if looking in the direction of the sounds would somehow enable him to hear them with better clarity and comprehension.

The Pastor turned to confront the unwelcome stranger. "I don't know what you're up to, but—" He never completed the sentence because Jonathan was no longer there. He had simply disappeared. The Pastor swallowed hard. His temples began to throb. The foreboding cries grew louder and, in some

strange way, seemed to beckon him to the sanctuary.

"This is a nightmare!" he cried out. "It's a dream! It's only a bad dream!"

But he was drawn to the sanctuary. He left the study with the flashlight in hand. He walked slowly, deliberately and warily down the hallway, his eyes and ears keenly alert for anything out of the ordinary. A moment later he stood outside the sanctuary doors. He listened to the macabre sounds, wondering what they might be, and fearing that his pounding heart could not take much more of this. His trembling hand pointed the flashlight's beam at the huge, double doors. He wiped perspiration from his brow, then slowly and apprehensively reached for a door handle. He hesitated for a moment, fearful of what awful things might be on the other side. He braced himself, opened the door with trembling hands, and, as quietly as possible, tip-toed into the unlit sanctuary.

The sounds were distinctly those of an organ, though unlike any organ he had ever heard. He felt the sounds as much as he heard them. They had a hollow, echoing quality that now vaguely reminded him of an organ he once heard in a Gothic cathedral in France. He squinted his eyes and searched the dark cavern of the sanctuary in the vicinity of the organ. But he could see nothing.

Lightning flashed and was immediately answered by exploding thunder. For a second, the huge, stained glass windows glowed brilliantly from the lightning and filled the sanctuary in a kaleidoscope of colors, the likes of which he had never before beheld. Then all was dark again. Had he imagined it? Or had the sanctuary actually taken on another appearance?

He shined his flashlight at a wall and saw huge blocks of rock. They glistened with dampness and were spotted with brown and ochre moss. The air smelled of mildew. "Where am I? My God! Where am I!" he cried out, echoing in the huge chamber. "Has my church become a dungeon?"

He looked through the darkness in the direction of the organ. But, what...? A faint, ghostly glow of light appeared inches above the organ bench. It grew and grew, until it illuminated both the organ bench and console. Then it began to emit many flashing colors, some more intense than others. When bass chords were dominant the pulsating light took on intensified hues of yellow, orange, and red. And when the higher sounds were louder, green, blue, and white were dominant. *I'm seeing sounds!*

The Pastor's eardrums already ached, and the sounds were growing louder

and louder. Then the light over the organ bench softened to a blue-white, much like the blue flame of a gas furnace. But it was something else: an animate form of energy. Someone or something was seated at the organ!

The sounds grew so loud that he no longer heard them with his ears, but with his soul. And instead of ear-splitting pain, he felt painful emotions deep within his troubled heart.

The impulse came over him to turn and run, but the beckoning of the organ was irresistible. Drawn to the source of the sounds and the bright blue light at the console, he inched closer.

The music stopped, and its echoes dissipated in the darkness. The Pastor paused. He stared at the glowing blue light. It was changing form again, taking on the proportions of...of a person! An aura! No, it was more like St. Elmo's Fire, as on the mast of a ship in a storm at sea.

"Come closer, Desmond," said a deep, authoritative voice. It was louder than a human voice, and it emanated from all directions in the sanctuary. Trance-like, the Pastor obeyed the apparition's command. He walked a few steps closer. All the while, the blue-white aura continued its transformation, now plainly into the translucent image of a human figure.

The image floated away from the organ bench. It was that of a tall man. As it took on more detail, the Pastor could see that the man had a large frame and was attired in a black, vested suit and string bow tie. He was elderly, bald on top, and had long, gray side hair. His thin, pursed lips and defiant chin were bordered by gray, bushy mutton chop sideburns.

The Pastor gasped. "Grandfather! But, how can this be? The scriptures forbid me to talk with the dead!"

"What you hear and what you see are what you ignored to hear and see in times past, Desmond. This night you will more than hear with your ears and see with your eyes, for within the memories and imagination of your soul are stirring the sights and sounds of days long past, and now you will see them and hear them as never before."

"I don't understand, Grandfather."

"No, of course, you do not."

"Why are you doing this? What do you want of me?" asked the Pastor. His

mouth and throat were dry from fright, causing his voice to croak.

"To warn, you, Desmond, so that you will surrender and enter in."

"Warn me? Of what? What is it that everyone wants to warn me about? What is all this nonsense? Will someone please explain what...." His voice trailed off and he smiled wryly. "This is only a nightmare, isn't it? You aren't real, none of this is real."

Not 'real' as you understand reality, Desmond. But this night, the Spirit implores you to search the depths of your heart for truths and realities which you have refused to hear and see, as one by one the years have slipped by. It is because of this that so much that now is upon you has been decreed to come upon you."

The Pastor squinted a questioning squint at the image of his grandfather. "Could it be that this is not a nightmare, but a vision? The Hebrew prophets had visions. Paul had visions of heaven—and John received much of the Revelation in visions.

"And didn't Joel write that in the end-time old men will dream dreams and young men will see visions? Oh, my! A dream! A vision! Am I having a vision? Can it be? How could—"

"Stop that blabbering!" bellowed the image.

The Pastor cowered.

"For many years," said the image, "you were a faithful servant of God, winning untold numbers of souls to salvation in Christ Jesus. You ventured where no evangelist before you ever trod in preaching the gospel to multitudes here and afar through the wonders of your modern era."

It is true, thought the Pastor. *No one has impacted America with the gospel like I have through radio, television, and the internet.*

"I've tried hard to be an obedient, faithful, and worthy servant," he said, hoping his voice sounded convincingly humble. "You, yourself, Grandfather, have always been my role model and inspiration."

"Silence!" admonished the booming voice.

The Pastor slunk back in fright.

You blind and foolish man! You dared to follow my own poor example and continued to live in self-reliance as I had done. Do you not realize that I was placed before you not as one to emulate but as an example of one not to follow?"

"How can you say that, Grandfather? No one tried as hard as you to be a good Christian!"

"Fool! Fool !" bellowed the image. "You chose to walk after the flesh rather than in the Spirit!" He pointed an accusing finger at the Pastor and glared at him with stern, piercing eyes. "Just as I did, you pride yourself in fulfilling the law, and in so doing rob yourself of God's grace! Surrender, Desmond! I implore you! Surrender, I say...and enter in!"

The Pastor defiantly stood tall and clinched his fists at his sides. "No one tries harder than I to be a worthy servant of our Lord!"

You miserable fool!" thundered the image. "You believe God places a debt on you for your salvation?"

And at that instant, lightning ripped the night sky and showered the sanctuary in brilliant light.

The Pastor shielded his eyes with an arm. Then came the booming thunder. He lowered his arm and looked around. The image of his grandfather was nowhere to be seen; only a brilliant blue aura in the shape of his figure remained. Then part of the aura moved. Like the fingers of a hand, it reached out to the organ's keyboard. It was changing shape again; like a tentacle of light, it crept onto and around the organ.

The aura or St. Elmo's Fire—whatever it was—sparkled and grew brighter. From here and there it ejected shards of glowing energy—missiles of light that burst forth in every direction. Where the slender bolts of blue energy struck they exploded to form other bursting balls of light, like fireworks on the Fourth of July. And those grew tentacles of blue fire that went out to envelope the chairs on the platform, to the rows of seats—to everything, giving the objects a ghostly, blue glow.

The organ began playing again, and this time the shrieking cries of the disembodied souls increased in decibels, more desperate and urgent, and more frightfully foreboding.

The Pastor's knees trembled fiercely. Feeling faint, he grasped the back of a seat to keep from falling. *Got to get hold of myself*, he thought, his breathing rapid and shallow. He could hear the convulsive pounding of his heart.

Enough of this, he thought defiantly. He spun around to flee the sanctuary, only to abruptly bump into someone and scream from the start.

"Hey, man, you didn't have to yell like that," said Jonathan. "Scared me half to—"

"Not you again!" moaned the Pastor. "Will this nightmare never end? Please, Jonathan, no more of this. Just leave me to myself. Let me wake up! Let me escape this horrible nightmare. I want to return to my study and lie down. I'm afraid I'm having a nervous breakdown. This could cause me a heart attack, you know."

"You aren't having a nervous breakdown, Pastor, and your heart's as strong as your stubborn self-will. Besides, there isn't time to rest, 'cause we're going calling."

"Calling? Don't be ridiculous! Why should I go anywhere with you? I don't even know who you are—or what you are."

"I'm a messenger, I told you."

"Then deliver your message and get out of here!"

"It was just delivered, but you didn't hear and you didn't see. So now, we must go on."

"I don't have the time or patience or least bit of interest in your outlandish, insulting mind-games," sneered the Pastor. "I want all of this to stop—and stop now!"

Jonathan smiled a sympathetic smile. "It is not within my authority to stop it. Only you can do that. But you won't, so we have to go on."

"Go where? To what? Tell me what I must do to stop all this and I will."

"I told you, Pastor: You're missing the message. You've got to listen and really hear, open your eyes and really see." He pointed a finger toward

heaven and it began to glow as before. Then he strummed his guitar and began singing a slow, haunting ballad:

His ears could hear,
But deaf was his mind.
His eyes could see,
But his heart was blind.

The Pastor opened his mouth to protest, but before he could utter a word, he felt a mild wobbliness in his legs. But no, it wasn't his legs. The floor was moving! It buckled up, then fell, twisted and turned.

"It's an earthquake!" cried the Pastor.

Jonathan shook his head.

"What's happening? What's going on?" demanded the Pastor, struggling to keep his balance. Jonathan continued to stare at him with penetrating eyes, singing his ballad, seemingly oblivious to the undulating floor.

A breeze whistled through the sanctuary, fluttering registration slips in the racks on the seat backs. A faint fog crept in with the breeze and swirled about the Pastor.

"What are you doing?" the Pastor demanded to know. "What's happening?" Jonathan said nothing.

The swirling fog grew dense and spun faster and faster until it became a howling gale. Everything was a dizzy, carousel blur—the altar, the rows of seats, and the stained glass windows....

Claustrophobia gripped the Pastor. He felt nauseous and his head was about to explode from the deafening roar of the swirling wind. He tightly shut his eyes and pressed his hands against his ears. "Stop it! Stop it!" he shouted, hysterically.

Then everything went black and the Pastor's mind went blank.

Chapter 8

In the Heavenly Realm

The Pastor turned in his sleep. Something was different about the sofa. Consciousness suddenly erupted in his mind and he sat bolt upright. But he was not in his study. He stared wide-eyed at the nacreous cloud that surrounded him. It was in a peaceful, ethereal world of luminous, iridescent whiteness.

It seemed so real, yet so unreal. He was sitting in a cloud! He tried to make sense out of it, but thinking such a mind-boggling thought only made his throbbing head throb all the more. He closed his eyes and rubbed his face to massage away his fatigue and troublesome thoughts.

He opened his eyes and surveyed this peculiar new world. He had driven through clouds in the mountains and had flown among them in airplanes, but now he was sitting in a cloud. And it was not like other clouds. It had a thin, foggy atmosphere on the surface, but just underneath was so dense that it supported his weight and kept him from falling. He reached down and watched his hand disappear into the thick vapor. The cloud gave gentle resistance, until inches further down where there was more firmness—not rigid, but spongy firm.

Clouds! the Pastor thought with contempt. And yet this peaceful cloud was nothing at all like the violent cloud Jonathan had brought upon him.

"Hey, there!"

The Pastor jerked around with a start. There was Jonathan, sitting cross-legged in the cloud.

"How do you feel, Pastor?"

"Humph! Dizzy, of course. A little sick to my stomach. Confused. And—and...."

"You'll feel better in a minute," he said, giving a reassuring smile. "It takes a little getting used to."

"And the confusion? When will that clear up?"

"What are you confused about?"

"What am I confused about? You know what I'm confused about! Where am I? Who are you? And what is happening to me? Have I completely lost touch with reality?"

"Over the years you lost touch in a lot of ways. But now, I pray you'll get back in touch."

The Pastor bristled. "You are an impertinent, condescending—"

"Whoa! Hold on, now, Pastor. I only want you to realize that there is a spiritual dimension of reality, and that—"

"Don't patronize me, young man. You are speaking to a theologian, you know!"

"Please, hear me out. It's appointed to most mortals to be exposed to only an infinitesimally small sliver of a very broad spectrum of reality."

"You have a real gift for observing the obvious," the Pastor said sarcastically.

"Let me finish, will you? There is so much more reality than you can begin to —"

"How much more?"

Jonathan threw up his arms in exasperation. "Please! Quit interrupting me."

"Well, now, maybe we're getting somewhere," said the Pastor. "You've come to show me new realities, is that it?"

"I've been sent to persuade you to open your eyes and ears, to see what you have been too blind to see and too deaf to hear."

"Humph! I think you'll find I have the faculties to recognize reality when I see it."

"Reality," said Jonathan, speaking slowly and choosing his words carefully, "is as broad and wide and high and deep as is God Himself. What mortals are privy to and what is beyond them is like comparing a grain of sand to all the beaches of the world. No, a grain of sand is too big. It's more like a molecule—or, smaller still, an atom. Or, even smaller, a single quark compared to all the quarks in creation! That only covers the material realm. As for non-

material reality—”

“I’ve got it! I’ve got it,” said the Pastor dismissively. “Skip the imagery, will you? Just tell me—”

“It’s not so much a question of telling you and showing you, Pastor, God will see to that in His own time and His own way. It’s more a matter of your hearing and seeing what already has been revealed to you.”

The Pastor wondered what his strange visitor must know, must have seen, must have heard, and must have experienced from wherever he came. He had to change his tactics.

“I must confess something, Jonathan,” he said in a reconciliatory tone, “I’ve underestimated you. You’re more intelligent than—than you first appeared to be.”

“You don’t understand, Pastor. I’m not withholding anything from you. It’s all right there for you to see and hear.”

“Humph!”

Jonathan stood up in the cloud and said, “It’s time to be on our way.”

“I can’t move,” the Pastor protested. “My head is spinning. I feel sick.”

“I promise you’ll feel better in a few minutes. Now stand up and let’s get going.”

The Pastor was not used to being ordered around, but he knew that lingering there in the middle of the cloud was not going to answer any of his questions. “Very well,” he agreed. “You have the advantage.”

The Pastor cautiously stood up. He sunk to his knees, but there he was, standing in a cloud.

“That’s it,” said Jonathan, “keep on coming.”

The Pastor hesitated. Sure, the cloud was supporting his weight where he stood, but “Does it have holes?” he asked. “Like thin spots in the ice on a lake?” The thought of falling through the cloud turned his spine into jello.

“It’s nothing like that,” Jonathan assured him.

"How high up are we?"

Jonathan smiled. "It's not that kind of cloud. There's nothing to fall to. No up and no down like you're used to. Now, c'mon, step over here; we've got to get moving." He raised an index finger skyward and, as before, St. Elmo's Fire appeared to sparkle and emit a glow of blue-white light. The cloud began to churn.

"No! Not again!" cried the Pastor. But his plea was lost in the screaming wind of the swirling cloud.

Chapter 9

The Den of Sin

The Pastor slowly awakened. He opened his eyes to the soft glow of candles. He was in his study, lying on the sofa. *No clouds!* He sighed with relief.

He sat up and rubbed the sleep from his face. *Is it over? Has the nightmare ended? But, of course, it has! I've been sleeping! I've been right here in my study all the time!* A smile of relief came to his face.

Minutes later he sat down at his desk with a fresh-brewed pot of tea. "It was a bad dream," he muttered, "that's all, only a bad dream. Grandfather said it was all in my mind." He smiled to himself, then laughed. He felt light-hearted. *When was the last time I really laughed?* he wondered. It felt good.

He picked up a pencil from his desk and playfully flipped it into the air. He caught it then flipped it again, only to fumble the catch. He leaned over to pick up the pencil. As his hand reached for it, he saw a faint, white vapor oozing out of the carpet.

He bolted up in his chair, wide-eyed and trembling. All across the floor the mist was rising from the carpet. He jumped from his chair and frantically looked around the study. "Jonathan!" he yelled. "Where are you?"

The fog crept around his legs, then picked up speed and grew into a dense, spinning cloud that filled the study. The walls and the fireplace became a blur. Vertigo came over him.

The Pastor didn't know how long he had been unconscious. But now he was floating in a peaceful cloud.

"Jonathan?" he said in a whisper, breaking the unnatural silence. He looked around. "Answer me ! " he demanded, squinting, looking for Jonathan in the thick cloud.

"Here I am," came Jonathan's voice from behind. The Pastor spun around to see Jonathan's faint image in the cloud.

"How dare you continue to subject me to this!" the Pastor protested.

Jonathan walked through the cloud toward him. "I could have been killed, you know. Leaving me alone in this—this cloud! It's a horrifying experience."

"You make it tough on yourself," said Jonathan. "It could have ended by now—and it could end right here. That's up to you."

"Then let's bring a halt to this nonsense, right now!"

"Are you sure you're ready?" Jonathan asked. "To hear and see? To surrender and enter in to God's rest?"

"Riddles!" spat the Pastor. "Nothing but riddles! Every time I ask you—" He cut himself off in mid-sentence, frowned and looked around. He cocked his head, listening. "Do you hear that? What is it?"

"It's music."

"I know it's music," snapped the Pastor. "Where is it coming from? Where are we?"

Lights of many hues began to flash here and there inside the cloud. The Pastor heard crowd noises over the din of disco music. Then images slowly materialized. In seconds it became apparent: He was standing in a cocktail lounge.

"This is Joplin's," said Jonathan. "One of the trendiest places in Denver—so I'm told."

A dazzling array of neon lights was suspended high overhead in infinite black space. A blue haze of acrid cigarette smoke hung in the air. It stung the

Pastor's eyes and lungs. And frequent utterances of profanity singed his ears. People were mingling around the crowded bar, drinking the devil's brew, boisterously laughing and talking. Others were sitting at round cocktail tables. Off to one side a young man and woman were unabashedly embraced in a lingering kiss.

"Disgusting!" snorted the Pastor.

Jonathan shrugged indifferently.

The small dance floor was jam-packed with dancers. The Pastor watched in shock as people danced suggestively to the most fleshly music he had ever heard. Women wore gaudy makeup and were hideously coiffured and scantily clad with revealing tops and skin-tight mini-skirts.

"A blatant ritual of sex if ever there was one!" said the Pastor. Never before had he seen such an open display of lasciviousness. "Shameless heathens!" he shouted.

"Save your breath, Pastor, they can't hear you or see you."

"Why have you brought me to this den of sin?"

"C'mon, you'll see."

The Pastor followed him over to an arched entry that opened to a private dining room. A dinner party was seated around a long dining table. The Pastor scanned the group, then gasped when he spotted Curtis and Robbie. "My own nephew! In a place like this! I'm appalled! Absolutely appalled! She brought him here. See what a bad influence that divorced woman is!"

Curtis rose from his chair and clanged a glass with a table knife to get everyone's attention. "I suppose you're all wondering why Robbie and I invited you here tonight," he said with a grin.

Someone shouted out: "Robbie's pregnant and you have to get married!"

Everyone at the table laughed. But the Pastor's mouth dropped open and he stared incredulously at his nephew.

"No, not quite," Curtis said, smiling and blushing.

Robbie stood up and hugged him. "I'm not pregnant—not yet," she said with

a smile. "But I'd like to be—real soon!"

The Pastor shook his head and mumbled something to himself. Were he wearing sackcloth he would rend it.

Curtis went on talking: "We wanted you all here so we could formally announce our engagement."

His friends applauded, whistled, and cheered.

"So when's the big day?" asked a young woman sitting across the table from the engaged couple.

"We were going to set a date this afternoon," said Curtis, "but—"

"Getting cold feet already?" called one of the men.

"No, nothing like that," said Curtis.

"I'll tell you why," volunteered Robbie, the smile gone from her face. "We wanted Curtis's uncle to marry us. We went to talk to him today to...." Choked by emotion, her chin quivered and her eyes watered over.

"You all know who my uncle is," said Curtis. "Pastor Desmond Morehouse. Well, because Robbie and I are both divorced, he said he won't marry us."

The Pastor smiled with smug self-righteousness.

The people at the table groaned and there were a few disparaging comments about the Pastor.

"No, wait," pleaded Curtis. "Please don't hold it against my Uncle. Robbie and I certainly don't."

"Humph!" grunted the Pastor.

"Hey, hey! Enough of this!" called out one of the men at the table. "Curtis loves Robbie and Robbie loves Curtis. That's all that matters!"

"I propose a toast," came the voice of another man who was standing up and raising a glass. "To Robbie and Curtis. We love you and pray for Jesus to grant you His richest blessings!"

The people at the table raised their champagne glasses and toasted the couple.

"Now it's my turn," said Curtis, raising his glass. His friends grew quiet. "I want to toast my bride." That he did, then gave Robbie a tender kiss. Their friends whooped and whistled.

The Pastor shook his head and mumbled under his breath: "Kissing in public, drinking champagne—Curtis knows the church's policy against drinking. Why, if he could see me and hear me, I'd...."

"Ah, young love," Jonathan said wistfully.

"Love?" snarled the Pastor. "In a place like this? What do those two divorced youngsters know about love? Infatuated, carnal fools are what they are!"

Jonathan looked upward and said, "You didn't tell me he was going to be this tough."

"What's that?" asked the Pastor.

"I wasn't talking to you," said Jonathan. "You know, I think you've forgotten what it's like to be young and in love."

"Humph!"

"Maybe you need a little refresher course." He raised his index finger upward.

"Oh, no!"

Jonathan's arm began to sparkle and glow.

"Please, not again!" cried the Pastor. "I beg of you!"

Chapter 10

The Eerie Engagement Dance

The violent, swirling cloud gave way to a silent void of darkness. Again the Pastor heard the faint sounds of music. But it was not the disco music of the cocktail lounge. It was older music—a big band sound. The music grew louder and new surroundings came into focus. In a matter of seconds the transition was complete.

The Pastor and Jonathan were standing beside a polished wood dance floor in a posh nightclub. It was packed with formally dressed couples who were swinging to the orchestra's peppy version of "In the Mood."

The Pastor was fascinated. It was a scene from long ago. He knew the place, the night, and the occasion. It was a "high class joint" in the vernacular of those days. More than that, it was, without equal, the place to go night clubbing in Denver during the war years. One of the city's better examples of Art Deco, it had a coved ceiling and indirect colored lighting. Here and there were wavy glass brick windows. Bright neon lights emblazoned the walls with colorful messages that touted the likes of Lucky Strikes and a beer brewed locally by the Coors family.

The bandstand was an elaborate affair—a stage, complete with footlights and a proscenium. The orchestra's twenty or so musicians wore white dinner jackets with black bow ties and black trousers. The band leader had a toothy grin and a thin Clark Gable mustache. His raven black hair was brilliantine shiny and slicked back.

"Where is she?" asked the Pastor, wistfully.

It had been the biggest night of his life: April 2, 1944, only weeks before he was drafted into the Army.

Jonathan leaned over to the Pastor and nodded toward the side of the stage.

The Pastor turned his eyes to see an attractive young couple. Standing before him were himself and Amanda as they were back then. He was wearing a black tux and she looked stunningly beautiful in a floor-length formal of champagne lace that bared her milky shoulders.

"Oh, my," whispered the Pastor. "She was so young, so beautiful."

"The two of you were very much in love," added Jonathan.

"That we were," agreed the Pastor. "She was the first woman I ever knew—knew in the biblical sense." Then he blushed. "Actually, she was the only woman I ever knew...that way."

"No one's questioning that."

The Pastor turned his eyes back to the dance floor. He saw himself lead Amanda by the hand up onto the stage. The band leader stopped the music. The couples on the dance floor turned to face the bandstand.

"May I have your attention, please," young Desmond shouted into the microphone. He wrapped an arm around Amanda's shoulders and drew her to him. "Last evening, I had the honor of dining with Amanda and her parents at their home. I, uh, asked her father for her hand in marriage." The crowd applauded.

"And," continued Desmond, as the crowd quieted, "he gave his consent!" The theatrical amazement in his voice drew chuckles from around the ballroom.

A man carrying a magnum of champagne and three long stemmed glasses bounded onto the stage.

"Look!" exclaimed the Pastor, pointing. "It's Willie Booth!" He turned to Jonathan. "He was my best man! Oh, how young he looks! He lost his life at Iwo Jima, you know."

Willie popped the cork and the crowd cheered. He poured bubbly champagne for Desmond and Amanda and himself, then raised his glass and said, "A toast! To Desmond and Amanda!"

"Hear! Hear!" came toasts from around the ballroom, as people raised their drinks to honor the engaged couple. Young Desmond and Amanda entwined their arms for an engagement toast and sipped the bubbly champagne. They were smiling and looking lovingly into each other's eyes.

"And now, the engagement dance," announced Willie, enthusiastically raising both arms into the air. He turned to the band leader and asked, "What's appropriate?"

"Don't Fence Me In," came a suggestion from the floor.

The crowd laughed.

The band started playing a slow number. After only a few measures, the Pastor recognized the melody. “The Girl That I Marry,” he whispered. “How long it’s been since I’ve heard it.”

He watched the crowd step back as his younger self led Amanda onto the dance floor. They began to dance slowly, gazing dreamily into each other’s eyes, caught up in a blissful world of their own. After an appropriate wait, Willie and his date, along with some other couples, walked onto the floor and started to dance.

The Pastor was overwhelmed by the emotion of the moment. His lips moved slightly as he mouthed the words of the old love song. He turned to Jonathan. “She was so beautiful—and such a graceful dancer. We were a happy couple. We had so many friends.”

“You certainly were an attractive couple, Pastor. And you enjoyed dancing.”

“Yes—especially Amanda. Of course, we didn’t dare let my grandfather know we went to night clubs. And, after the war, when I attended seminary, we quit dancing altogether. Our church had strong sentiments against dancing and worldly music.”

The dance ended, then the orchestra began playing another slow number. Desmond and Amanda embraced closely, hardly moving their feet to the music.

Amanda made a lot of sacrifices for you, Pastor—gave up dancing, having fun with friends....”

“We were ministers of God’s Word. And that called for personal sacrifice.”

“Even children?”

“Why bring that up?”

“Amanda wanted children of her own, didn’t she?”

“The time was never right. The pressure of seminary, then a growing pastorate.... We were both so busy. And then we lost Michael and Shirley. Curtis had no one else. So, from that day on, I loved Curtis as though he were my own son.”

"Really?" asked Jonathan. He raised an index finger and his arm began to sparkle and glow.

The Pastor raised a fist to his mouth and bit on a clinched finger, as apprehension might cause a child to do. But there was no cloud this time. Instead, the music and all movement in the room came to a halt; the people were transformed into frozen mannequins.

The Pastor looked questioningly at Jonathan.

"Don't look at me," said Jonathan. "Look at her." He nodded in the direction of Amanda.

The Pastor looked back at Amanda's frozen figure. A beam of blue-white energy slowly moved from the tip of Jonathan's finger through space toward Amanda. It reached her immobile figure and surrounded it with a glowing aura. A translucent image formed over her—like a double exposure. Then the image stepped out of Amanda's frozen body.

The Pastor gasped and took a step backwards. The energy-enshrouded image of Amanda began walking toward him. He took another step backwards, but this time Jonathan grasped him by the elbow.

"Whoa, there, Pastor. Nothing to be afraid of."

Amanda's image walked up to them. Surrounded by the aura of blue light, her image was angelically radiant, though not as youthful in appearance as the body from which it had emerged. Nor was it middle aged, as Amanda was when she passed away. Instead, the image reflected an ageless beauty—a composite of her youthful as well as mature physical beauty. It was a wonderfully visible manifestation of her innermost beauty, the hidden person of her heart.

"You look older," Amanda said. Her voice sounded hollow and distant. "Amanda? Is it really you? Is this really happening?" Tears swelled in his eyes. "Oh, Amanda, you look so beautiful. And oh, how I've missed you!" "Missed me? Ha!"

The Pastor was taken aback.

"When we were young there was romance. We were so much in love—so close. We could communicate. But the war changed you. You came home

with a hardened heart. And as the years went by and your ministry grew, you drifted away.”

“People grow older,” said the Pastor. “Romantic love evolves into—”

“Romantic love has no age, Desmond. It doesn’t have to grow old and fade away. I always loved you and I always will. But you had a mistress.”

“A what?”

“Yes! You had a mistress—your ministry. You poured all your passion into your ministry, and I was shut out of your life.”

“That’s absurd!” countered the Pastor. Then, in a soft, pleading tone he said, “Amanda, this is me, your loving husband, Desmond. Remember? Look, I haven’t changed a bit except for a few more gray hairs.”

“Oh, but you have changed, and for the worse, I fear.”

“Things were so stressful then—and more so now.”

“You create much of your stress,” said Amanda. “I first saw it in you when you returned from France after the war.”

The Pastor stiffened.

“You had this—this barrier, some emotional wound. I knew it had something to do with the war. Your leg, I guessed. But you never talked about it and I never pried. Your leg healed, but there were other wounds that did not. They gave you a darkened, cold, and embittered heart. Just look at the shambles you’ve made of your relationship with Curtis—and with everyone else.”

“Now, wait just one minute,” said the Pastor, his face flushed. He wondered how much she knew about that night. “It isn’t I who have changed, it’s Curtis who has changed. It was bad enough that he made a poor choice in his first marriage, and now he intends to marry a divorced woman!”

“I understand your concern,” said Amanda, “but under the circumstances, Curtis is biblically free to remarry. Robbie and her former husband were very young and were not Christians. He abandoned her and left no trace of his whereabouts. All her attempts to locate him were futile. In time she divorced him on the grounds of desertion. After that she came to know God’s love and forgiveness, and she gave her heart to Jesus. She’s a beautiful Christian

woman, Desmond, and she'll be a loving wife to Curtis. The Lord has forgiven her and I wish you would find it in your heart to forgive her, too."

"I don't hold divorce against her, personally," said the Pastor. "It's just that Curtis is in the ministry. Don't you remember how precarious those days were when I had to keep his divorce from becoming a scandal?"

"Yes, I remember—only too well. You paid her hush money and shipped her off to California, never to be heard from again. And you spent a bundle of money on attorneys to get the marriage annulled."

"I avoided a scandal, didn't I? Thank God I got Curtis out of that mess without disgracing the ministry and tarnishing the name of Christ!"

"Or your name and reputation," Amanda added.

"Humph!" grunted the Pastor. "What's at issue here is that Curtis is about to make the same mistake all over again."

"Robbie is no mistake. You should be happy for them."

"But a divorced woman!"

"Oh, Desmond, you are so idealistic! Sometimes I think it's because you're trying to compensate for your own inadequacies. You've never been able to accept yourself. And because of that you've never been able to accept others for who they are. It's caused you to retreat into a legalistic world of perfectionism. It's made you and those around you miserable."

"You never before talked to me like this."

"I should have. But only since I—since I left, have things become clearer to me. I came to realize you never wanted to know me better—just as you don't want to know Curtis better."

"That's absurd! We talk everyday," insisted the Pastor.

"About the ministry, not about him! Oh, Desmond, can't you see? Curtis has tried so hard to live up to your expectations. He says what he thinks you want him to say. He's afraid to be open and honest with you. He thinks you will be critical of him. Besides, you have to do more than talk to really get to know someone. You have to be involved in their life. Think back, Desmond:

Who taught Curtis to ride a bicycle? I did, not you. Just like I taught him to play baseball because you weren't around. I went sledding with him and taught him to ice skate. And where were you the nights I helped him with homework and listened to his bedtime prayers? Oh, his prayers! They were so sweet, so honest, so innocent, so from the heart! But you were never there to hear them. You were never there to share in his joys and his sorrows, his dreams and his fears. He has always loved you and looked up to you. You were the only father he ever knew. Oh, how he longed for your love and attention. He wanted to be close to you and know you better, but you had this barrier that—"

"You're right about one thing," interrupted the Pastor, hoping to divert the conversation away from that dreaded night. "Curtis has a heart for people."

"Do you know any of his friends, Desmond? Probably not. And I doubt that you can remember the name of even one of his boyhood pals. But it wasn't only Curtis. As the years went by you had fewer and fewer real friends of your own. Oh, you had associates in the ministry, but they weren't your friends—not the kind who could confide in you and you in them. You had all sorts of opportunities to make friends. Why, you could have gone with me to visit people in the nursing homes and hospitals."

"You always invited me," the Pastor admitted. "But that was your ministry. And I had mine—my church, my flock. Confound it, Amanda! My purpose in life isn't to gratify my ego by making a lot of friends. The ministry isn't a popularity contest. God has called me to preach the gospel and to defend the faith."

"And to love others."

"I do what I do because it's my calling. And a certain amount of detachment comes with the territory. Don't you understand?"

"Desmond, Desmond," relented Amanda. "Now your time is running out." Then her image took a step backwards. "And so has my time with you run out. Remember what you have seen and heard."

"Don't leave, Amanda! Don't go—not yet. Please, can't we talk some more?" He looked at Jonathan with pleading eyes.

Jonathan shook his head.

The Pastor looked back at Amanda's glowing image. It was slowly stepping

backwards and looking at him with loving but sad eyes. Then it stepped back inside Amanda's frozen body and began to dissolve. The blue aura that surrounded her still figure receded into the area of her heart. It took on the form of a beam of light and returned to the tip of Jonathan's finger. The night club instantly burst back to life, with the band playing and young Desmond and Amanda continuing their engagement dance. It was as if nothing had happened.

"Amanda was a people person," the Pastor said to Jonathan. "To her, life was always being involved with other people. But had I been the same kind of person, my ministry would never have grown into what it has become today. We were two different people with two different callings. Even now she can't understand that."

Jonathan sighed with resignation. He swung his guitar around and began to sing:

His ears could hear,
But deaf was his mind.
His eyes could see,
But his heart was blind.

"Humph!"

As Jonathan sang, he raised his right hand from the guitar and pointed his index finger upward. It glowed and sparkled, and fog began to form as before. The white vapor swirled across the dance floor, thickening and rising higher and higher.

The Pastor looked longingly at his younger self and Amanda as they danced. And then the dense, swirling cloud closed in around him. He braced himself for what he knew was to come. A moment later he was carried away in the cloud, spinning off into a world of oblivion.

Chapter 11

Wounded Soldiers

The Pastor awakened to find himself and Jonathan lazily floating about in the white cloud. He welcomed the respite, though his head was spinning. Jonathan watched the Pastor in silence.

After a time the Pastor spoke. "Amanda became a nurse while I attended seminary. She worked in a hospital of all places!"

"And a part time volunteer for many more years. What do you have against hospitals?" asked Jonathan.

"Look, there are things people like and don't like, and I don't like hospitals. They give me the creeps."

"What did Amanda think about that?"

"I think she understood."

"Did you encourage her in her work as a nurse?"

"Well, I—okay, listen, I'll be perfectly blunt about it. Her rightful place was at my side—to be my helpmate."

"A First Lady type?"

"That's a bit heady, but something like that, I suppose."

"I believe it," said Jonathan, "but I think you're trying to throw me off track. Your dislike of hospitals runs deeper than that—some kind of phobia."

The Pastor bristled and snapped, "I thought you were a messenger, not a psychiatrist. Besides, we're talking about Amanda, not me."

"You are talking about Amanda, but I am here to talk about you. C'mon, let's take a walk."

"I don't suppose you care to tell me where we're going?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"I thought you'd say that."

They walked in silence for sometime. The cloud thinned and new surroundings came into view. At first the Pastor could only make out that they were in a very large room. Then he heard people singing Christmas carols. A moment later the Pastor discovered to his displeasure that he was in a crowded hospital ward.

"How can you do this to me?" he berated Jonathan. "I just told you how I feel about hospitals!"

"How can you face the realities of the future if you can't face the realities of the past and present? Just relax, Pastor. Look around."

The Pastor's forehead was damp with perspiration. A warm flush had come over him and he felt faint. What he saw only compounded his discomfort. Beds with wounded soldiers lined the long, white walls of the room. The footboard of each bed was decorated with a Christmas wreath. Christmas cards were displayed here and there on bedside tables and taped to the walls. All the patients were young men, many of them amputees.

At the far end of the room the Pastor saw Amanda. She was leading some bedridden young men in singing "Joy to the World." At her side were two other familiar faces: Bert and Annabelle. The Pastor marveled over how young they looked. He guessed the year to be 1971 or 1972.

He looked at the maimed young men. "Vietnam" he said. "They're so young, just boys. Wounded and maimed for the rest of their lives. What tragedy. What terrible, horrible tragedy! They'll never be normal again. Their lives are ruined."

"Not necessarily," said Jonathan. "With Christ's comfort and healing they can be brought into wholeness in Him."

The Pastor looked incredulously at Jonathan. "How can you say that? You just can't spiritualize away their wounds! These men have lost limbs that will never be restored! Some have been blinded. Some have brain damage. And all of them have emotional wounds."

Jonathan thought for a moment, then choosing his words carefully, said, "Consider, Pastor, that beyond that vast area of reality which your eyes see and your ears hear, there are hidden dimensions of God's love and compassion and wisdom."

"That's true, of course," said the Pastor, "but—"

"By faith you entrust the healable to the Lord, now, by faith, entrust to Him those who appear unhealable."

"Humph!"

"Wounds are interesting," said Jonathan. "Some heal well and some don't. A wound that heals properly leaves a scar that is stronger than the original tissue. It's kind of like that with emotional wounds. For some people scars produce hard hearts, while for others they produce strong character. Wounds, whether physical or emotional, sometimes serve as instruments of brokenness—to draw a person out of a self-centered life and to bring him closer to the cross and the comfort and healing of Christ."

"I've prayed and prayed for healing," said the Pastor, "but...."

"And?"

"Don't ask me," snapped the Pastor. "Forget I mentioned it. Look, why don't you just ask one of those boys. Ask if they have prayed for their pain and suffering to be taken away. Ask them if God has heard their prayers."

"He has heard their prayers, Pastor. He loves them each and every one, just as He loves you. And His grace is sufficient for them. Some have already entered into His special rest, and I pray that the others will choose to follow. As for you, Pastor, you face that choice as well. If only you would let me help you."

"If you really want to help me, then take me back to my study and leave me alone!" With that, the Pastor turned for a farewell glance at Amanda.

Jonathan began to sing his ballad:

His ears could hear,
But deaf was his mind.
His eyes could see,
But his heart was blind.

The song agitated the Pastor all the more. Out of spite, he kept his back turned to Jonathan. He knew what his obstinacy would cost him. Sure

enough, Jonathan was already raising a glowing finger heavenward to summon back the cloud.

Chapter 12

A Message from the Grave

The Pastor stirred in his sleep, feeling chilled and damp. He turned onto his side and felt wet grass. He opened his eyes. It was dark, and dense fog hung heavily in the still night air. He looked around, squinting to see. There—yes, it was Jonathan. He was sitting on a large rock. But, no—it was a tombstone!

"Have a nice nap, Pastor?"

"Humph!"

"C'mon," said Jonathan, motioning for the Pastor to follow him. "I want to show you something."

They walked past several graves, then stopped in front of a tombstone that stood taller than all the others. Chiseled from white marble, it was crowned with a simple cross. On its face was the inscription: "Amanda Kathryn Morehouse, 1926-1988" and "Desmond William Morehouse, 1926—."

"What is the final date that will be added?" asked the Pastor with quivering voice. "Tell me, Jonathan, how much time do I have?"

"That's not for me to know, Pastor. What's important is not how many tomorrows you will awaken to, but how you live your todays."

The Pastor wondered how many future days it would take for him to make up for that night—how many more weeks or months or years. And he hoped the angel of death would tarry. The thought prompted him to look at Jonathan. But he dared not inquire.

Jonathan held up a book with a white dust jacket. "Recognize this?"

"My Lord, My love, My Life," answered the Pastor. "Amanda wrote it—the only book she ever wrote. She had a promising career as an author. I encouraged her to write more, of course, but..."

“Have you read it?”

“Of course, I have. I—well, I read parts of it.”

Jonathan opened the book and thumbed through a few pages. “Maybe you’ll recall this passage.” He found the page and began to read: “It has not always been easy for me to love others, even as a Christian. I tried and tried, but still my feelings for certain people remained negative and I could not bring myself to love them.

“Then, one day, God spoke to me through the scriptures, namely, [Galatians 2:20](#). He told me I had been crucified with Christ and that my old self no longer lived, but that I was a new creature and Christ lives in me. My self outside of Christ could not love difficult people, but if I allowed Jesus to live His life in me and through me, I could love them. Since He is my life and His holy and righteous nature has been imparted to me, His capacity to love is now my capacity to love.”

Jonathan closed the book. “You were blessed with a very special wife, Pastor.”

“Look, Jonathan, there are different kinds of love and different ways of expressing it. Some people—like Amanda— show God’s love through their emotions. Others, like myself, show God’s love through faith, obedience, and service.”

Jonathan looked into his eyes and said nothing. It made the Pastor uneasy, as if Jonathan saw into his very soul.

“Listen, Jonathan, maybe I can help you understand. My spirituality is based on scripture, not sentimentalism and emotions. Sure, I could have spent my life making friends and doing things with them. But priorities are priorities, and my ministry to many people has always been more important than a ministry to only a few. Can’t you understand simple arithmetic?”

“Pastor, I—”

“Let me finish! Amanda worked one-on-one with people, but I minister to tens of thousands on every television program. She had her calling and I have mine. Neither your insipid arguments nor your esoteric escapades will persuade me to change my mind about anything. You’re wasting your time and mine.”

Jonathan turned away from the Pastor and walked a short distance across the cemetery lawn. He appeared to be in deep meditation. When he turned around, he said to the Pastor, "I'm afraid I've done all I can do here. I, uh, checked in, and you've been reclassified."

"'Checked in'? With who? And what do you mean, 'reclassified'?"

"I've been ordered to return, now," said Jonathan, raising a glowing finger.

"Wait!" pleaded the Pastor. "You can't just leave me here!"

But Jonathan ignored him and turned and walked away through the thickening fog. Out of the white void came his voice: "I can tell you this much, Pastor: Tonight you will be visited by another. He will come to you when the clock strikes midnight."

"No!" cried the Pastor. "Don't leave me! I can't take anymore of this!"

But Jonathan did not answer.

The wind blew stronger and howled ferociously. Still, the Pastor heard the faint sounds of Jonathan strumming his guitar and singing:

His ears could hear,
But deaf was his mind.
His eyes could see,
But his heart was blind.

Chapter 13

Return of the Betrayed

Thunder crashed near the church, startling the Pastor from his deep and troublesome sleep. He sat up on the edge of the sofa. The lights were still out and the candles had burned down considerably. He looked at the grandfather clock and heard the tick tock of its ever-swinging pendulum. Its ornate black hands showed the time to be fifteen minutes before midnight. Jonathan's parting words lingered in his mind: He would receive another visitor at midnight.

Fifteen minutes to go, he thought.

He clung to the fragile hope that it was all a terrible dream. It had to be, he told himself, there is no other rational explanation.

Thunder crackled in the distance.

He clamped his hands over his ears and tightly squeezed his eyes shut. But there was no way to close his mind to the bothersome sounds and images of the past that had returned to haunt him. "Oh, how wrong you are, Jonathan!" He hoped his recent visitor heard him. *My eyes do see and my ears do hear, but I wish it were not so!*

I must get hold of myself, he thought. He massaged his painful leg. The pills were never totally effective. *It's my thorn in the flesh*, he reminded himself. *All the pills have done is give me this horrible nightmare.*

But was it a nightmare? It was all too real to be a dream. And he doubted he was having visions because visions were to reveal the future, not the past. *Could it be a Satanic attack?* he wondered. Fright gripped his heart like a vise. He felt so alone. "My God, where are You?" he called out. "Send your angels to protect me, Lord!" And he wondered if the Lord already sent an angel— Jonathan? *But why? Only to torment me? Maybe Jonathan is a demon!* Then he cried out: "What do You want of me, Lord?" But there was no answer.

Would he ever escape the memories? Would he ever be set free? Or was his past destined to finally destroy him? *No, I will not surrender to that night*, he told himself. *It happened long ago. It's buried in the past and there it will remain. I'll get my mind off it. My sermon! Of course! I'll get my mind back into the sermon.* "No," he argued out loud with himself, "I'll pray first. That's what I'll do." He slid off the sofa and knelt down beside it on the carpet, resting his elbows on the deep, plush cushion. He squeezed his eyes shut and tightly locked his hands together to pray.

He knelt there, praying fervently for several minutes, asking God to honor his life of stewardship and obedience by sparing him from what he feared might befall him at the midnight hour. "Hasn't my ministry proven me worthy, Lord? Hasn't the price I've paid been enough? Please, Lord, come to me...help me!"

Bong, chimed the grandfather clock. *Bong, bong....* The Pastor stared wide-eyed at the clock. Minutes had slipped by and midnight was only seconds away. He started counting the bongs outloud, his apprehension growing with

each stroke of the pendulum: "Five. . . six. . . seven. . . eight. . . nine... ten. . . eleven...twelve!"

The sound of the last bong died away, then all was silent in the Pastor's study. It was midnight.

The Pastor remained on his knees at the sofa, his eyes tightly closed. He heard his rapid breathing, the ticking of the clock, and the incessant pattering of rain. He was afraid to open his eyes, afraid of what he might see. And he covered his ears, afraid also of what he might hear.

Maybe it really was only a bad dream, the Pastor thought; Nothing is happening! He ventured to open his eyes. At first, he cautiously glanced from side-to-side without moving his head. Then he turned around and slowly scrutinized every shadowy corner of his study. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he rose from his knees. Midnight had come and gone.

"It was only a dream!" he said out loud, hoping he was right. Then he said it again, shouting gleefully: "Only a dream!" He scurried over to his desk and sat down to resume work on his sermon. "Only a dream!" he kept muttering.

He had written but a few words on the legal pad when he noticed the yellow pages had taken on a pale, greenish hue. Out the corner of his eye he saw a green glow that could only be coming from—No, that's impossible! he thought. There is no electricity. He glanced at the computer monitor, and what he saw turned his face into a pallid mask of frozen horror. For across the green screen, written in large, black letters against the vivid green screen, was "SURRENDER!"

He bounded from the chair and frantically scurried over to a light switch on the wall. It was still in the on position. All the lights remained out, but the computer was getting power from somewhere—or some thing! He flicked the wall switch down to off, then up to on. Still no electricity. He feverishly flipped the switch off and on, off and on. But still no lights.

"Oh, my God, spare me this! Have mercy on me!" He went back to his desk and collapsed in the chair, overwhelmed by his ordeal. *I'm having a nervous breakdown, he thought. Oh, my! That's it! Of course! It's so obvious—why didn't it occur to me sooner? It's not a dream, not a vision, not a Satanic attack. Jonathan is nothing more than a figment of my imagination! Stress! That's what is causing this. And now I'm hallucinating. I'm losing my mind!* Then he looked again at the green glow of the computer screen. But stress can't light up a computer screen, he told himself.

Lightning flickered across the room, illuminating everything in it for a split second. But his mind would not wrestle with the impossibility for lightning to illuminate his windowless study. Not now. For he had glimpsed something on the other side of the room that had not been there before.

"Who's there?" he called out in a dry, croaking voice.

But the only sounds to be heard were the distant crackling of thunder, the pounding rain, and the monotonous ticking of the grandfather clock.

"Jonathan?" he called out. But there was no answer. "Jonathan!" he demanded in a scolding voice like that of an agitated father calling for his young son. But still there was no answer.

Only a shadow, he told himself. He slumped back in his chair. *Got to get hold of myself.*

Then, in the dim candlelight, the "shadow" moved.

The Pastor gripped the arms of his chair. His wide, frightened eyes locked on the apparition. Then it moved again—toward him! It had the shape of a man and was slowly walking toward him. Closer and closer it stepped, until its features became visible.

The Pastor gasped. It was a gruesome figure of a man. He wore the uniform of a World War II soldier, a uniform torn, dirty, and blood-stained. In the figure's abdominal area was a sickening mass of bloody, shredded cloth and glistening, ballooning intestines that bulged through a jagged stomach wound.

The Pastor turned away from the ghastly sight for fear he might vomit. He mustered the courage to look again—but only at the soldier's face. The apparition wore a steel helmet. From under the brim, dull, sunken eyes stared back at the Pastor. The pallid face was twisted with pain and suffering.

"D-e-s-m-o-n-d," groaned the soldier, slowly and laboriously. "D-e-s-m-o-n-d," he said again, this time more intently.

"W-what do you want of me?" stuttered the Pastor.

"You left me, but I have found you. Don't you recognize me?" The soldier raised his hand and pointed at some black stenciled lettering above the right

pocket of his shirt.

The Pastor squinted his eyes to read the small inscription in the dim candlelight. "Fargone! Tony Fargone!"

"Yes, Desmond. 'Far-go-nee—rhymes with Tony,' you used to say."

"Yes! Yes! But everyone insisted on calling you 'Far Gone.'"

"Because they thought I was hopelessly crazy."

"You were...undisciplined," conceded the Pastor. "Far Gone! Yes, 'Far Gone Fargone—rhymes with Tony.'"

"But not as far gone then as you are far gone today, Desmond."

"Are you saying that I'm crazy?" Then he burst out laughing. "Is that it? Am I crazy? Have I gone mad? You, Jonathan, Grandfather, Amanda—it is madness!" He laughed harder. Tears ran down his cheeks. For some time he laughed hysterically. Then his laughter turned into sobbing.

"I have had much time to think about that night," Desmond. "I was your best buddy. I taught you everything about being a man—a 'man' as I thought a man to be back then. Remember how I taught you to drink whiskey? To smoke? And surely you can't forget the things I taught you about women!"

"That was long ago," dismissed the Pastor, "only a brief episode in my life. I was young and naive, spiritually immature. I never knew from one battle to the next if I would live or die. Yes, I experimented with drinking and smoking. But you know I never did anything with a woman back then. Amanda was the first and only woman in my life. And there will never be another. She became my wife, in case you don't know. I married her when I returned from the war. My life changed. I committed my life to the Lord. I gave my all to the ministry. And so much of it was because of—of you! And, thank God, Amanda was a godly influence on me. Yes! Thank God for her!"

"Amanda did point you down the right path. But you strayed down another."

"What are you insinuating?"

"And you continue to walk farther and farther down the wrong path."

"My life is impeccably righteous," insisted the Pastor. "God is my witness. I'm

no longer a slave to the sins of my youth, and I'm certainly not intimidated by them."

"Then why have you shunned Bert all these years? Why have you never accepted Curtis as your adopted son?"

The Pastor glared at Tony, but said nothing.

"I'll tell you why," said Tony, "because Bert reminds you of me and that night, the time of your greatest shame. You hated what you did, then you hated yourself for doing it, and now—and now you are consumed by that hate."

"All right, all right!" shouted the Pastor. "It's true! I left you behind. But let me tell you, Tony, I have paid for it—dearly! That night has haunted me all these years!"

Tony stepped over to the Pastor's desk and picked up the television's remote control. He aimed it at the Sony and pressed a button. The screen lit up with a dizzy image of jagged, flashing lights.

"What are you doing?" asked the Pastor. "How did you do that? The electricity is out."

Tony did not answer.

The remote control emitted a beam of blue-white light that slowly telescoped across the room, over to the Sony. The beam enveloped the image on the television screen. Tony moved the beam and dragged the image from the screen to the wall of the study. The image grew bigger, filling the entire wall with flashing lights. Then it faded into another image, a dark and dreary one.

"France, 1944," said Tony. "It was raining lightly, remember? The night was dark and cold, and the clouds hugged the ground. The world had turned into mud and the trees were reduced to skeletons, stripped of their branches and leaves by bursts of artillery shells."

Beads of perspiration glistened on the Pastor's forehead as he listened to Tony and watched in dread the unfolding scene before him. With a quivering voice he said, "Now you have come for vengeance."

"Vengeance is not mine, Desmond. Watch and listen." He continued to

narrate the scene on the study's wall: "The Germans were advancing...."

The Pastor watched shadowy figures stealthily creep across the muddy battlefield. The scene changed to two men firing a machine gun from a fox hole.

"You and I were ordered to stay at our outpost and man the machine gun," said Tony. "I was the gunner and you were feeding me belt after belt of ammo."

"We held them off for a while," the Pastor said, his voice trembling.

"Then it happened," Tony went on. "Some Kraut caught me in his rifle sights and let me have one right in the leg."

The Pastor winced, for he saw every vivid detail unfold before his eyes. "They were overrunning our position," he said.

"You started to drag me back to our unit, then you—"

"We both would have been killed," pleaded the Pastor.

"You saw the Germans coming closer. And then you left me. You ran for safety and left me behind with a bullet in my leg!"

"I could only save myself, not both of us," insisted the Pastor. He watched himself as a terrified young soldier running and slipping through the mud and debris of battle. Some distance behind him, in hot pursuit, was a rifle-carrying German soldier. "He's been chasing me ever since," the Pastor said somberly.

"You saved yourself. But as for me, I couldn't move. And I'd lost my rifle in all the confusion. I was scared to death. I remember praying, promising God that if He let me survive I would change my ways and try to live a good, Christian life. After a while a Kraut came running toward me—almost stepped on me. But he saw me in the mud at the last second. I'll never forget that crazed, hateful look in his eyes. He raised his rifle and hesitated for a second. I saw a flicker of light flash off his bayonet. Then he yelled—some wild, primal yell—and lunged down at me with the bayonet."

The Pastor jerked his eyes away from the horrible sight.

"Look!" demanded Tony. The Pastor reluctantly looked back at the image on

the wall.

"The Kraut left me for dead, but I wasn't dead—not yet." I looked at my guts bulging out from the bayonet slash across my belly. I spent the last minutes of my life praying and watching my blood ooze out of my guts and drip into the mud."

The Pastor looked away again, feeling nauseous. "Please, please—no more, no more. I've tried, Tony. The Lord knows I've tried over all these years to make amends for what I did."

"I was hurting so bad and was so afraid," said Tony.

"Please, Tony, forgive me!" begged the Pastor, looking again at his old friend. "Give me some peace of mind after all these years."

Tony nodded. "Jesus forgave you long ago, Desmond. So did I. But you have never forgiven yourself. And it has kept you from surrendering all and entering in to God's rest."

The Pastor nodded. Tears ran down his cheeks.

The image on the wall dissipated into horizontal flashes of sparkling colors. Then they faded away, leaving only stark grayness.

Tony pressed a button on the TV's remote control and the grayness became a cloud that slowly spread around and over and under himself and the Pastor.

"What's happening?" asked the Pastor. "What are you doing?"

"Taking you with me," said Tony. "We're going back."

And the gray cloud closed in around them.

Chapter 14

That Night

Tony's mutilated body was changing before the Pastor's eyes. Intestines slithered back into the cavity of the abdomen and the jagged bayonet wound

was closing—healing. Blood and mud evaporated and the uniform turned clean and fresh. Life and healthy, youthful color came to Tony's face, and a sparkle appeared in eyes that had been dull and lifeless. In moments the transformation was complete.

"You look so—so good!" said the Pastor.

"It's the way you want to remember me, Desmond.

They were outdoors, and it was nighttime. Thick fog shrouded the ground. But this cloud wasn't like Jonathan's clouds; it was like that horrible cloud from so long ago—that suffocating bank of dense fog that returned so often in his dreams.

The Pastor's feet were damp and cold. He was standing in mud that covered his ankles. They were in a desolate place, a field of mud. He heard distant explosions and through the mist and fog saw the flashes of artillery shells exploding on a hillside across the valley. The fog was oppressively thick. He felt the strangling sensation of claustrophobia coming on. "No!" he protested, hoping to fight it off, "I won't let it overtake me again!"

He looked around. Jutting out of the mud here and there were the remains of a forest, decimated by a recent artillery barrage—burning stumps and shattered trunks of trees. Shell holes pocked the face of the battlefield. Bodies of dead American and German soldiers were strewn about like broken dolls. The acrid smell of burnt gunpowder mixed with the nauseating stench of blood and charred corpses hung heavy in the night air, stinging the Pastor's eyes and nose.

The devastation had taken place only minutes earlier, and now the deadly artillery barrage had a new target: the hillside across the valley. The Pastor guessed the boys up there were taking a real pounding. Young men, he thought, just as he was, scared and praying for safe deliverance from the enemy and death. Some never made it, and many who did were wounded forever.

It was all too familiar to the Pastor. There were times over the years when he prayed for partial amnesia, for the Lord to remove those terrible memories from his mind. But the memories never went away. Whenever they came to mind he quickly switched to some diversionary thought.

The Pastor heard far away popping sounds. He knew what they were—rifle shots, toy-like in sound because of the distance, but deadly.

Each artillery explosion cast a momentary mantle of light across the battlefield. By this sporadic light, the Pastor watched a hundred or so yards away as a squad of German soldiers sloshed through the mud, heading in his direction.

"We were both victims of the war," the Pastor said to Tony. "Maybe you were the lucky one. You escaped by death and went on to another life. But I stayed here and have lived a living death."

Someone was running through the mud toward them. As he neared, the Pastor saw that he was an American soldier, and he was not carrying a weapon or wearing a helmet. The soldier glanced back over his shoulder. Some distance behind him followed a German soldier.

The Pastor watched the terrified young American run past, no more than ten feet away. And then his suspicion was confirmed: The soldier was himself.

"I was so young, so scared," he softly sobbed to Tony. "I felt so—oh, so guilty over leaving you behind. But I was afraid to go back for you."

Regaining his composure, the Pastor went on, "The Germans were getting closer. Our unit was retreating and I had to find them and get back to safety."

An artillery shell screamed overhead. The terrified, young Desmond dove for cover into a shell hole. He landed in a heap in the muddy crater and cried out in sudden pain.

The Pastor grimaced. Though he could not see over the crater's crest to the bottom of the shell hole, he remembered what had happened. He started sloshing through the mud toward the crater for a better look. Tony was right behind him. They reached the edge and looked down at young Desmond, crumpled in the mud, writhing in pain and anguish.

Tony looked at the Pastor and saw a face twisted with the pitiful, agonizing look of remorse and helplessness.

Young Desmond was impaled on a finger-sized, broken tree branch that jutted out of the mud and water in the bottom of the crater. The bloodied, splintered tip protruded from a gashing hole in his leg.

The Pastor calmly asked, "Am I to relive all of it?"

Tony remained silent, never moving his eyes from the shell hole.

Young Desmond lay there, clutching his leg, crying with pain. Blood ebbed from the wound and turned the muddy water crimson. "Help!" he cried. "Corpsman! Somebody! Please, oh, please, somebody help me!"

A bank of thick fog was rolling in, reducing visibility to a few yards at best. The Pastor shivered—just as he had shivered on that night and every cloudy, foggy night since.

Tony broke his silence: "You suffered in that muddy hole all night, bleeding, losing your strength, and crying for help."

"It seemed like an eternity," said the Pastor.

"It was a little before daybreak when things started to happen," Tony said. Some distance away—unseen by Desmond then, but seen by him now—a German soldier crouched behind the scant protection of a smoldering tree stump. The German scouted the horizon for another place of cover. Then he heard a voice crying out in the darkness. He smiled—a menacing, twisted smile on a face that had lost much of its humanness—the face of a man who had killed time and again throughout the endless night; the face of a man who had been dodging death, step-by-step, second-by-second. And now the German was no longer in control of himself—no longer a soldier fighting a war, but an animal guided by instinct to survive. And it pushed him to kill, kill, kill....

In another direction and closer to Desmond, two American soldiers crouched in a muddy trench.

"There it is again," said one of the G.I.s.

"You're hearing things, Bert. C'mon, let's get the hell outta here—everybody else is gone."

"It's one of our guys, I tell ya," Bert insisted. "Let's go get 'em."

"You lost your marbles or somethin'? It's crawlin' with Krauts out there!"

"Dammit, Mac! Are ya goin' with me or not?"

"But it might be a trap. I'm gettin' the hell outta here."

"Yeah? Well it might not be a trap," Bert argued.

Mac slithered out of the trench. He looked back at Bert and said, "For the last time, are you comin' or not?"

"I'm goin' after 'em," said Bert. And he climbed up the muddy side of the trench.

"You're nuts!" Mac shouted angrily. "I'm leavin'."

Bert ignored him and started crawling through the mud in the direction of Desmond's cries. He held his M-1 in both hands, using his elbows and legs to slither through the gooey, smelly muck.

The German had since left the tree stump and was running in a crouched, zigzag pattern toward young Desmond's shell hole. When he reached a point within several meters of it, he stopped and knelt. He heard it again, the crying and yelling. Though the German did not understand the language, he knew he had cornered an enemy. "Amerikaner," he whispered disdainfully. He could not see the American through the mist and fog, but he determined the direction of the cries and sensed that his wounded prey was within easy throwing distance. He pulled a *Stielhandgranate* from his belt. His eyes glistened with gleeful madness. With a short, quick jerk, he yanked the potato masher's toggle. He raised the grenade over his shoulder to lob it in the direction of the wounded soldier's cries.

Crack!

The German lurched backwards and fell to the mud, dropping the grenade. In shock and disbelief, he looked at his chest and saw dark red blood gushing from the black bullet hole in his tunic. *The grenade!* he thought in alarm, and looked in wide-eyed horror at the live bomb lying in the mud. He grasped for it, to throw it a safe distance away. But it was inches beyond reach. He lunged for it again, frantically clawing the mud. So close, yet so far away. His eyes widened in terror, then the grenade exploded, doing instantly what the bullet in his chest eventually would have done.

Falling debris pelted Bert's helmet and back. He patted the smoking barrel of his M-1, then looked around and listened. He could neither see nor hear any other Germans. Cautiously, he rose to a crouch and crept over to the edge of Desmond's shell hole. Wary of a possible trap, he was careful not to expose himself to the man inside.

"Hey! You a G.I.?" Bert called out, leveling his M-1 at the lip of the crater.

"Yes! I'm an American!" sobbed Desmond. "I'm hurt! Please, for God's sake, help me!"

"What's your name?" Bert demanded.

"Morehouse. Private Desmond Morehouse."

"Desmond?" said Bert, laughing. He stood up straight and relaxed his grip on the M-1. "Hell, no German would make up a sissy name like that."

Bert slid down into the shell hole along side Desmond. "Good Lord A' Mighty!" he exclaimed when he saw the broken branch protruding from Desmond's leg. "You got yerself in one helluva fix."

Bert gently rolled Desmond onto his side. He tore a strip of cloth from the leg of Desmond's fatigues and used it to tie a tourniquet on his leg, just above the protruding branch. Satisfied that the flow of blood was stopped, he grasped the branch with both hands. "This is gonna hurt, kid, but you can't take it with you." One swift yank and out it came. Desmond shrieked in pain, then lost consciousness.

Bert climbed out of the hole, pulling Desmond up with him. "Wake up, kid!" he said, slapping Desmond's face. "Wake up, dammit!"

Desmond's eyes opened, but saw what was not there to be seen. "Mom! It hurts, Mom!" he whimpered.

"Oh, hell," moaned Bert. "Don't lose it, kid. Don't lose it. C'mon, now, dammit, stay awake."

He placed one of Desmond's arms around his neck and pulled him onto his shoulder and back in a fireman's carry. He picked up his M-1 and started sloshing through the mud in the direction of the American line. Minutes later, he arrived at the abandoned trench where he and his buddy Mac had been. Exhausted and panting for breath, he gently rolled Desmond off his back and onto the bottom of the trench. Then he collapsed in the mud and rolled onto his back to give his aching muscles a rest and to catch his breath. But it was a brief rest stop, for the Germans were advancing. Bert resumed the trek across the muddy field with Desmond on his back. The load was heavy and the deep, slippery mud made walking all the more difficult and tiring.

Bert went on like this for several minutes more, then again had to stop to rest. Desmond was unconscious. Bert started to slip him off his back, but his weakened muscles gave way, and Desmond fell to the mud in a heap and cried out in pain.

"Sorry, kid," said Bert, slumping to his knees. "At least it woke you up."

Then something slammed into Bert's arm and knocked him over. Dazed at first, he did not realize the jolt was from a bullet. But when he looked at his left arm, he knew. From just below the elbow it dangled grotesquely; whether hanging by shreds of skin or threads of his jacket, he did not want to guess.

"We'll make it, kid," said Bert, trying to bolster his own hope as well as Desmond's. But Desmond never heard.

Bert knew the shock from his wound would soon wear off and give way to unbearable pain. More urgent than that, a severed artery was spurting blood profusely. *Gotta hurry, before I pass out.*

Lying in the mud, Bert anxiously fumbled with his good hand to pull out his shirttail. He ripped through the fabric with his bayonet, gripped the cloth in his teeth and tore off a strip of hem. He managed to tie a tourniquet just above the elbow of his shattered arm, leaving two long ends of cloth. He used the handle of his bayonet to twist the tourniquet and cinch the cloth tightly around his arm. The blood stopped spurting. With the loose ends of cloth he used his right hand and teeth to tie the blade of the bayonet to his upper arm to hold the tourniquet tightly in place.

Bert's vision was blurry and his mind fuzzy. The notion came to him that his dangling arm might fall off. *If I don't lose it maybe the docs can sew it back on*, he reasoned. So he laboriously tore another strip of cloth from his shirttail, tied an end around his dangling forearm and fashioned a sling around his neck. He looked at his cinched-up arm. It was an ugly piece of battlefield first aid, but it would do the job. He hoped.

Bert's vision faded in and out of focus. *Gotta hurry*, he kept telling himself. But he felt too weak to stand up, let alone drag Desmond through the mud. *I'd give my right arm for a drink*, he thought. Then he chuckled. *No! Not my good arm—my left one!*

Laughing seemed to give him strength. He struggled up to a kneeling

position, rested and caught his breath. Mustering all his strength and resolve, he stood up. He was light-headed and faint. He took a few deep breaths. It helped. He knelt and loosened Desmond's ammo belt around his waist. Tugging and slipping the belt back and forth, he worked it up Desmond's torso, inch-by-inch, to just under the arm pits. He took the sling off his M-1 and let it out to its full length. He tied one end to Desmond's ammo belt and the other end to his own belt.

The job was done, but it had sapped what little strength he had. He tried to stand, but faltered and fell. He was simply too weak. "Lord Jesus!" he cried out in desperation. "The Good Book says You made lame men walk—please, give me the strength to get up!"

Bert closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath. He got up on one knee, then slowly stood erect. He teetered dizzily and his rubbery knees felt like they would buckle. But they didn't. He took a step, braced himself, breathed deeply, then took another step—and another. "I'm doing it!" he whispered. "Thank You, Lord Jesus! Thank You!"

He staggered on through the mud, straining and slipping, slowly pulling the makeshift tether, dragging Desmond along behind.

Chapter 15

Golgotha

Tony raised the television remote control and pressed a button. The battlefield faded into grayness. "It must have seemed like an eternity to Bert," said Tony. "But then some corpsmen ran across the two of you and got you to a field hospital. You both spent many hours in surgery. They saved your leg, but they couldn't reattach Bert's arm."

The shroud of gray cloud that enveloped the Pastor and Tony was dissipating.

"I was delirious with pain," recalled the Pastor, tears streaking down his face. "I remember Bert talking to me in the shell hole, but after that, nothing."

"Guilt and fear can become barriers to remembering, Desmond."

The Pastor nodded.

“And when those barriers begin to crumble—”

“The memories return,” the Pastor said, completing the rest of Tony’s sentence. “But it’s so painful.”

“It’s part of the healing. What you heard and saw and experienced was more than you could deal with back then. But tonight—”

“Oh, Tony! Do you think I will ever be healed?”

The last wisps of the gray mist evaporated, and the Pastor and Tony stood face-to-face in the study.

“Bert has always been proud of you, Desmond. He never considered himself to be much of a success in life. The way he saw things, his only purposes on earth were to love God, to be a loving husband to his late wife Rosie, to befriend the needy, and to look out for your welfare.”

“Look out for me?”

“It was a loyalty he never relinquished. Next to Rosie, he considered you his best friend.”

“Me? His best friend? I never dreamed that....” He walked over to Tony. “Bert always tried to be my friend. Amanda brought it up many times. She never understood why I was so—so cool toward him.” The Pastor turned away from Tony and said. “I’ve never had time for friends—the demands of the ministry, you know. Amanda was the only one I made time for, and she always wanted more.”

“Was it really the demands of the ministry and of Amanda, Desmond? Or an excuse for avoiding people so they wouldn’t get to know the real you?”

“I suppose I’m a workaholic. But what pastor isn’t? I felt I had to keep busy. I had that night to overcome and I believed that my work for the Lord would somehow atone for it.”

“Did it work, Desmond? Did getting on a performance treadmill really make you worthy?”

The Pastor shrugged and shook his head. "Achieving helped me feel worthy—for a while. But then the euphoria wore off, and I guess, in the long run, it really hasn't made me feel any better about myself. And you know why? Because no matter what big and glorious thing I accomplished, it never changed me. I'm still a coward! The more I try to overcome my weaknesses and shortcomings, the more the ugliness comes out! I—I..." He choked up. All he could do was shrug again—a shrug of hopeless defeat. Tears swelled up in his eyes. "It's like a beast inside me that I can't control. I've prayed and prayed and tried and tried, but..."

"Cowardliness is a product of the unregenerate heart, Desmond, and denial is a defense the flesh uses to protect itself."

"But, Tony, after the war I made a genuine commitment to Christ. I was born again. And ever since I've prayed and prayed for God to give me strength to overcome my cowardliness. And now you're saying I should admit I'm a coward and accept defeat and failure!"

"God knows your weaknesses, Desmond. And He didn't intend for you to cope with them out of your own strength. That's why He sent His Son to live in you and through you—so you could live in Christ's sufficiency."

"But that doesn't change the past, Tony; it doesn't change who I really am. I'm a coward by nature."

"Desmond, you know that Jesus died to forgive you of all your sins and that He lives in you."

"Yes, of course, but—"

"Didn't He die for cowards, too?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"And you know that you were saved by grace through faith, and God made you a new creature with the righteousness of Christ—you were given a new heart like His. So who are you trying to impress? God?—so He will love you more? Desmond, Desmond; God's love for you is ultimate love—unconditional love."

"I—I know all that, but it hasn't changed things. I—I want to feel good about myself again."

Tony nodded and said, "The self-centered heart doesn't like to admit it's a failure."

The Pastor threw up his hands in perplexity and said, "Is it so wrong not to want to be a failure?"

"Self outside of Christ is a complete failure. But Christ is your life. You are a holy and righteous saint! Look, let me ask you something: Was Jesus a failure?"

"Why, of course not."

"Was Jesus a liar, a thief, or a murderer?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Was Jesus a coward?"

"I—I think I see what are you getting at, Tony."

"Desmond, you are the righteousness of Christ." After saying that, Tony looked upward and cocked his head as if trying to hear a faint voice. He looked back at the Pastor and said, "Turn around, Desmond."

The Pastor looked at him questioningly.

"Your back has been turned to the truth for a long time. Turn around, Desmond. Journey to the cross. Look into the face of truth...the face of forgiveness...the face of freedom and victory! See and hear as you never have before. Surrender all things fleshly and worldly, and enter in to Christ's grace, His rest and sufficiency."

The Pastor wasn't sure he wanted to do all that.

"Do it—turn around," Tony urged.

The Pastor slowly turned. The images of his study started to fade away, and darkness enveloped him. A stiff breeze blew in his face. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw he was standing on a hill, barren and windswept. The sky was dark and storm clouds churned violently overhead. Lightning flashed in the distance, followed by reports of thunder. "Where are we?" he asked. There was no answer. He turned around, but Tony was not there. All he saw was a path leading up to the barren knoll.

The Pastor felt drawn up the path toward the crest of the hill. The chill night wind caused his eyes to water. He looked ahead, straining his eyes to see what Tony wanted him to see. He stumbled over a loose rock and fell to his knees. He picked himself up and kept on walking. Lightning flashed, and in its brief moment of brightness the Pastor saw it—forty or fifty yards up the hill. Thunder crashed overhead. Adrenaline shot through him. It's the crucifixion!

The Pastor gingerly walked through the wind and darkness along the steep footpath that led to the rocky summit of Golgotha. Moments later he stood trembling and panting for breath, still several yards away from the three crosses. There was a small crowd of people, some of them Roman soldiers. The Pastor heard muffled sobs and wailing. A cross bearing the body of a criminal stood between him and the cross with Jesus.

The wind was picking up and he felt drops of rain hit his face. He climbed farther, until he reached the foot of the cross which bore the criminal. He trembled with apprehension. Slowly raising his eyes, he saw two feet nailed to the upright member of the cross. His eyes moved further up and he saw the legs, then a loin cloth, tattered and streaked with blood. Then he looked at the criminal's face.

"Oh, my! Oh, my!" he cried out. And he fell to the ground in anguish.

The criminal's face was *his* face.

He lay there for several minutes, mustering all his strength, for his journey would not end here, but at the cross of Christ.

He rose to his feet and took a step toward the middle cross, the cross that bore the body of Jesus. In that instant the night sky was ripped by a blinding flash of lightning and thunder exploded overhead. The earth shook and the Pastor cried out and braced himself. The ground churned and rolled, then abruptly jolted upward. The Pastor fell, tumbling and sliding down a rain-slickened slope in the darkness.

"Lord! Lord!" he cried out, looking back at the cross.

The earth opened and the Pastor slid on toward the widening crevasse. He frantically clawed the ground for a handhold—a clump of grass, a bush, anything to cling to. But his fingers found only slippery mud, and he

continued sliding. And then he felt himself falling into the dark abyss—falling, falling, falling....

Chapter 16

The Awakening

The Pastor felt rested, as if awakening from a good night's sleep. He opened his eyes to find himself floating in a cloud. It was so peaceful. Then he heard his name called. The voice was soft and low...and beckoning. The cloud parted before him to reveal a towering gate of two doors. They were white with streaks of pink, like—yes, pearls! The doors began to open.

"Desi! Desi!" he was called again. But it was a different voice, urgently calling him.

"Wake up! Wake up!" said Bert, knelling beside the sofa and shaking the Pastor.

"Lord! Save me!" the Pastor cried out.

"Desi! Wake up! It's me, Bert."

The Pastor opened his eyes with a start. "The earthquake! The cloud!"

"Earthquake? Cloud? What in tarnation you talkin' about, Desi?"

"Oh, Bert! It's you!" He grasped his forearm with an iron grip. He was wide-eyed with fright, soaked in perspiration and gasping for breath.

"I'm gonna call an ambulance," said Bert, rising to his feet.

"No! No!" said the Pastor, holding onto Bert's arm. "It was a dream—a bad dream, that's all."

"You sure?" asked Bert. "You sure yer okay?"

"Yes, yes," said the Pastor, massaging his face with both hands. "I'm okay, I'm okay. It was just a bad dream, that's all." He sat up on the sofa. "I'm okay, Bert, I'm okay...."

Bert sighed deeply with relief. "Ya scared the bejesus outta me!"

The Pastor looked across the study at his desk. The lights had come back on while he was sleeping. Yellow pages of sermon notes were strewn here and there, and the computer's screen radiated a greenish glow. The candles on the desk had burned down long ago, leaving the inverted teacups coated with wax. Soothing music came from the radio.

The Pastor started to stand, but his legs were wobbly. Bert gave him a hand. "Musta been some nightmare you was havin'," he said.

"Oh, Bert, I have so much to explain, so much to do." Then his eyes got watery and he embraced Bert with a big hug.

"What in tarnation's come over you?" he asked, peeling away the Pastor's arms.

"Oh, Bert, the most incredible thing happened last night. I started reading *A Christmas Carol*. I was reading about Scrooge and, well, you know the story. And then I fell asleep, and—and I'm not sure you'll understand, but you were in the dream. And so was Curtis and Annabelle and Amanda and Grandfather Morehouse. My whole life flashed before my eyes. And I saw myself—as others see me. So much took place; it was such an ordeal. I saw things and heard things that, well, for one thing, I saw that I've done you such wrong over the years."

"Done *me* wrong?"

"Bert," said the Pastor, resting his hands on the big man shoulders and looking him squarely in the eyes, "you saved my life. You shot that German soldier before he got to me. And you lost your arm dragging me back to our unit."

Bert shrugged. "I never thought ya knew all that."

"Things came back to me last night, things I had forgotten, things I didn't know I saw and heard back then. Anyway, what I'm saying is that you made an heroic sacrifice, and I—"

"Heck, I ain't no hero, Desi. I was just in the right place at the right time to help ya. And the wrong place at the wrong time when that Kraut winged me."

The Pastor shook his head and smiled over Bert's humility. Then a somber expression came over his face. "Something happened before you rescued me, Bert, something I should have talked to you about years ago—along with many other things."

"Yeah? Like What?"

"It had to do with Tony—Tony Fargone."

"Good ol' 'Far Gone' Fargone! Wild and crazy, wasn't he? But he had a good heart, that guy. A real shame wasn't it—checked out the same night me 'n' you—"

"Yes, Bert, the same night. He died the same night. He and I had been manning a machine gun together."

Bert's eye widened. "You was with 'em?"

The Pastor nodded. "Yes, I was with him...for a time. The Germans were about to overrun our position. Well, Tony got shot in the leg. I was frightened. I saw the Germans coming closer and closer. And then I did something I've regretted ever since: I turned and ran. I left Tony behind. He kept crying and yelling, 'Don't leave me, Desi! Don't leave me!' But I kept on running. His cries continued to haunt me over all these years."

"Woowee," exclaimed Bert. "You kept all that bottled up inside ya fer all these years?" He sighed, then said, "Ya know, battle can do that to a guy's mind. Happened to lots of guys. You can't blame yerself. Besides, it was a long time ago."

"Not to me, Bert. It's always been so vivid in my memory, as if it happened only yesterday. The things I saw, the sounds, even the smells. For years I tried to forget, but it all kept coming back. I had dreams about a German with a rifle coming after me, and I kept seeing Tony and hearing his cries...."

"Like I said, Desi, battle can do that. Fear can do funny things to a guy. It can drive ya out of yer mind, until the only thing that matters is to save yer own butt."

"That night was the most shameful night of my life, Bert. And I remember lying there in the hospital a couple of days after they operated on my leg. They cut back on the morphine and my mind started to clear. I vaguely remember Lieutenant Ormsby telling me that Tony was dead. Later, he asked

me what happened. I lied. I told him Tony and I became separated in the fog. So I was a liar on top of being a coward. Maybe no one else knew, but I knew. It's all I could think about, day after day, lying there in the hospital bed. Oh, how I hated myself."

Bert nodded understandingly. "If only I'd known what you was goin' through, maybe I coulda helped."

"And then I remember the day you came walking into my ward with the stub of your arm all bandaged up."

"Yeah," said Bert, "I remember that."

"I felt such terrible guilt; first Tony, then you...."

Bert shrugged and said, "You can't blame yerself fer my arm. It just happened, that's all. Nobody's to blame."

"You came over and sat on the edge of my bed. You wanted to talk! I was afraid you were going to bring up Tony and rescuing me and how you lost your arm. But no, nothing like that. You never did bring it up. You were concerned only about me. You wanted to cheer me up. Remember? You talked about going home and fishing and baseball—things like that."

Bert smiled at the remembrance.

"And then came another difficult day," the Pastor continued. "Remember when they dressed us in our uniforms? And Lieutenant Ormsby came in and—and decorated us? Oh, Bert...."

"Yep," said Bert. "I remember. That's when they took the picture of us with our medals."

The Pastor dabbed away a tear, then continued talking. "I thought I'd die when Lieutenant Ormsby pinned that Purple Heart on my chest. There I was, being decorated for being wounded in action! They were treating me like a hero! And when I returned to the States, well, I never told Amanda in my letters what had happened because I was so ashamed. So, when she saw me on crutches and with a bandaged leg she assumed I had been shot by a German."

Bert nodded, understandingly.

"It was a broken tree branch, Bert, not a bullet. But you knew—you pulled it out! So I never told her the truth—never told anyone the truth.

"The years went by and I tried so hard to forget you and Tony. Then you moved to Denver and looked me up. And when you and Rosie joined the church, you wanted to be my friends! But it was all coming back to me—the horrible memories, the fear, the guilt, the shame, the nightmares.... It ate away at my insides. And you were always asking me to go visiting with you to the VA hospital. But I couldn't do it. I just couldn't do it...just couldn't face all those wounded soldiers. In all those years since the war, I never so much as set foot inside a hospital."

Bert nodded and gave the Pastor a teary smile of reassurance.

"Amanda meant everything to me, Bert. She was so loving, so understanding. If it hadn't been for her, the terrible memories of that night would have been too much for me to bear. And then—then the Lord called her home." His voice broke, and he had to pause before going on. "Amanda was my life. And after she was gone my world fell apart. I missed her terribly, and I—I grew bitter toward the Lord for taking her away from me. I needed her so much."

"All of us needed her," said Bert. "She was a special person —a real woman of God."

"You know, every time I see someone in a military uniform or a disabled person, it brings back the memories," said the Pastor. He looked at his trophy wall, then walked over to it. He stood in front of the picture of himself with Bert in their Army uniforms with medals pinned to their chests. With tears steaming down his face, he pointed to the photo and said, "Do you understand, now, Bert? Do you understand?"

Bert nodded and wiped away his tears with the back of his hand.

The Pastor walked back over to him. "A long time ago I thought being a successful pastor would make up for my past and that I'd eventually feel better about myself. I kept driving and driving until I became successful beyond my wildest dreams. Look at all that," he said, nodding at the trophy wall. "Well, I suppose I fooled a lot of people into thinking I'm a big shot—a hero! But I couldn't fool myself—and certainly not the Lord.

"I've been a minister of the Word for going on a half century, Bert, so I know all about sin and guilt and forgiveness. I've studied it, I've preached it, and

I've written about it. Intellectually, I knew God had forgiven me. And you certainly did nothing to indicate you were carrying a grudge. But I still had to live with the consequences of the cowardly thing I did. You were a hero, Bert, and I was a coward."

"Heck, Desi, I wasn't no hero. I didn't do nothin' nobody else wouldn't have done. I guess people like to have heros, but the way I see it there ain't no heros in wars. There's only victims—Dead victims and surviving victims."

"Perhaps you're right, Bert, but every time I saw you—saw the stub of your arm—I thought of all the suffering I caused you."

"Heck, my arm healed a long time ago," said Bert, sniffing back his tears. "And I think you've done some healin', too. Ya know, it takes a lot of courage fer a man to swallow his pride and admit he was a coward."

"Over the years I've hated myself—to the point I just wished I would die. Well, last night I saw that prideful, cowardly old man in a way I've never seen him before. I saw my old self...nailed to a cross."

Bert gave the Pastor a puzzled frown.

"Yes, Bert, the old me was crucified with Jesus!"

Bert understood. "And then you was resurrected with Him!"

The Pastor nodded and said, "Right now I want to square things between us." He searched Bert's eyes and said, "I've done you such wrong over the years. Will you forgive me? Will you please forgive me?" Bert wiped away his tears, and with emotion quivering in his voice, said, "If only I'd known, Desi—we coulda settled this years ago. But here we are, so let's do it. I forgive ya. Now, there, you're released, you're free."

The Pastor stepped up to Bert and hugged him. They stood there for sometime, holding onto each other, both of them sobbing, saying nothing, but thinking and thinking. After a time they disembraced. The Pastor went over to his desk and Bert took a seat on the sofa.

Both sat in silence for a time, then the Pastor said, "You know, Bert, over all these years, my burden of guilt kept me from making an important journey. But last night I walked up a rocky knoll—"

The grandfather clock chimed, and the Pastor halted in mid-sentence.

"Eight o'clock," said Bert. "Guess I oughta leave ya be so you can get ready fer church."

"Church? Oh, my! Yes! It's Sunday!"

"Yep—yer twenty-fifth anniversary on TV."

"Yes, so it is!" He rose from his chair. "Want to take a quick stroll with me, Bert?"

"Sure. Where to?"

"The sanctuary."

The Pastor walked out of the study and Bert scampered to keep up with his brisk pace. Sunlight shown through the hall windows. "The sun is shining!" the Pastor said joyfully.

"That was one heck of a hail storm we had last night, wasn't it? Oops, that reminds me: I checked around the property: We lost some winders and the roses got chopped to pieces. Oh, yeah, and the wind knocked over the oak tree out front. Coulda been a little twister—some was spotted around town last night. Oh, well, the old tree was dyin' anyway—disease and all. Rot was settin' in. But don't worry, Desi, I'll plant another tree."

"We will plant another one," said the Pastor. "We'll do it together!"

They walked into the sanctuary and the Pastor's face lit up at the sight of the sun shining through the stained glass windows. "It's Sunday, Bert! The storm has passed!"

"Yep," said Bert, "not a cloud in the sky."

"Oh, but there is, Bert! We can't see it with human eyes, but there is a cloud up there—in the heavenly realm. And you and I are in the midst of it, seated with Christ at the right hand of the Father! Oh, how I've come to appreciate white, fluffy clouds. They remind me of who I am in Christ and that I am seated with Him in the heavenly realm. And look," he said, pointing, "look how the sun radiates through the windows with all the colors of the rainbow, reminding us of God's promise never to leave us or forsake us. Marvelous! Absolutely marvelous!"

Bert looked over at the stained glass windows and saw the sunlight shining through them, casting rays of blue, green, red and yellow.

"Isn't it just glorious, Bert? A thousand rainbows!"

Bert with a smile. "The world outside has changed a lot in all the years I've been comin' to this church, but every Sunday them winders is always the same—sun shinin' through 'em, makin' all them pretty colors. And ya talk like it's the first time ya ever seen 'em."

The Pastor chuckled, then said: "Amazing, isn't it?—how you can look at something for so long a time before you really see it."

They walked down the aisle toward the platform. "What time is it, now?" asked the Pastor.

"No more'n a few minutes later than it was in yer study," answered Bert, checking his watch. "Six minutes after eight."

"Is there still time?" asked the Pastor.

"Time fer what?"

"To get more flowers in here," said the Pastor. He stopped walking and turned to face Bert. "I know this is asking a lot, but would you mind going back home for more flowers?"

"But Curtis said ya thought there was already too many."

"Never mind what Curtis told you. No, no—that didn't come out the right way. What I meant to say is I've changed my mind. We need more flowers, Bert—many more! Decorate the whole sanctuary with them if you want!"

"Whatever ya say, Desi. Lord knows I got plenty of 'em."

"Oh, and one more thing: I want to buy a big arrangement from you—for Curtis and Robbie. Yesterday they broke the good news to me and asked me to marry them."

"Hey, now that's somethin' to celebrate all right. Now there's a marriage made in heaven if there ever was one." Bert glanced at his wristwatch. "Well, I better get movin' then, got lots to do before church starts."

"Me, too," said the Pastor. And he embraced Bert with a firm hug.

Bert left for home and the Pastor returned to his study. He showered and shaved in the study's bathroom, then put on fresh clothes. In the time that remained before the worship service, he knelt at the sofa and talked with the Lord about many things—and in a way he hadn't talked with Him in many years.

It was a time of confession, self-forgiveness and complete surrender...a time of thanksgiving and praise. A time of entering into God's rest and grace.

Chapter 17

A New Day

It was time for the worship service to begin at Mile High Community Church and the sanctuary was packed with worshipers. The organ's call to worship swelled in the sanctuary and the television crew was positioned at their cameras. Up and down the aisles, ushers scouted for seats for last-minute arrivals.

Curtis waited for his Uncle Morehouse in the tiny room adjacent the sanctuary. It was there that they gathered before every worship service to pray, then walk out onto the platform together.

Curtis cracked open the door and peered out into the sanctuary. The capacity crowd satisfied him that the publicity and advertising about the TV ministry's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration had done its job well. Then he spotted his uncle coming down an aisle. *What is he doing out there?* Curtis wondered.

The Pastor smiled broadly as he looked over the crowd. Most of the faces were familiar, but some were not. He walked down the aisle and smiled warmly to Clyde, a man once strong as an ox, who now was bent-shouldered from age and whose hands were gnarled with arthritis. Across the aisle sat Lucy Downs, a young woman whose husband went through a devastating bankruptcy two years ago, became despondent, then committed suicide. The Pastor walked over to her, rested a comforting hand on her shoulder and greeted her. Her face lit up with a smile.

Curtis smiled, too, and wondered, What in the world has gotten into Uncle?

Further down the aisle the Pastor waved and gave a loving and encouraging smile to Lloyd Ferguson and his three young children. Not long ago Lloyd's wife ran off with another man.

By this time the congregation had taken notice of the Pastor's most unusual mingling with the flock. Some thought it was being staged for television.

The Pastor walked onto the platform and took his seat. He scanned the congregation, and to every worshiper's eye he caught, he greeted them with a nod and a smile.

Curtis walked onto the platform. The Pastor rose from his throne and greeted his nephew with a beaming smile and a firm hug.

"Good morning, Uncle Desmond," whispered Curtis, looking around in embarrassment over his uncle's unaccustomed display of affection—and in front of the entire congregation!

"Good morning, son," said the Pastor. His dancing eyes glistened over with happiness.

As they sat down, Curtis stared incredulously at his uncle. *He called me "son"! What's come over him?*

Curtis's puzzled look prompted the Pastor to reach over and affectionately pat his knee. Curtis was so much like his father, he thought. Michael had a heart for people with problems. That's why he became an Army chaplain and went to Vietnam.

Strange how things work out, thought the Pastor. *I always thought Michael would be here, at my side. But now, Curtis and I will carry on together, ministering to all these wounded soldiers of the cross.*

The Pastor returned his attention to the congregation and immediately spotted Annabelle talking with a couple at the back of the sanctuary. *Oh, Annabelle,* thought the Pastor. *Whatever would I do without you? What would this church do without you?*

The organ's call to worship ended and Curtis walked over to the podium and welcomed everyone. He read some announcements, gave an opening prayer, then returned to his seat.

It was time for the Pastor to read the morning's scripture, but he was preoccupied with looking at people and thinking about them. Everyone was waiting for him to go to the pulpit. Some exchanged questioning looks and murmured.

"Uncle Desmond," Curtis prodded in a whisper. "You're up—scripture!"

"Oh, my! Yes, of course," said the Pastor, snapping back from his thoughts. He jumped to his feet and stepped over to the pulpit. He paused to brace himself, then, with his emotions under control, said: "The storm has passed, the skies have cleared, and the sun is shining brightly. Today is a new day! 'This is the day the Lord hath made! Let us be glad and rejoice in it!'"

His joyful proclamation was received with smiles, nodding heads and a scattering of amens.

"Before this morning's scripture reading," the Pastor said, "I have a few more announcements. I'm thrilled—yes, thrilled that my son Curtis and Roberta Richardson announced their wedding engagement last night. And they honor me by asking that I join them together in holy matrimony—which I look forward to doing with all my heart."

Curtis glanced at Robbie and mouthed, "I love you."

"And, now," the Pastor said, turning his attention back to the congregation, "I—I..." His chin quivered and he wiped away a tear. He took a sip of water from the glass on the podium then continued. "I want to thank Bert Samaran for today's beautiful flowers—and for all the flowers he has donated to the church over the years."

Bert beamed a broad smile.

"Your flowers are a symbol of life, Bert. They will always be a constant reminder to me of your love and—and your sacrifice."

The Pastor paused for a moment to get a grip on his emotions. Then he said, "Bert Samaran—and many others in our church family—exemplify what Christian service is all about. They're an inspiration to us all. The Bible says that a glorious day is coming—a day when Jesus will say to you, 'I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.... Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine,

even the least of them, you did it to Me.”

With that, the Pastor nodded to the choir director then took his seat. As the choir began singing a response of amens, the Pastor bowed his head and silently prayed: *Lord, You know I have no sermon prepared for this morning. And, yet, I sense that You are moving me to confess to them about that night. So I'll tell them about Tony and Bert and the cowardly thing I did. I'll ask their forgiveness for failing them all these years. And after that, please say what You will to them through me. Thank You, Father, thank You....*

The Pastor opened his eyes and glanced down at the Bible he rested on his lap. The slip of paper Jonathan had given him stuck out from between the pages. He pulled it free. There was verse written on it and he began to read:

Empty Hands

One by one He took them from me:
All the things I valued most;
'Til I was empty-handed,
Every glittering toy was lost.

And I walked earth's highways, grieving,
In my rags and poverty.
Until I heard His voice inviting,
"Lift those empty hands to Me!"

Then I turned my hands toward heaven,
And He filled them with a store
Of His own transcendent riches,
'Til they could contain no more.

And at last I comprehended
With my stupid mind, and dull,
That God cannot pour His riches
Into hands already full.

The Pastor smiled and closed his eyes. *Thank You, Lord, for answering my prayer and showing me what You want me to speak on.*

The choral response ended. and the music director walked up to the pulpit. He lowered the mike. then announced. "As you know, for today's special music, we advertised that Geno would perform on the concert piano.

However, I received word late last night that his flight was diverted from Denver because of the thunderstorm and tornado warnings, so he can't be with us today. But Geno thoughtfully lined-up a replacement—a young musician whose music of praise is filling the Christian airwaves. So please join me in welcoming Jonathan."

The Pastor's mouth dropped open. *Jonathan! Did he say Jonathan?*

As the congregation gave Jonathan a welcoming round of applause, the Pastor watched the sandy-haired singer walk onto the platform. He carried a guitar, and across the front of his white sweat shirt was large red lettering that boldly proclaimed: "REJOICE!" He sat down on a stool and adjusted the microphones.

Jonathan began strumming his guitar, and went on to sing two ballads of praise. Afterward he said, "Now, I'd like for us to sing together—an old hymn that I think most you know well." He started to sing "The Old Rugged Cross."

When the hymn ended, the young musician kept on strumming his guitar and said, "Now, if you will look at your song sheets, you'll find another verse and chorus to 'The Old Rugged Cross.' I wrote it sometime ago. It has special meaning to me, as I hope it will to you. Let's sing it together." And with that, he led everyone in singing sweet words of testimony and praise to the Lord:

It was there, on that cross,
Where He gave up His life,
To redeem me from sin and all strife.

With Him there, on that cross,
I laid down my old life,
Then He raised me from darkness to light.

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Where for all my dark sins He did pay.
My old life was exchanged on that day,
In me He lives, always to stay.

"One more time," Jonathan asked, and the congregation followed him in singing.

Pastor Morehouse raised his hands and head heavenward in praise, tears of

joy streaming down his face. His soaring heart saw a multitude in the clouds —Curtis and Robbie, Annabelle, Bert and Rosie, Grandfather Morehouse, his mother and father, Tony, his flock from over the years, and himself with Amanda at his side. Above the throng was a burst of brilliant light and then a host of angels. All in the heavenlies were giving glory and honor and praise to Him who hears the cries of wounded soldiers.

— The End —

Copyright ©1997, 2015 by Franklin L. Allnutt. All right reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any form, except for brief quotations in reviews, without written permission from the publisher. Unless otherwise noted, scripture is taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

The poem, "Empty Hands," has been quoted by Charles Swindoll and others, and appears to be anonymous. If not, please contact the author.

Cry of the Wounded Soldier is a work of fiction. The story and characters were invented by the author. Any character resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Frank shared this ebook for free in 2021.