

# **Homeless Like Me**

*Donald James Parker*

**Sword of the Spirit Publishing**

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## **Other Books by Donald James Parker**

**2007**

All the Voices of the Wind

**2008**

The Bulldog Compact  
Reforming the Potter's Clay  
All the Stillness of the Wind  
All the Fury of the Wind  
More Than Dust in the Wind  
Angels of Interstate 29

**2009**

Love Waits



## Chapter 1

Brian felt a pair of strong hands seize him from behind just before he suffered the heat of being slammed into a brick wall, followed by the coldness of steel pressed against his throat. He could feel the vibration of each word from a menacing voice bounce off his trembling body.

"I don't know what your game is, mister, but I know you're not one of us."

"Don't shoot!" Brian screeched.

The coldness eased off and Brian's assailant started to laugh. "Don't shoot? This knife isn't loaded."

"That is a knife, huh?"

"Brilliant deduction, Sherlock." The laughing ceased. "Now, dude, talk fast and talk straight. What are you doing down here pretending to be a bum like me?"

Brian's face contorted into a grimace. "I didn't say you're a bum."

"No, you didn't. I'm confessing to the crime. Now spill your guts, before I have to do it for you – if you get my drift. Are you the fuzz?"

"The what?"

"Are you for real? Don't you know nuthin'?"

"I know that if you don't move that knife further away from my carotid artery, I'm gonna wet my pants."

The knife-wielder laughed again. "You sure ain't no cop, unless you're the best actor I ever saw. You make the cowardly lion look like the hero in *Bravehart*. What are you doin' hangin' out here at the rescue mission?"

Brian coughed and pointed to the knife with his eyes. The man withdrew it a few inches further from the trembling body of his victim.

Brian looked around him and saw that no one else was within hearing distance. "OK, you're right. I'm not homeless. But I'm not a policeman or FBI agent or anything."

"Then what the hell are you?"

"Can I wipe the sweat off my brow before it gets in my eyes?"

"Whatever."

Brian hastily grabbed the sleeve of his shirt and wiped his forehead dry. "Thanks. You're not going to believe me."

"Give me a try."

"I'm an author."

"A what?"

"A book writer."

"You're right. I don't believe you." The knife moved toward Brian again.

"Cross my heart and hope to . . . live!"

"Sure sounds like a whopper to me."

Brian shrugged. "I told you. But it's true."

"Explain."

"OK. You gotta understand the publishing business. It's like major cutthroat competition. There are about a million people writing novels, but only a handful are being published every year. It's murder . . . ." Brian looked at the knife. "Ah, let me rephrase that . . . it's hell trying to break into the writing game. I needed something unique. Ever hear of the book, *Black Like Me*?"

"I'm familiar with it. Some white dude painted himself black and then went out and wrote about what happened to him as a black person. He found out what it's like to be one of us."

Brian gestured with his hand. "Exactly!"

"Are you telling me you're trying to pass yourself off as a homeless person so you can write about being homeless?"

"You got it." Brian relaxed a little bit.

"So you're going to take advantage of homeless people so you make enough money to buy a big fancy house with a swimming pool and all that crap?"

Brian's eyes popped halfway out of the sockets. "No! A thousand times no. Not only am I using this as a way to get a unique story, I'm trying to draw attention to the plight of the homeless so that people can understand them better and help more adequately. And I will never have a swimming pool. I'm afraid of water."

The big black man stared at Brian for a second and then put his knife away. "Why does that not surprise me?"

"That I don't want a pool?"

"No, that you're afraid of water. You look like you're scared of your freaking shadow. Reminds me of a cat at the dog pound."

"I've never been on the streets before. It's pretty dangerous, I think."

"You got that part right, dude. What's your handle?"

"Brian. Brian Anderson."

"Mine's Zeke."

"Zeke what?"

"Just Zeke. And Brian, the streets are a little safer if you don't ask too many personal questions. I suggest you find yourself a new first name and don't mention last names, yours or anybody else's."

Brian nodded vigorously.

"So you really want to help us homeless types out?"

Brian kept nodding.

"In that case, I suppose I should help you so you can help others. If somebody doesn't look out for you, the police will be carting your body away in the very near future."

Brian swallowed hard. "That bad, huh?"

"Worse. Come on. If you're going to play a homeless dude, you're going to have to learn how to look and talk like the real deal. Let's go down the street where we can get some more privacy, and I'll teach you the ropes. I hope I never regret this."

"Oh, you won't, Zeke. I promise."

"I've heard that promise word before. Don't mean squat to me. Follow me."

Brian obeyed and for the next half hour listened to Zeke's instructions on the art of making himself invisible in the middle of the street scene. When they were finished, they started walking back to the rescue mission.

"How much of your book have you written?"

"None. Today's my first day of research."

"Good. That means I can make sure you do this right. I suppose I'll have to be your bodyguard to enable you to live until the part where you write 'the end.'"

Brian's eyebrows arched. "You'd do that for me?"

"Not for you so much, but for the rest of the poor folks that can't help themselves. I'm a big tough guy on the outside, but it hurts me to see the lives these people are leading. If you can do something to ease their plight, it's worth me savin' your hide."

"Excuse me if this is too personal, but . . . ." The look on Zeke's face stopped Brian in mid-sentence. "Sorry, don't ask personal questions, right?"

"You're starting to get it, sonny. You might live long enough to win a Pulitzer."

"You're familiar with literature?"

Zeke laughed. "I haven't always been a bum, you know. Far away, in another galaxy, I had a book in my hand from time to time." He looked Brian over from head to toe. "You're awfully scrawny, dude. What do you weigh?"

"About a hundred and fifty."

"With lead underwear on. I'm almost double that. I guess I'll be your guardian angel, if you don't mind your angels coming in the color black."

"Not a problem for me."

"Do you have any money on you?"

Brian hesitated. "A little."

"You need to get yourself a better disguise. You should look so different your mother wouldn't even pick you out of a lineup. Before I take you into the rescue mission, we're gonna visit a little shop down the street that specializes in just what the disguise doctor would prescribe."

They reversed directions and shuffled as Zeke instructed Brian to move – with a stride that indicated no purpose and no hurry to get to the next dead-end in life. Brian came out of the shop a short time later wearing a hat that covered a large percentage of his forehead and ears. He sported a shirt that was as faded as his holey blue jeans. A fake beard gave his face an entirely new look.

"The key here is to blend in with your surroundings, kind of like a chameleon. You don't want anyone noticing you, got it?"

"Does this mean I can't wear my black and white saddle shoes?"

Zeke wheeled around and studied Brian's face. Brian winked at him, and Zeke let his head drop back and laughed. "Just jerkin' my chain, weren't you, Brian?"

"A little bit."

"Funny!" Zeke's face grew stern, and he stopped walking.

"Don't do it again!"

Brian swallowed his smile and took a step backward. "Sorry, I didn't think."

Zeke took a step toward Brian and towered over him menacingly for a moment and then broke into a grin. "Relax, BA. It was my turn to do some cage rattling."

Brian let out his breath audibly. "BA?"

"Brian Anderson. That's your name right?"

"My name is Jose Jimenez. No, wait, my name is Jose."

Zeke laughed again. "You're learnin'. But you don't look like a Jose. You need a name as plain as your clothing. How about plain old Bob?"

"Works for me. I hope nobody tries to get my attention using that name, at least until I get used to it."

"Mind over matter, Bob. So what are you going to write about?"

"I don't know. My plan is just watch what goes down and figure it out as I go."

"Are you writing it as fiction?"

Brian scrunched his eyebrows and bit on a finger. "I haven't decided yet, but I think so."

"You're really flying by the seat of your pants, aren't you?"

"I guess so. But I'm afraid of heights."

"Yeah. I figured. You know, I'm not sure you can pull this thing off doing it straight. I think it'll be safer if I tell folks that your brain's a bit scrambled. So try to play a little dumb or crazy, if you can handle that."

"No problem." He changed to a singing voice. "All I gotta do is act naturally."

Zeke belted out another laugh. The two men reached the front door of the rescue mission where other disheveled men and women were starting to line up for lunch. Zeke guided Brian to one of the men.

"Amos."

"Hey, Zeke. Who's the new guy? Your long lost cousin?"

Zeke grinned weakly. "He's my buddy, and he's with me, if you get my drift. Got a little problem with his brain. Some dude mistook his head for a golf ball and tried to drive him down the middle of the fairway. Perhaps you can pass the word along that anybody who messes with Bob here is gonna deal with me afterward."

"Sure thing, Zeke." He shuffled away from them and joined another group of men. After listening to Amos speak for a little while, all of the men turned to gaze at Brian.

Brian scratched his head. "I thought the trick was to not be noticed?"

"It is."

"Then why are you telling everybody I'm with you and causing them to notice me?"

"Because it's more important that people know who your daddy is than it is to remain anonymous."

"What's my father got to do with this?"

Zeke rolled his eyes. "You're serious this time, aren't you?"

Brian nodded.

"Man, you gotta learn the language of the streets if you're gonna hang here."

Brian rubbed his neck.

Zeke laughed. "You're killin' me here, Bob."

"Do you ever utter a sentence that doesn't contain some form of violence?"

"I don't know. I never listen to myself."

"Well, I can tell you that . . . ." Brian's mouth fell open and his eyes bugged out.

Zeke turned to see what had caused Brian to spaz out. A smile broke out on his face, replacing the contorted mask of curiosity he had previously worn. "Hello, Miss Angel!"

"Hi, Zeke. How are you today?"

"Couldn't be better, ma'am."

"Glad to hear it." She sashayed past the two men and entered the mission.

Zeke looked back at Brian whose head had swiveled toward the mission and then took on the pose of a statue again. "You're gonna let some crows fly in if you don't shut your lips."

Brian continued to stare at the entrance to the mission. Zeke gave him a couple of playful taps on his cheek. Brian let out a big sigh, closed his mouth, and turned to face his new bodyguard.

"Who was that angel?"

"I told you before, Bob, we don't use last names. Her name is just Angel or better yet Miss Angel to show some respect."

"What's she doing down here?"

"She's a volunteer. She spends her lunch hours down here helping serve and nursemaiding anyone who needs the service of an RN. She usually comes back in the evening, too. She's a fixture down here and a very welcome one at that."

"What a stroke of luck!"

Zeke focused intense eyes on the small man. "What do you mean?"

"Lucky that I get to rub elbows with such a lovely creature."

"Hmm. You better be careful about rubbing Miss Angel in any geographic part of her anatomy. She's got more friends than a powerball lottery winner. You mess with her and somebody's going to redesign your face. That somebody could be me. You savvy?"

"Hold on here, Zeke. I'm not going to do her any harm. I'd just like to get to know the lady. Is she married?"

Zeke rolled his eyes. "I'm not sure. All I know is that she doesn't wear a ring. I don't get into people's personal business, remember."

"I gotta find out."

"You're on your own. And let me point out a little fact that might detour your lofty plans. You're brain damaged and homeless. Not exactly eligible bachelor material, you know."

Brian barely controlled himself enough to keep his voice down to a decibel level that wouldn't blow his cover. "But that's all just pretend. I'm not really homeless or brain-damaged."

"I'm starting to think I'm the brain-damaged one for taking you under my wing. Actually, it's not too late to back out. I haven't signed a contract yet."

Brian hung his head.

"Oh, don't even try the 'please have pity on me' trick."

Brian started to shuffle away. Zeke's large right paw reeled him in. "Get back here, you big baby. I'm just playin' with you again. I said I'd take care of you, and my word is gold."

"Like the hair of a certain Angel."

"Oh, man. You got it bad. With that glazed over look in your eyes, I'm afraid you might have a terminal case. I maybe can protect you from the thugs on the streets, but I can't do anything about saving you from that love sickness."

"I don't remember asking to be saved."

Zeke rolled his eyes. "Don't matter none if you ask or not. My 300 pounds of agile, mobile, and hostile manhood can't do anything in this matter."

## Chapter 2

Brian had a hard time thinking about food as Zeke led him through the lunch line. His eyes remained fixed on the angelic movements of a blue dress covered by a white apron. Brian kept thinking of Angel in Wonderland. *Lewis Carroll should have named his heroine Angel instead of Alice.* When he got up to where Angel was scooping mashed potatoes onto plates, he got his first glance into her eyes whose color almost perfectly matched the blue dress. His mind whirled with the various descriptive terms he would use to describe such a creature in a book. She flashed him a big smile which almost made him forget where he was.

"You're new here, aren't you?"

Brian nodded.

"I'm Angel."

"Yes, you are."

"And your name is?"

"Br –" Brian coughed. "Bob." He noticed that Angel's eyes were focused behind him. He looked back in time to see Zeke making gestures indicating his friend's elevator didn't quite make it to the top floor.

*Why did I agree to the brain damage disguise?* Brian thought he saw pity in Angel's eyes after Zeke's revelation to her. "Thank you, ma'am." He moved to the next server where he received a couple of slabs of meat.

"Welcome. Are you hungry today, Zeke?" Angel asked.

Zeke let out a laugh that startled Brian, reminding him of the rumbling of an active volcano.

"You know I could finish off four of these plates without working up a sweat."

"I hope you aren't eating the plates along with the food."

Zeke grinned at her. "Not yet. If I ever reach that point, remember that I like my china well done."

Brian rolled his eyes. *And he passes me off as brain damaged!*

Brian took a spot at an empty table. He watched Zeke look over at another table where he probably had friends and then look back to Brian. Finally he made his decision and plopped his tray down across from his newest acquaintance.

"I feel guilty." Brian said.

"Because you took me away from my friends?"

"Well, that too, but I'm referring to eating their food here. I'm not homeless. I'd like to pay for it somehow."

Zeke shrugged. "They don't take donations down here at the kitchen. You'd have to go the office to do that. I'd suggest you go as your real self and not Spongehead Bob. Patrons of this eating establishment don't normally have disposable cash."

"Great. Not only do you establish that I'm a dude whose elevator doesn't make it to the top, but you have to hang a nickname on me as well."

"Don't bother thanking me. Just glad to help out."

Brian swallowed a mouthful of meat and potatoes. "Somehow I'll summon up the strength to tone down my gratitude."

Zeke laughed. "Good one. Are you going to put humor in your book?"

"Probably. If I can find something about being homeless that's funny."

"If we didn't laugh at problems, we'd all be as crazy as –"

Zeke's eyes opened wide and fixated on something across the room. Brian turned to see what had captivated him. He didn't see anything out of the ordinary. His gaze went back to Zeke again. His attention was still focused toward the lunch line. Brian looked back once more. A large black lady with three children stood in line. *Can that be what Zeke is staring at?* "See something you like, Zeke?"

"Huh?"

"Read my lips now. Do you see something you like?"

Zeke looked at Brian and then back toward the servers. "I don't see nuthin' at all."

"You could have fooled me the way your pupils dilated and your tongue hung out."

"My tongue was hanging out?"

"Dude, almost down to the table."

Zeke laughed. "Now I know you're yanking on my leg because my tongue won't go down much more than a foot."

"Yeah, but your foot's more attractive."

"You ain't seen my feet. You might change your mind."

"I'll take your word for that." Brian forked another mouthful of food and deposited it. He watched Zeke eyeball the mother and kids as they sat down at a table to their left. "Ever been married, Zeke?"

A glassy look settled in the eyes of Brian's dining mate. "Didn't I tell you not to ask so many questions?"

"Sorry. Just trying to get to know you better."

"Am I supposed to feel honored?"

Brian raised a hand. "I'm just trying to be a nice guy here. Maybe you prefer someone who just keeps their nose and their eyes in their food."

"It is kind of nice to have someone to carry on an intelligent conversation with, but don't get carried away – especially with some of these guys around here – or you might get carried away in an ambulance."

Brian nodded and continued chewing. A newcomer sat at the other end of their table. Brian was scoping him out when the man turned and looked right into his eyes. Brian was mesmerized for a second but then found the strength to pull away. *What's the story with those eyes? The term smiling eyes applies perfectly here, but why does a Native American in a homeless shelter have incandescent pupils?*

A few other men sat down between Brian and the interesting character. When another man sat across from the object of Brian's fascination, the curious writer decided it was safe to find out more from Zeke. "Do you know the Indian on the end?"

"Oh, yeah. I called him Chief. His name is Soaring Eagle. You want to stay away from him."

"Why? Dangerous character?"

Zeke nodded. "Real dangerous. He'll pound you over the head with the Bible if you let him get started."

"Bible?"

"Yeah, you know that big black book with lots of thees and thous in it."

"I know what a Bible is, just never figured I'd run into someone quoting scripture down here."

"You'll run into lots of it in these parts. The do-gooders come in here with that talk of eternal life and try to stir up the homeless to give a rat's hind end. They get frustrated after a while and quit showing up and someone else comes in later to repeat the cycle. Only Miss Angel has stuck it out."

"She's a thumper, too?"

Zeke shook his head. "With Miss Angel it's different. She lets her actions do most of the talking. When she does open her mouth to say something, people pay real close attention to her because they know she loves them. They don't get much of that in their lives."

Brian looked up to gaze at Angel flitting from table to table, apparently making sure everyone felt at home. She stopped at the side of the black woman and her children. Both Brian and Zeke gazed longingly in that direction. "She's beautiful," Brian said.

"Yes, she is. And Angel is quite attractive also."

"Ah, so you do have the hots for that gal. Have you met her?"

"We've talked a couple of times. Her no-account husband beat her. She moved out. They have unpaid bills and a few months of unpaid rent so they would have been evicted soon anyway."

"Why don't you put a move on her?"

Zeke sat up straight and pointed a huge index finger in Brian's direction. "Listen, she's already had one no-good black man for a husband. She's doesn't need another deadbeat in her life."

"Deadbeat? You're being a little hard on yourself aren't you? This is just a temporary situation, right? You will get back on your feet and get a job and everything?"

"Maybe, but not much hope here. Who wants to hire an oversized black man with a spotty past?"

"You gotta have hope. If you don't have it, what do you have?"

"Look around at the people in this room, Bob. What most of these people have is exactly nothing, including hope. Read the death in their eyes. Maybe you can capture that in your book."

Brian looked around. "Not everybody is like that. Take that lady with the three kids for example."

"She's a newbie. It takes awhile before the light of life gets rubbed out of them."

"How long until yours is gone?"

"I ain't letting it go."

Brian nodded. "That's the spirit. Somebody has to give those other people the same fight you have."

"I thought that is what you were going to do in your book."

"Sounds good. However, how many homeless people are reading books?"

"I haven't done a poll lately. You might have a point there. They're so busy trying to stay alive that they don't have time or opportunity to get a life."

"But the people who read my books might be able to help."

"What these people need is a job, a decent place to live and, most of all, some respect and self-respect."

"Zeke, people can give away jobs and they can give respect, but self-respect comes from within. You can have everything in the world and not have self-respect."

"True. And you can have nothing at all and still possess self-respect. Look at Chief down there. He acts like he owns the world."

Brian took a peek at their tablemate again. "What's up with that, anyway? It's like his eyes are shining."

"You noticed. He claims it's Jesus in his eyes."

"Why doesn't Jesus give him a place to live then?"

Zeke shrugged. "My attitude exactly."

The man they were talking about stood up and picked up his plate. To Brian's horror he walked toward them. The writer quickly turned his head back to his food.

"Jesus didn't have a place to lay his head either."

Brian turned and looked into the man's eyes. "Pardon me?"

"You're excused." The man, ramrod straight and regal, walked away.

"Did you hear what he said, Zeke?"

"I heard."

"How did he know what my question was? He couldn't have heard me almost whispering from down there with all the noise around here."

Zeke shrugged. "Maybe God told him."

Brian rolled his eyes, stabbed a slab of meat, and pushed it into his mouth. When he finished chewing, he looked into Zeke's eyes. "If I were you, I wouldn't quit my day job to become a standup comedian."

Zeke laughed. "You forget, my bookish friend, I don't have a job to quit."

Brian looked around the room. "I did kind of forget where I was for a minute. That guy's eyes are unsettling. I don't know any other way to describe the sensation."

"I know exactly what you're talking about. Let's talk about something else."

"Good idea. So, what's the story on all the people here? How do they end up in a place like this?"

"First of all, Bob, everyone has a different story. It used to be that most of the people were here because they were mentally impaired in some fashion or addicted to some substance that prevented them from leading a normal life – if there is such thing as normal."

"But not any more?"

"There are more and more people showing up that just plain lost their means of making a living and can't find another one. Some of these are hard working people who just can't get a break. The economy is going to hell in a hand basket."

"You know, as a writer, I'm allergic to clichés. But they do fascinate me. Where in the world did that expression come from and what exactly does it signify?"

Zeke shrugged. "You're the writer. I guess it just means that things are falling apart. Why the reference to a hand basket as

opposed to a picnic basket or a bushel basket, I have no clue. And to tell you the truth, I'm not going to lose any sleep over it."

"The basket question or the economy?"

"Neither."

"What would you do if the economy got so bad that places like this couldn't get enough donations to keep going?"

Zeke looked over at the woman with the three kids. "I wouldn't want that to happen, but I don't know what I can do to prevent it. The president hasn't asked me for any advice on financial matters lately."

"Ditto."

"You can put your economic solutions into your book on the homeless and kill two birds with one stone."

"Another cliché. At least that one is intuitively obvious. You're right. I could assassinate two flying creatures with a single rock. In fact, I could cram a bunch of stuff into my book."

"Literary license, I believe they call it."

"Yeah, but I have to stick to things that will rivet my readers to their chairs."

"Maybe a few nails will do the trick."

"Cute. Or that toadsticker you keep in your boot."

Zeke looked around, the annoyance written clearly enough on his face to make Brian's sweat glands increase their output. "You need to learn how to keep your mouth shut concerning things you shouldn't talk about. In fact, with your brain damage disguise, you need to quit carrying on any type of intelligent conversation around here."

"So you're implying that my conversation skills are beyond that of a mental midget."

"Don't get all puffed up, but I'll put you somewhere between a blonde and Albert Einstein."

Brian stifled a laugh. "That's not even ballpark. By the way, where do you sleep at night?"

"When the weather's warm, I escape to my summer cabin."

Brian felt his eyeballs protruding, but there was nothing he could do to retract them. "Summer cabin?"

"That's what I call it. It's a few panels of corrugated tin that I put together to call Home Sweet Home. It's not much, but it keeps most of the rain off and keeps the possums from nibbling my toes at night."

Brian shuddered.

"What's the matter? Don't you like possum kisses?"

"I don't like possum anything. They're the most despicable creatures on the planet."

Zeke shook his head. "Not even close. They don't even come close to mankind in the despicable category. They can't help it if they're ugly."

"Whatever. So since it's not warm now, where are you sleeping?"

"Here at the mission. Are you going to spend the night with us?"

Brian's mouth fell open. "Me?"

"Dude, if you're going to write a book about being homeless, you can't just put on the garb and expect the insight to magically appear in your head. You have to live the life for a while. This has to be an emotional experience so you can get the feelings into the book, not just the ideas."

"But I . . . ."

"Do you want to write a best seller, or do you want to dink around wasting your time and mine?"

"Well, of course I want to come up with a best seller, but I wasn't planning to go into the bowels of Hell to do it."

"Dude, you don't know what Hell is. Being homeless is only a purgatory, or maybe you could call it a near Hell experience."

Brian surveyed the occupants of the room. It was bad enough for him to share eating quarters with some of these people. The thought of sleeping in the same room with them made his stomach churn. Visions of having his scalp taken while he slumbered were impossible to shake off. He bit down on his lower lip.

"Too much for you, ain't it? I should have known you didn't have what it takes when I first ran into you."

"Hold on, Zeke. Don't write me off yet. I have to wrestle with this idea for a while. I have to admit sleeping in a homeless shelter is not on my list of things I want to do before I die."

"Are you afraid if you do, you won't get a chance to fulfill any of the other things on your list?"

"That thought has entered my mind. Besides, I'm a man who loves his privacy. And I also need a good night's sleep to be able to function the next day."

"Understood. Do it on a weekend then, so you can sleep at home during the day if the natives keep your eyes open during the night with their snoring or yelling."

"Yelling?"

"Once in a while a guy goes a little crazy and starts yelling. Some of these guys are old soldiers who still get haunted by their war experiences."

"Are there any other perks you care to suggest to entice me to book a weekend in the near future?"

Zeke laughed. "I suppose I shouldn't be too hard on you. If I had my druthers, I'd be sawing my logs in a different environment myself."

Brian drummed on the table with his fingers. "Do you use drugs?"

"What did I tell you about asking too many questions?"

"I know. I know. I just wondered."

"Well, wonder no more. I'm homeless, not brainless. I've seen too many people mess themselves up something fierce on that junk. My goal is to survive. You don't do that well if you're not in complete control of your faculties at all times. Do you dig it?"

Brian nodded. "I was just wondering . . ."

"Wondering what?"

"I have this spare bedroom at home. I don't need it for anything right now. It has an attached bathroom that would be all yours. If you want to sleep at my place for a while during this book writing process, that would be cool with me. Perhaps you can even proofread and critique my manuscript."

Zeke blinked. "Are you serious?"

"I think so. But don't take too long to decide, or I might change my mind."

"What are the strings?"

"No strings. You're being my body guard. I'll pay you by providing you with a place to stay."

"And your critique buddy."

"That too, if you want."

"That would be good. That way I can make sure you get everything into this book that you should."

Brian nodded. "Exactly. But I have a few rules."

"Such as?"

"Keep your hands out of my stuff. And don't put a knife to my throat again. And don't invite anybody over."

Zeke laughed. "I think I can reign in my urges to shave your neck without shaving cream. How would I get back here to eat?"

"You can eat at my place – at least when I'm not down here." Brian cast a glance at Angel. "I'm not anxious to spend the night here, but meals definitely seem more attractive."

"I'm a big eater. I don't aim to be a freeloader. If you'll let me do some tasks around the house like yard work, cooking, cleaning, whatever, I'll move in with you."

"Dang! That sounds good. Do you do windows too?"

Zeke grinned. "Don't get carried away, dude!"

Brian shrugged and held out his hand.

Zeke peered at it for as second and finally reached out his gigantic appendage and engulfed Brian's in it.

### Chapter 3

After the men finished eating, Brian followed Zeke to the place where they returned their dirty dishes. To Brian's surprise, Angel was scraping the plates into a garbage pail. He also was amazed at the amount of food some of the guests left uneaten. He and Zeke had both cleaned their plates. Brian thought he might have to convince Zeke that licking a plate in public was socially uncouth.

"What's up with all the food left?"

Zeke shrugged. "Maybe they weren't hungry. Or also they might not have liked what was being served tonight."

"You're kidding. My mom always used to say that beggars can't be choosers. How can they be picky about what they eat in their situation?"

"There's more food tomorrow. We've actually got it pretty good here."

"Come to think of it, this is better food than I whip together at home. These guys are throwing away better food than I eat."

"Good thing I'll be doing the cooking then. And don't forget you're brain damaged. Don't let Angel hear you talking like this or your cover will be blown."

"And why is that a problem?"

"I thought you wanted to write a book. Or did you just come down here trolling for women?"

Brian laughed. "I have to admit that was the furthest thing from my mind when I made the decision to drop in here. However, now that I'm here –" Brian felt a giant shoe come down on top of his own. The pressure applied was not heavy enough to make him scream, but did get his full attention. His eyes pleaded with Zeke to release him.

Zeke made a little circle around his head with a finger.

Brian rolled his eyes and then nodded, an action that triggered Zeke to remove his size fifteen anchor.

A short while later they stood in front of Angel. Brian threw his silverware into a dish pan and handed his empty plate to the beautiful woman.

"Wow. You did a good job. Way to go!"

Brian felt like a six-year-old getting an 'atta-boy' from the first grade teacher. The gleam from Angel's eyes and the pearl colored teeth hiding under the surface of her luscious pink lips salved over

any pain that her patronization caused. He summoned up his best smile and looked her directly in the eyes. "Thank you, ma'am."

When Brian dawdled in front of the garbage, Zeke gave him a little shove in the back to get his feet moving again. He took one look back as he dragged himself away.

"Have a wonderful day, Bob."

*She remembered my name. Actually, she doesn't know my name. She remembered my alias, but that can't be a bad sign.* He nodded. "I will. You, too."

"Thank you. Well, Zeke, did you get enough to eat?"

"Not really. Unfortunately I was sitting with the only other guy who cleaned his plate today so I wasn't able to score some extra food. Next time I might have to try the old 'look over there' gag."

Angel laughed. "God bless your day, Zeke."

"You too, Miss Angel."

Brian waited until they got out of earshot before he started talking again. "Seeing someone like her in action almost convinces me there is a god."

Zeke nodded. "If all the people who sling God's name around acted like her, there'd be a lot fewer unbelievers out here. So I assume you have a car around here somewhere."

"Assumptions are risky, but you're right on this one. I'm parked about six blocks away on a side street."

"Good thinking not to park too close to the shelter if you plan on keeping up the charade of being homeless."

"My mama didn't raise any fools. Besides, I once saw a guy playing his violin out on the sidewalk. I felt sorry for him, thinking he was destitute and dropped a fiver into his violin case. I came back the same way later and saw him get into a fancy vehicle and drive away. I've kept my wallet closed ever since. You can't be sure that people begging for money aren't con men. That also taught me not to park very close to where I'm going to hang out."

Zeke smiled. "I was wrong about you. You're not totally devoid of street smarts. Some people take advantage of people's sympathy to fleece them. Torques me off because it causes generous people to become skeptical and withhold help from those that really are in need. When I run into one of those turkeys panhandling on my turf, I invite them to get lost."

Brian laughed. "I suspect that not many turn down your invitations."

"Not since the first guy tried it, and I wrote on the concrete with his nose."

Brian shuddered as they passed out of the main door and back into the street. His glance caught the eyes of Soaring Eagle. The shudder picked up momentum. "That guy gives me the willies."

"Dude, everything gives you the willies, but in this case, I think you're justified. There's something strange about that guy. That look is his eye just isn't natural. Maybe he's crazy."

"Could be. So, where are all your belongings?"

Zeke pointed to his tattered backpack.

"That's all you own?"

"Pretty pathetic ain't it? Even if I had something, I got no safe place to keep it."

"How do you wash your clothes?"

Zeke laughed. "Not a high priority for me, but I have my ways, but if I tell you then I'd have to –"

Brian held up his hand. "I get the point. Well, if you're living with me, you gotta have more than one change of clothes. We'll stop by Value Village on the way home and grab you some new duds."

"You mean old duds. I hope I get to pick them out. I don't want to be looking like no whi . . . ."

"Were you going to say whitey or something like that?"

"Yeah. Sorry. No offense. I just need to look like a soul brother."

Brian winced. "No offense from my end either, but at your size, I don't think you'll have too much chance to be picky. You'll have to settle for some used circus tents or something."

"Not a problem little buddy. I'll just take three of your shirts and sew them together to make one." Zeke slapped Brian on the back.

"Ouch! New rule. Don't touch me!"

Zeke laughed. "Oops. I forgot that you're a wimp. I hope it doesn't take you long to write this book. I'm not sure how long I can keep you under my wing without trampling you."

"Just please try to refrain from flapping."

The sound of Zeke's deep laughter bounced off the surrounding buildings.

"You sure laugh a lot for somebody without a place to lay his head. What's up with that?"

"You can't cry when you're laughing."

Brian scratched his head. "I guess you have a point there. First thing we'll do when we get home is get you in the shower and you can comb it out."

"Comb what out?"

"Your point. And you can change the oil while you're at it. Looks like you've had the requisite three months since your last hair washing."

"Why don't you save your sarcastic humor for your book? I wouldn't want you to push the wrong button and drive me postal."

Brian nodded. "I think I better just shut up."

"Works for me."

The two trudged silently for the rest of the trip to the car. When they arrived Brian said, "This is it." He surveyed the area around them. No one seemed to be paying attention to them so he pulled his keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door.

Zeke took off his backpack and threw it on the floor in the back seat. "Nice wheels."

"Thanks. They get me where I want to go." He fired up the engine and pulled into the street. A few blocks later the sound of chanting eclipsed the noise of the quietly running motor.

"What's that?" Zeke asked.

"You got me. From the sound of it, we'll find out pretty soon. We seem to be headed straight toward the noise."

The two men kept their eyes peeled as they advanced down the wide street. Two blocks later they encountered picketers on both sides of the street. Brian slowed down and took a quick peek at the signs. Zeke studied them carefully.

Brian shook his head. "Crap. I couldn't read the signs. There's no election this time of year. Did you figure out who that group is and what they're yelling about?"

"It's not a group."

"Of course it was a group. I saw a bunch of people."

"What I mean is that there were two groups. One group had signs up arguing against same sex marriage and the other group had signs supporting it."

"Oh, geez. I should have guessed. What a freaking nightmare!"

"Where do you stand on it?" Zeke asked.

"As far away as I can."

"What does that mean?"

"That means I don't give a rat's derriere one way or another. I just don't want to get caught in the crossfire."

Zeke nodded. "I hear you there. I'm not extremely excited about dying for my own cause. The thought of kicking the bucket because of someone else's crusade is against my religion."

"I didn't think you were religious."

"I deeply believe in the sanctity of life – mine that is. That's a form of religion, don't you think?"

"Whatever. I don't think much about religion. I've got a book to write and dreams to fulfill. Don't have time to think about life after death. Maybe I'll change my tune when I'm rocking away on a front porch in an old folks' home, but for now, I'm focused on the here and now."

"Figures."

"What figures?"

"Why should you be concerned about a better life? You've got a good one right now. Sometimes when life really seems like the pits, I start thinking of the possibilities. My grandma used to jabber on about the mansions that God prepares for His people. Seems to me, it's about my turn to get a mansion."

"Don't hold your breath!" Brian drove in silence for a few blocks. "I figured maybe you'd relate to the gay rights thing."

"Why do you say that?"

"Cause your people went through a struggle to win civil rights."

"My people?"

"Blacks."

"Yeah, I guess. That was before my time. I do see where you're coming from. You think I should be pulling for another underdog to knock the establishment off their perch?"

Brian nodded. "Something like that."

"I guess that thought crossed my mind, but I didn't let it take up residence. I don't have an axe to grind or a horse in this race, but there's just something creepy to me about men being with men and vice versa."

"Vice versa?"

"I mean women with women. It just don't seem natural. Their body parts just ain't made for coming together, if you get my drift."

"Loud and clear. I figure a guy can do what he wants to in his own house, but I'm tired of all the wrangling. I can't open up a newspaper without running into a story about the controversy."

Zeke grinned. "I'll have to take your word on that. Reading newspapers isn't high on my priority list either."

"Speaking of priorities, what's your goal in life, Zeke?"

"At this point, finding my next meal and a dry place to sleep seems to dominate my thinking."

"You're setting your sights awfully low, pathetically low. I want to be famous and have people flock around me asking me for my autograph. In the winter, I want to live in a nice warm place like San Diego or Arizona or something. When the Superbowl or World Series comes, I want to jump into my jet and fly to wherever the

action is. I wanna big boat in which I can entertain my friends out on Puget Sound. I want –"

"Do you have a barf bag in here?"

"Are you sick?" Brian asked.

"I'm getting there. One more sentence out of your mouth, and stuff will be coming out of mine."

"Oh. I get it. My gushing was that bad, huh?"

"Worse. Luckily, I'm a tough guy and can take a lot. So much for your lofty goals of helping the homeless."

"Hey, the fame and fortune will be a byproduct of helping the homeless. OK? Let's change the subject to calm your queasy stomach. Tell me about some of the interesting people down at the shelter."

"Speaking of luckily, one of the regulars is a gambler named Lucky."

"His name is Lucky, and he's homeless?"

"Not everybody lives up to their name. In this case he had a lot of luck – all of it bad. Lost his house in a poker game. Needless to say his wife wasn't very happy."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Go figure."

"She dented his head with a rolling pin. Probably dented the rolling pin as well. As soon as Lucky gets his grubstake, he'll win everything back again."

"That's what they always say. Why can't guys like him get hooked on phonics instead of Texas Holdem?"

Zeke laughed. "Then there's Doc Holiday."

"Doc? Is he a real doc or is he just named after the famous friend of Wyatt Earp?"

"He was a doc. Operated one day under the influence. Patient didn't make it. Big malpractice suit followed and Doc's Wednesday afternoon tee times on the golf course were cancelled for the duration. Now he's just a lush. He'd perform a prefrontal lobotomy on you for a fifth of Jim Beam."

"I'll keep that in mind if I'm ever in the market to have another hole drilled in my head."

Zeke looked Brian over. "I see what you mean. Looks like an oil exploration crew went wildcatting on yours."

"Funny. Stick to the topic at hand, please."

"OK, then there's Nervous Nelly."

"What's her problem?"

"Not a her. I gave him that nickname. He's as nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Reminds me of you."

"Looking over his shoulder for lawmen, maybe?"

"I don't think so. He would have fit in with that group of picketers we just saw."

"Which one?"

"The rainbow ones."

"Oh, so he's gay."

"Yep. He doesn't openly profess it, but I have ways of getting the scoop on people. I suspect he's been beat up a few times as a result."

Brian shook his head. "That'll make a guy nervous. Sounds like I have plenty of material to draw on for my story, especially with Miss Angel around."

"Miss Angel. You plan on putting her in your book?"

"I figure the book should be about her. I'll have her be the heroine of the story. And make it a love story and have her fall in love with the hero."

"Any chance you'll make yourself the hero?"

"What a wonderful idea, Zeke. Maybe you should consider taking up writing."

"If you can do it, I probably could."

"I won't touch that comment with a ten foot pole."

"How about an eleven foot Norwegian?"

Brian glanced away from the road to take a quick glance at Zeke. "Telling ethnic jokes now? That's not politically correct, you know."

"Screw politically correct. I bet the Norwegians are sitting around telling black jokes."

"Not if you're in earshot. They wouldn't want to risk having their lutefisk shoved into places where the sun never shines."

Zeke sculptured his face into a fake pout. "I must have made a miserable first impression on you. You must see me as a creature of habitual violence."

"Duh!"

"Will you ever be able to recognize the gentle heart that beats within this giant frame?"

Brian let out a snort as he pulled the car into a parking lot. "I don't know Gentle Ben, but let's go see if we can find some clothes that will kick start your makeover and cover up that giant frame of yours containing such a sensitive heart."

"Maybe we'll hit the jackpot and there'll be some cast off clothing from one of the Seahawk offensive lineman."

"Now you're dreaming, Zeke. Good for you."

Forty-five minutes later the two men emerged from the store. Zeke carried the plastic sacks that contained his new wardrobe. As

Brian navigated his automobile toward home, Zeke admired his new threads. A short time later when Brian pulled into a driveway, Zeke looked up from his new treasure to discover a large modern home with a two car garage.

"Is this where you live?"

"We."

"You speak French?"

"No. I meant we as in you and I live here."

"Oh, yeah. Dude! I think I've died and gone to Heaven. I've done got my mansion."

"It's no mansion, but it was my dream house at the time."

"What do you do when you're not slumming to pay for something like this?"

"I'm a computer analyst. Come on, let's go in. It's time you get introduced to soap and water."

"And shampoo?" Zeke asked.

"That too."

The two men entered the house and Zeke looked around him in awe. "I never figured I'd ever live in a place like this."

"Just remember the rules or you won't be here for very long."

"Don't worry none about that. I'm in no hurry to get kicked out of the mansion."

Brian laughed. "This is your bedroom. I don't have a bed in here, so you'll have to use an air mattress."

"I don't need no mattress. I've slept on enough cement and hard ground so that this carpet will be like sleeping on feathers."

"You've slept on cement?"

"More than I care to remember. The good news is that you never get up on the wrong side of the bed."

"Or fall out. Sounds like a compelling endorsement to me, but I'll pass it up. Throw your stuff in here. I'll show you where your bathroom is. While you're taking a shower, I'll run your clothes through the washing machine. On second thought, maybe we should throw them away."

"I don't think so. If we're going back to the shelter, I need to fit in."

"True. But you don't have to match everyone else's smell. With all the stench coming from other people down there, I don't think anyone will notice that you don't smell."

"Which means I can't be smelling good either or they'll notice that."

"Makes sense. So no deodorant or bodywash for you when we switch into homeless mode."

Zeke nodded. A few minutes later he was toweling off the beads of water that had adhered to his ample body as he stood under the spray of the showerhead. He donned a pair of his new pants and shirt and stared at himself in the mirror. He let out a war whoop.

A second later Brian called out from the other side of the door. "Are you alright in there?"

Zeke swung the door open. "I'm more than alright. Check out the new man!"

"Clothes do make the man."

"I don't buy that crap, but it certainly don't hurt a guy's self respect to have some decent looking duds."

"I never thought much about it, but I guess I did feel a bit better when I got back into my regular clothes when we got home. I'm going to go work on my book for a while. You can watch TV if you want. I got a bunch of videos you can throw into the DVD player also."

Zeke nodded. Brian showed him to the family room, taught him how to work the DVD player, and left his new bodyguard with eyes happily glued to the TV screen.

Three hours later Brian returned to the television room. "Are you holding up OK?"

Zeke laughed, "Surely you jest."

"Quit calling me Shirley, and no I am not jesting."

"This is the life. I already watched one movie and now I'm halfway through another one."

"Super. Are you getting hungry?"

"Oh, yeah. Television watching is extremely hard work. Show me the kitchen and where you keep stuff, and I'll start whipping up a meal."

Brian shrugged. "OK, it's your picnic and I hope not my funeral."

A few minutes later Brian was back at his computer, trying to focus on the beginning of his novel despite the noise of pans banging from the kitchen. He tried to conjure up the lovely vision of Angel. *How do I capture the essence of her being with mere words?* He was still trying to perfect the section where he introduced the heroine named Angelica when Zeke poked his head in the door.

"Come and get it while it's hot."

Brian took one last look at his computer screen and rose from his chair. "My brain could use a break."

"How's it going?"

"Slow. I have this deep down passion I want to translate into words, but it all seems to be leaking out when I get it down in black and white."

"Sounds like you need different words then."

Brian nodded. "I'm afraid you're right. Let's eat."

The men shuffled into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

Brian looked down at the plate Zeke had dished up for him. "Smells good." He took a bite and chewed.

"Is it alright?"

Brian forked a slab of meat. "It's more than alright. It's downright delicious. Where did you learn to cook like this?"

"Army."

"Really. Why aren't you still in the service?"

Zeke looked at the ceiling. "You might say I wore out my welcome. I got into a few too many fights."

"People complaining about your cooking?"

"No. People disrespecting me in other ways. A guy has to stand up and fight for his honor, you know."

"Not me. I've always believed that the better part of valor is discretion."

Zeke rolled his eyes. "And that getting sand kicked into your face is better than a knuckle sandwich?"

"OK, I'm a coward. I admit it. What more do you want from me?"

"I'd like to see you stand and fight for something."

"Maybe I do my fighting in a different way. Take my book, for instance. It's been said that the pen is mightier than the sword."

"But you're using a computer."

"Come on, Zeke. That cliché doesn't really involve the pen itself. It refers to the impact of the words themselves."

"Yeah, but you're overlooking one key point."

"What's that?"

"Those words are only mightier because they cause more people to rise up and fight. In the end, it's the fighting that matters."

Brian shook his head. "I disagree to a certain extent. Sometimes words prevent or stop fighting. Sometimes words penetrate to men's souls and enable them to understand that their fighting is in vain."

"Good luck, boss man. Your plans are even more ambitious than I suspected. You're going to usher in world peace at the same time you wipe out poverty and entertain people with a delightful love story."

"Boss man?"

"Yes, sir. Don't you like the title?"

"Hmmm. Just don't call me that down at the shelter."

"No worries. Besides, if it I did it down there, people would find it pretty funny that I was calling a mentally defective man boss."

"Probably. As far as the scope of my book, I know you're trying to be sarcastic, but I really don't have such wide reaching goals with this story. Maybe in the sequel."

Zeke laughed. "If there is a sequel."

Brian looked out the window at the sunshine he had missed during his exile to the computer room. "Yeah."

"Are you sure you can get this done with a fulltime job and doing research also?"

"I'm like the little engine that could. I think I can. I think I can. Besides, that's one of the reasons you're here: to push me."

"I kind of get a kick out of leaning on people, so this might be a pleasurable assignment."

"Just don't get sadistic on me. And remember, just like in kindergarten, keep your hands and feet to yourself."

"How am I going to push you then?"

"With your mouth."

Zeke bit his lip. "So I get to bite you —"

"Hands, feet, and teeth to yourself!"

"You're not making it easy. Maybe I'll use psychological manipulation. And I'll withhold food if you don't get your homework done."

"That'll work. Give me some incentive to get my scheduled work count completed."

"Hmm. I have a great incentive for you, but I'm not sure I should let the monster loose."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Miss Angel. What if you fantasize having Miss Angel reading your completed book? Will that jumpstart you?"

"Dude, that'll put me into warp speed. And I won't fantasize. She will read this when I finish."

"Sure. Brain-damaged Bob is going to walk up to the pretty lady at the rescue shelter, plop a book in front of her and say, 'This is a book I wrote. Please, pretty please, read it just for me.'"

"Who says I have to stay Bob all the time? In fact I can volunteer to work down there at the shelter just like she does and do some of my research from the other side of the garbage pail."

"I suppose you can try that approach. It might improve your book. Doubtful that you'll get to first base with Miss Angel. There

have been horny dudes like you hanging out there before to impress her. She dispatches them with ease."

"Horny? Come on, Zeke. This is not a sexual attraction. I'm in love."

"Yeah. Whatever."

"No, not whatever. This is something very specific. I am in love with the lady."

"Love at first sight, huh?"

"That's right."

"You're shallower than I thought. Your root system is barely below the surface."

"That's not fair. She is absolutely gorgeous so the physical attraction is obvious, but there is something about her voice and the light in her eyes that makes my Geiger counter go off."

"Fine. Your Richter scale can go off the charts, and it ain't going to help you."

"Why do you say that?"

"First of all, you're not exactly a heartthrob hunk, but that wouldn't matter to Angel. What does matter is God. I overheard her talking to a friend one night, and she said that she wouldn't marry someone who was not on fire for God."

"On fire for God. What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm not exactly sure myself. What I am sure is that it doesn't mean atheist."

Brian threw up his hands. "I'm not an atheist. I'm an agnostic."

"What's the difference?"

"An agnostic just believes that we can't know for sure if there is a God."

"Same thing to Miss Angel. You gotta love her God with your whole heart and soul or you'll never get her to love you."

Brian made a face. "Great. Now what do I do?"

"You don't have to take my word for it, but I think you'll save yourself some heartache down the line if you just forget about her."

Brian broke into an unmelodious version of *Achey Breaky Heart*.

"One more thing, boss. Don't try to serenade anybody, unless you're trying to ditch them."

"Everybody's a freaking comedian."

Zeke grinned. "And some people just present a natural target for them."

"Screw you. I'm going in to watch the news."

"Nothing good on."

"Probably not, but I like to keep up on all the crap going on around me."

Zeke shrugged. "It's your TV. You won't get much writing done that way though."

"It will only take a few minutes to digest the news. Then I'll get my butt in the computer chair, slave driver."

"Slave driver? You're the boss man, at least while we're in the house."

"That's right. And now I'm going to watch my TV."

"And I'll do the dishes."

Brian shook his head. "Never in a million years would I have pictured you doing dishes at my house after the rude greeting you gave me downtown."

"That makes two of us."

Brian departed into the living room. A few minutes later he screamed out a summons for Zeke to join him in the family room.

Zeke sprinted into the room. "What's the matter?" He slammed on the brakes when he saw the TV. "Hey, those are –"

"Shh." Brian cranked the sound up.

"There was an ugly confrontation down on Center Street today. A group of people opposing same-sex marriage picketed in front of one of the local businesses, which turns out to be owned by one of the protestors. On the other side of the street, rival picketers appeared and began yelling discouraging words at their counterparts. Things were fairly peaceful until a militant gay group called the Rainbow Warriors appeared and began throwing things. Police were called in to quell the disturbance. Three of those opposed to same-sex marriage were injured by flying debris. They were taken to a local hospital –"

"No!" Brian ran to the screen and pointed. "Is that who I think it is?"

Zeke nodded. "If you're thinkin' that was Miss Angel, I'm thinkin' you're right."

## Chapter 4

Brian paced back and forth. "What in the devil is she doing down there risking her pretty neck? She could have been one of those taken to the hospital. I wonder how they are."

"We might have found out if you'd kept your mouth shushed like you told me to."

"So sue me. I just had a kneejerk reaction when I saw Angel."

Zeke clenched his fist. "Did you see those thugs? Rainbow Warriors my achin' butt. Terrorizing a bunch of women and teenagers isn't the work of warriors. I'd love to bash a couple of those heads together."

"That would put a new spin on the term 'gay bashing.'"

"I don't know about that, but their heads would be spinning."

"I believe you. It's time I find out more about that group. I don't like the idea of Angel standing in the way of those guys getting what they want, whatever that is." Brian headed to his computer.

\* \* \*

Zeke dropped in after he finished the dishes. "What did you find out about those turkeys?"

"They may be birds but not turkeys, I'm afraid. More like vultures. They're anarchists. Look at this principle they live by: 'Do not condemn a fighting technique on the grounds that the government interprets it as illegal.' These guys are loose cannons, and Angel is in range of their mortars. Look at this slogan they use about insurrection."

"Hold on. Maybe this was just an isolated incident. Don't get yourself all worked up over nothing."

"Listen, dude, what part of 'I'm in love with her' did you not comprehend? I wasn't joking around. If something happens to her, I might explore some illegal tactics myself."

Zeke laughed "You? Mister Afraid of His Own Shadow?"

"I'm only afraid when I'm not madder than a New York Yankee fan at World Series time. I tell you what I'm going to do. Tomorrow I'm going back to the shelter as Brian and not Bob. And I've going to warn Miss Angel to stay away from the front lines."

"That ought to be interesting."

"I'm glad you think so. Now perhaps you can get out of my hair so I can get back to my novel."

"I can take a hint. It's time I checked out that bedroom. I haven't had a good night's sleep in a long time."

"I forgot to ask you if you snore."

"Like a freight train."

Brian looked up at the ceiling.

"Good night, boss."

"Yeah, pleasant dreams."

Brian stared at his computer screen for several minutes trying to exorcise his mind of the visions of the fracas from the nightly newscast. The demon wouldn't leave. After struggling to bang out a few unsatisfactory paragraphs, he dragged himself off to his bedroom. After closing the door and turning on some music to drown out the freight train, Brian rolled into bed. Sleep claimed him, but not without a lot of thought about the honey-haired woman who had turned his life upside down.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Brian awoke to the smell of bacon cooking. It took him a minute before he came to full consciousness and realized that he now had a roommate who cooked. The temptation of his body to stay in bed was overruled by the growling of his stomach. He jumped out of bed, donned casual attire, and strolled into the kitchen.

"It's about time you got up, Sleeping Beauty."

"What happened to boss? I think I like that one better."

"You'll get lots of names from me. When you sleep this late, you get a name like Sleeping Beauty instead."

"Why not Rip Van Winkle instead?" Brian asked.

"Because Rip was a man. You're a pansy."

Brian rolled his eyes. "I'll probably get an identity crisis from you. Multiple personality syndrome or something like that. Move over Sybil, all sixteen, or however many personalities she had. Here I come."

"I don't get it?"

"Another wasted joke. Oh well, I'll just have to keep my humor down at the street level for you."

"I do believe there's an old expression about not biting the hand that feeds you."

Brian looked into the frying pans, one laden with bacon and eggs and the other holding a pancake that was golden brown.

"Sorry, I take it back. I have to remember that our academic backgrounds are quite dissimilar, and you won't understand a lot of references that I might make."

"I can say the same thing myself."

"Yes, you can. I admit I'm quite ignorant when it comes to your world."

"So, just don't stand there. Grab a chair and dig into this food I'm about to put in front of you."

"You won't have to ask me twice."

The odor of the bacon and eggs tantalized Brian's nostrils as he buttered his pancake. "Another fine job by the new cook."

"Did you expect less? Do you have big plans today for hammering out a zillion words on your computer?"

Brian laughed. "I'm a pretty ambitious guy, but a zillion goes beyond even my goals. Besides, I'm going back to the shelter to see Angel."

"Maybe."

"What do you mean, maybe? I'm going."

"You can go, but that doesn't necessarily mean you'll see her. I neglected to tell you that sometimes she doesn't show up on Sundays."

"Great." Brian bit his lip. "No matter. I gotta give it shot. I'm going down there as myself. Are you coming with me?"

"I don't mind being seen with a mentally defective bum, but I'm not sure I want my reputation soiled by being seen with a dude like you."

Brian's face reddened. "Wait, you're just playing with me again. Besides, we really shouldn't be seen together. I'll drop you off at our parking spot and you can walk over. I'll park the car right next to the shelter."

"That's no fair! Why should I have to wear out my shoes and legs walking a marathon?"

"A marathon is twenty-six miles. You'll be walking about 600 yards. And you call me a wimp."

"Well, you are one."

"Whatever. You don't have to go with me. Of course, if I get killed because you're not there to protect me, you'll be back out on the streets again."

Zeke looked around the room. "That's true. This place is starting to grow on me. I've come to the conclusion that most bums can get some self-respect back if you put them in the right environment."

"I noticed that your attitude has undergone a transformation with the new clothes and getting cleaned up. You're not the wild man that I first met. I'm getting a little worried that you'll get too tame here and won't want to go back to the shelter to keep me protected."

"I think that is supposed to be a compliment. As far as me going back to the shelter, I have a bunch of friends down there I'd like to see. It's really comfortable and peaceful here, and I could really get off on hanging out here, but there's one thing I want you to know about me."

"Just one thing?"

"One for now. Despite being a homeless bum and craving what ordinary people have, I've always had it in the back of my head that people spend their lives seeking comfort, but that there should be more to life. People should have more purpose than just surrounding themselves with stuff that makes them feel good."

"You're quite the philosopher."

Zeke grinned. "Living on the streets gives you a whole new outlook on life."

"I'm starting to get that picture. Hopefully I won't have to subject myself to this ordeal long enough that I become an expert on the subject."

Zeke nodded. "I would second that motion because I don't want to be wet nurse to no wimp for an extended period of time. However, I must point out that if you want to write a convincing book, you need to get into the part of a homeless person. Dressing up like one and eating at the same table with transients is not going to give you the right stuff for your book. You need to somehow feel what they feel. Experience the desperation of not having security in your life. You need to lose your safety net."

"Are you saying I should let you lock me out of my house, and I should fend for myself so instead of being a fake, I'm the real deal?"

"Appealing idea, but I'm afraid that won't work. First of all, you won't survive without me. And also you need to come back here to write your book. What I'm saying is that you need to empathize with these people as you're breaking bread with them. Don't just look at the rags they wear on the outside, but look into their hearts and get a real education."

"You surprise me again, Zeke. That is very perspicacious of you."

"Hold on. I might be smarter than you thought, but I don't have a big vocabulary like a fancy-pants writer like yourself."

"You don't know what the word surprise means?"

"Funny! I was referring to that word that sounded like perspiration."

Brian grinned. "Perspicacious means insightful. In other words you have a very valid point. If I'm going to grab the hearts and minds of my readers, I have to first capture the spirit of the people I'm writing about."

"Is there an echo in here?"

Brian laughed. "OK, I'll give you the credit for the idea, but I think I would have come to that realization on my own at some point."

"I'm not convinced."

Brian pressed his hands against his heart.

"What's the matter? Your ticker giving you a problem?"

"You wounded me."

"What? With that little stab I penetrated to your heart? You better get a thicker skin, dude. Only the strong survive. You need to get some calluses."

"Over my heart?"

Zeke nodded. "Especially if you're going to get notions about sweeping Miss Angel off her feet. She's grounded way too firmly for that to happen."

"Time will tell, my friend."

"Are we friends?"

Brian studied Zeke's face. "I'm not sure what we are yet. I think the 'Odd Couple' fits at this point in time."

"Definitely an odd couple. One skinny white coward and one robust black stud."

"Do you want to be friends with me?"

Zeke shrugged. "What is a friend? That word gets slung around pretty loosely, I'm a thinkin'."

"You're probably right. I've never stopped to ponder that. I have lots of friends at the YMCA and at work, but yet are they really friends, or just people that I communicate with?"

"Would any of them stand up with you in a fight?"

Brian swallowed a mouthful of eggs. "The people I hang out with are not in the habit of brawling."

"There's more than one type of fighting."

"True. Sometimes we get some doozies at the office when we get into the conference room. I guess most of the people I know would stand by me as long as it benefitted them but otherwise . . .

."

Zeke flipped another pancake onto Brian's plate. "There you go. That's not a real friend."

Brian nodded as he chewed.

Zeke poured the batter for another pancake. "I've committed myself to protecting you. If a fight breaks out, I'll have your backside."

"Well, I guess you're a friend, then, according to your definition."

"Not quite. Friendship is a mutual thing."

"Are you wondering if I'll stand up and fight if you're the one who's in trouble?"

"My, aren't you perspicacious?"

Brian laughed. "Looks like somebody learned a new word today."

"You got that right. And you better remember that I'm a fast learner. But you've changed the subject away from friendship and fighting."

Brian scooped another forkful of eggs into his mouth and stared out the window as he gummed it. He turned back to Zeke and found a captive audience. He blew out a sigh. "I just don't like fighting."

"I know. I had you pegged right from the beginning."

"Zeke, you want follow some of your own advice?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You said something about empathizing with people and look into their hearts and get a real education. Maybe you should try looking past my ninety-eight pound weakling frame and seeing who I am inside."

"That won't be easy."

"Just try to imagine yourself at half your size. Would you still be so hung up on fighting if you weren't physically superior to most of the men you run into?"

"Maybe you have a point there, boss. Maybe I wouldn't be so violent. But on the other hand, she had a wart."

"What?"

"That was a joke and a way of stalling because I wasn't sure what I was going to say after that. If a man starts thinking too much about what's inside him, he'll go crazy. You know, thinking about what might have happened. Like a football coach agonizing over things his team did wrong. If only we hadn't fumbled in the first quarter or if we'd scored that touchdown instead of settling for a field goal. Do you know what I mean?"

Brian nodded. "Yeah. I believe you're right that thinking too much causes pain. I think the alternative though is just as bad. If you don't think at all, you'll never grow as a person."

"I grew quite a bit without thinking."

"I wasn't talking about the inches in your waistline."

Zeke grinned. "I was afraid of that."

"You talk like you know something about football. Did you play?"

"It was my claim to fame. I played some college ball, but I wasn't good enough to go pro. Ended up in the army after my eligibility was gone. Never did get my degree."

"Ever think of going back?"

"To the army?"

"No, to school."

Zeke snorted. "With what, my good looks? It costs a fortune to go to college these days."

"True. You screwed up by not getting your degree when you were playing football."

Zeke slammed another pancake onto Brian's plate. "Tell me something I don't know already."

"That's enough pancakes for me. Sorry, it looks like I hit a nerve. If it's any consolation, I've done some stupid things in my life, too, that I wish I could take back. Life doesn't give you mulligans, though."

"Why are you bringing fish into the conversation?"

"Fish?" Brian eyebrows arched for a moment and then dropped down. "Oh, you're confused with mullets. A mulligan is a golf term for getting to hit a second shot when you choke the first one."

"Oh. In that case, I could use lots of mulligans. But why are we talking about it, if we can't have any? What time we going to the shelter?"

"Let's leave at 11:30."

Zeke nodded. "That'll give me time to watch another movie."

"And change back into your shelter costume."

"Costume?"

"Yeah. Today you'll be the one playing homeless."

Zeke shook his head. "It's not like I really have a home. This is just another stopping off place. It just happens to be a little nicer than most of the rest of them."

Brian studied Zeke's expression. *What would it be like if I was really homeless? I need to put my feet into Zeke's shoes and see*

*what it feels like to never be able to say 'there is no place like home.'*

\* \* \*

At the appointed time, Brian and Zeke loaded up the car and headed to the shelter. Brian wore dress slacks, a crisply pressed shirt and a tie.

"Who you trying to impress with the choker? Folks at the shelter aren't going to think highly of you 'cause you're dressed up."

"What about Angel?"

"She probably likes people looking neat, but she's not shallow enough to think that clothes make the man."

"Yeah. You've given me that impression. I'll just have to let Angel see past the clothes."

Zeke looked over Brian's physique. "I know Angel's not going to fall for that approach."

"If she can't fall in love with my heart, then I'm totally hosed."

Zeke blinked and then let out a horse laugh.

Brian bit his lip. "Why are you laughing at my sad plight? It's bad enough being in love without somebody making fun of your condition."

"I wasn't laughing at your situation. I was laughing because I was referring to you letting Angel see on the other side of your clothing. And there's only one thing worse than a skinny white man."

"Oh, boy. I've opened up a can of worms here. Do I dare ask what that one thing is?"

"Be brave. For once in your life, be bold. Go for it!"

Brian shook his head. "Whatever. What's worse than a skinny white man, two skinny white men?"

"Nice try. A skinny white man with no clothes on."

"I think I've heard enough of your white man jokes. And your skinny jokes too. I'd like you to know that some people find my physique attractive."

"Looks like I've found a nerve now."

"Yeah, Zeke, you have. I try to hide this nerve, but it's there. I wasn't a big football star like you because my body was undersized. I compensated by using my brain. You should try it sometime."

"Now you're hitting below the belt. Good thing I'm wearing a cast iron jockstrap."

"And another thing, big guy. My body is in good shape. I workout at the Y regularly and even lift weights. Just because my metabolism is high and I can't put on any weight doesn't make me less of a man."

The two were silent for a moment. Zeke stared out the window at the buildings they passed. When the car stopped for a red light, he turned back to Brian. "I guess friends try not to step on their friend's nerves."

"I truly believe that you don't have to walk on eggshells when you're talking to a real friend, but you definitely don't want to expose nerve endings. Maybe a really good friend goes out of his way, to cover up those nerves."

"Sorry, I made fun of your physique."

Brian sighed. "That's OK. I'm kind of used to it. Sorry I belittled you in any way."

"Maybe I could use a little belittling. Around the waistline, anyway."

Brian held his hand out.

"What's that for?"

"A handshake on friendship."

Zeke grimaced. "It's one thing to not stomp on people's nerves but we don't have to get all touchy and feely, do we? I'm not comfortable with that type of stuff."

"I hear you. I'm not too crazy about it myself. This is just a handshake of friendship."

"Friends, huh? Well, just don't ask me to become your blood brother. I ain't cutting no holes in my body for nobody. I suppose I better shake your paw so you can get it back on the steering wheel so you don't kill both of us."

"I can drive with one hand. Just don't squeeze too hard when you shake or that might send us headfirst into a tree."

Zeke gingerly put his hand around Brian's and swallowed it up. "Maybe, but I like seeing both hands on the wheel, especially for a skin –". He pulled his hand back. "Sorry, it's hard to break old habits."

Brian looked over at him. "What other old habits do you have that you need to break?"

"I'm not telling you, and I also prefer eyes on the road. You don't have to look at me when you talk."

"I can do that. It's not like it's a big treat to look at your ugly . . . . Oops, now I'm doing it too."

Zeke shrugged. "Maybe we should just not worry about it. If we're really friends, we should be able to say just about anything to each other without worrying"

"I'm not sure I buy that, but within reason, that ought to work. In that case, you seem to be almost neurotic about automobiles. What's up with that?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Nerve, huh?"

"There's nerves and then there's super nerves. This one would be a super nerve."

Brian rolled his eyes. "You're killing me here. Now I'm going to wonder all day and maybe longer about what happened to you in an automobile." He looked over at Zeke who had closed his eyes and seemed to be in a state of mental anguish.

Zeke's eyes fluttered open and then widened instantly just before the screaming began. "Brian! You're going to run a red light!"

Brian wheeled his eyes back to the road and then slammed on his brakes. The squealing of tires rang in his ears as the car slid to a halt just past the line which indicated the stopping zone. A car barreled through the intersection directly in front of them. Brian checked the rear view mirror quickly and slammed the car into reverse, backing up far enough to get them behind the line. "See what you did by not telling me about your bad experience."

Zeke's voice did not hide his agitation. "You're blaming me? You should be thanking me for saving your life. That car would have plowed right into your door."

Brian contemplated that vision as his heart rate began to return to normal. "You're right. Thank you."

"When I took the job as your bodyguard, I didn't realize I'd have to help you drive the car to keep you alive."

"I'm a very good driver. My attention got a bit derailed by your reaction to the automobile question."

"You're not going to rest until you know the juicy details, are you?"

Brian shook his head. "Probably not."

"My mother was killed in a car accident. The driver was changing the radio station and went through a stop sign. The car that hit them was coming from the passenger side. She never had a chance."

"Oh, gosh, Zeke. I'm sorry. I wouldn't have pried this out of you if I'd known how serious it was. You weren't driving, were you?"

"No. I was in the back seat. My old man was behind the wheel."

"Did you guys get hurt?"

"I got banged up pretty good. I was in the hospital when my grandma told me the old man had disappeared."

"Your dad vanished?"

Zeke bit his lip. "That's what I said. My grandma took me in and raised me."

"Your dad never came back?"

"Never laid eyes on the SOB again. Now, you may be the boss man, but I'm giving you an order, or call it a rule if you prefer. Don't you ever dare bring up the topic of my old man ever again! Do you read me loud and clear?"

## Chapter 5

Brian could feel Zeke's eye's burning into his flesh. He didn't take his eyes off the road as he stepped on the accelerator. "I can take a subtle hint. I promise I won't go there, unless you bring up the topic."

"Good, I hate to wring the neck of a friend. Rest assured that I won't ever bring up the topic. I'd rather bring up my breakfast, which I might do that if you don't stop scaring the crap out of me. Do all white men drive like this?"

"Hey, I took my eye off the road for one second. It could happen to anyone no matter what color their skin is. Why are you always bringing up the subject of race? I don't think of you as being black, except when you bring up the whitey thing all the time."

"My bad. You can't help it if you're a paleface."

"Why do you use an Indian word? You made me think of Soaring Eagle."

Zeke laughed "Another 'my bad.' That guy really has you buffaloed, huh?"

"Good choice of terms. He does have my attention."

"Maybe you should write him into your book."

"Maybe you better stick to being my body guard and not my literary caddy."

Zeke guffawed. "You might need me for both."

"Perhaps you'd like your name on the cover as the co-author?"

"Hmmm. And my name on the contract to rake in the big bucks, also?"

"Now you really are turning into a dreamer."

"You encouraged me to."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Keep it under control. Don't think about things that can't possibly happen – like seeing your name in big letters on my book."

"Oh, our names will be in small letters?"

"Funny. Your name might appear in the acknowledgement section where I thank the people that made it all possible."

"I see which way the wind is blowing. How come you get to daydream impossible things, but I can't?"

Brian quickly glanced at his passenger. "Such as?"

Zeke pointed to the road, and Brian directed his gaze in front of the car again. "Such as Miss Angel. You ain't never gonna win her heart."

"Up yours. I'm not listening to your doubting Thomas talk any more. You don't have control over what Angel does in her life. I do have control over who is credited as the author of my book. And you won't be there, for sure, so you see I'm not doubtful. It's simply a fact."

"There's our parking place."

Brian pulled in and let Zeke out. Before closing the door, Zeke said, "If you're lucky, I'll be able to walk six blocks before someone puts a knife into you about six inches. You might want to rethink that tie thing. It's kind of like painting a bull's-eye on your back."

"I'll consider your words of wisdom for a while. There, that's long enough. Now close the door please so I can carry out my mission of love."

Brian heard Zeke muttering something about stupid Cupid as he slammed the door. He navigated the six blocks to the front of the rescue mission and pulled into a parking spot. *One good thing about shelters is that the customers don't take up parking spots.*

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The doors apparently had not been opened yet because people milled on the sidewalk outside. Brian debated whether he should stay in the car or not. *If somebody really wants to hurt me, the glass between me and them probably wouldn't provide more than a delay. I might as well stand by the door.*

He got out and sauntered to the door. Zeke had warned him about looking people in the eye. As a result he just glanced to his left and right. That brief look was all it required to make him aware that people were staring at him. The last time he was here, he was one of the hungry. Now he was a rich man with a shiny car and fancy clothes. A feeling of being out of place struck him like a bolt from heaven. Just as he was wondering if his brave stupidity, or was it stupid bravery, was worth the risk, the answer to his question arrived. A small automobile slid into the parking spot next to his. The golden tresses of the driver sparkled in the sunshine that penetrated the driver's window. Brian's heart rate skyrocketed as if he had been subjected to electric shock.

*It ought to be against the law to be so beautiful.* He tried not to stare as she approached the door. *Could she possibly recognize me? Nah. What will be the first words I speak to her as Brian?*

*They've got to be something powerful, something awe inspiring, something –*

"You must be new here?"

He turned and looked at the woman he'd been fantasizing about for the last twenty-four hours. She looked just as enticing today in no way diminishing the ardor of his infatuation. "Why do you say that?"

"Only rookies come down here with a tie on. They soon learn that their attire is not going to win friends and influence down here."

Brian felt the heat rush into his face. He stammered out a lame excuse just as someone opened the doors from the inside.

*Wonderful first impression I'm making. Maybe I should have written a script for this scene. Somehow I don't think Angel would follow the script.*

He held the door for her to enter. He was about to follow when a parade of hungry humans began their march to the lunchroom. Emotional rockets exploded inside him as he held the door while all the people whom he would not have hired to mow his lawn took advantage of his courtesy. His tongue was almost cleaved in two as he bit down to avoid a nasty comment that might make him the object of someone's physical wrath. *Some of these people think they're better than me. Unbelievable! I got more respect dressed in my glad rags.* The last man in the line went through the door, and Brian prepared to make his own entrance. Before he accomplished that mission, a familiar voice from behind stopped him in his tracks.

"I see you added a new title to your résumé."

Brian looked up to see Zeke grinning at him. He looked around and saw that Zeke and he were alone. "And what title would that be?"

"Doorman at the Ritz Rescue Mission."

Brian held up a finger. "Remember, we don't know each other."

"Don't worry. I'm cool."

"And you can go back to playing the tough guy role instead of comedian."

"Maybe I should start with you and use your tie to do rope tricks, while you're still in it."

Another old man shuffled toward them. Zeke stood aside. Brian backed up and held the door open for the newcomer. After the potential eavesdropper had gone inside, Brian closed the door and turned back to Zeke. "She's here."

"I know. Her car's parked next to yours."

"Oh, yeah."

"Did she see you?"

"Even talked to me."

"She probably mentioned your tie."

Brian coughed. "I'm going in. I need to help serve." He grabbed the door and pulled it open.

Zeke cleared his throat.

Brian looked back at him and then threw his head up toward the sky. He stepped back and held the door as Zeke promenaded through like nobility being announced at the royal court. Brian followed up behind him and strode past. He went straight to Angel's side.

"Excuse me, miss, are you in charge of things here?"

A musical laugh rippled the air. "No, sir. That would be the man over there in the green shirt." She pointed. "Are you going to help us serve?"

"If you need my help."

"Usually we have plenty but one regular couple is out of town this weekend. You might be in luck."

*In luck to be able to dish out food to transients? I never thought that idea would have any merit.* "Cool."

"Do I know you from somewhere? You look familiar."

"This is the first time that Brian Anderson has ever been here."

"I assume that you're Brian Anderson?"

Brian smiled. "You must be psychic. At your service."

"Thanks for the insult. Psychics are an abomination to me."

*How do I get my foot out of my mouth?* "Sorry, it was meant as a joke."

"No problem. My name is Angel."

Brian started to tell her he was already aware of that fact but stopped himself in mid thought. *I can't know who she is since this is my first time here.* "Nice to meet you, Angel. I better get to work."

"Right. Nice to meet you, too. Enjoy your visit."

Brian walked over to the man in the green tee-shirt. Within a couple of minutes, he was commissioned to dish out gravy. The good news was that Angel stood next to him in line at the potato pan.

As the hungry crowd made their way past the two, Brian attempted to keep up with his work while getting in a word with Angel when he could. The opportunities were few in number because Angel seemed to have something to say to every patron. She seemed to know almost all of the clientele by name.

Brian's mind froze, along with his blood, when he heard Angel say, "Soaring Eagle. So good to see you. Blessed Sunday to you." She reached over and patted his arm.

Brian's jealousy meter shot up to the top. It had competition from other warning systems in his body when the Native American held his plate out for gravy. Brian tried to avoid the piercing brown eyes which somehow had a greenish tinge to them, but made contact anyway. Shivers zinged down his spine.

"I don't remember your name, but we've met before," Soaring Eagle said.

Brian decided not to speak unless necessary and just shook his head.

Angel came to his rescue. "This is Brian. It's his first day with us."

Brian felt Soaring Eagle's eyes though he refused to look up to ensure himself that the sensation was not his imagination.

"Hmm. The spirit tells me I've met this man before."

Brian shrugged and refilled his gravy ladle to be ready for the next person in line. He looked up to see Zeke grinning at him.

"Nice tie, dude. It goes really well with your shirt."

Angel interrupted again. "Zeke. Good to see you. Do you know Brian?"

"Miss Angel. It's always a delight to see you. You know me well enough to know that I'd never claim knowing some fancy pants who wears ties."

Angel's laugh chimed again. "I have a feeling that Brian won't have his on next time he comes down here to work, if there is a next time."

*You've got that right. I've got more grief over this tie than some celebrity that get's picked up on a DUI. I love hearing that laugh of hers, but not at my expense.*

Zeke got his topping for his potatoes and started moving again. "Thanks for the gravy, Brad."

"Brian. The name is Brian." *He's really enjoying this little game of cat and mouse. It isn't much fun being the mouse. Maybe someday I'll get to be the cat, and we'll see how he likes it.*

When everyone had been served, Brian turned to Angel. "By the way, I wanted to leave a donation to help pay for the food that the mission provides. Can I give that to you?"

"Sorry again. Try the woman in the red Nebraska sweatshirt."

Brian scanned the lunchroom. "OK, I see her. I'll catch her later. What can I do to help now?"

"You can help me scrape plates and stack trays."

"That would be my pleasure." *Now I'm getting somewhere.*

"I know you'll hate to cover up that beautiful tie, but you'd better get an apron on for this dirty chore. Stay right here, and I'll bring you one."

Brian nodded. He looked around the room. As his eye fell on Soaring Eagle, the man turned and stared at Brian who quickly averted his gaze. *I swear there was electricity passing between us. I've only had that happen with beautiful women in the past. What is up with that?*

Before he could dwell on that phenomenon, Angel returned with his apron. He acted like he didn't know how to put it on, so that the beautiful woman had to give him assistance. Chills went up his body when her fingertips made contact with his.

As they scraped leftovers into the garbage, Brian kept up an almost steady conversation. "So your husband doesn't mind you coming down here to work?"

Angel shook her head. A sick feeling went through Brian's internal plumbing. *Please tell me you're not married*

"I'm not married."

*Yes! Poor baby.* Brian felt the relief pour through his pores. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"You're sorry I'm not married?"

"That sounds weird doesn't it? I didn't exactly mean that. I guess I asked the wrong question. Your boyfriend must not mind your coming down here?"

She shook her head again. Brian held his breath for her to say that she didn't have one of those either.

"Mr. Anderson, maybe I can save you some time. Unless I'm mistaken, you seemed poised on the threshold of asking me for a date."

For some reason the term 'the blush on the rose' went through Brian's brain as his blood rocketed upward. *Why don't I just get a little sign to carry around in my pocket that says 'guilty as charged' that I can hold up at times like this?* After a couple of failed attempts to form meaningful sounds, Brian said, "Was I that obvious?"

"I'm a pro at this game. I've been hit on by more men than the strength meter at a carnival. It's not hard to see it coming. Dating is not in my repertoire of hobbies."

"You don't want to get married?"

"Au contraire, Pierre. I would love to get married."

Brian's face contorted. "How is that going to happen if you don't date?"

"God will tell me when my husband comes along."

"Excuse me. Do you think God is going to tap you on the shoulder when you meet Mr. Wonderful and say, 'this is the one, Angel'?"

"I'm not going to put God in a box and dictate how he'll do it, but it's been prophesied over me that God will reveal my future husband to me."

"And then you'll date?"

"And then I'll get married. Why date when I've found the one that God meant for me?"

"Maybe the man will need a little time to come to the realization he wants to marry you."

Angel shrugged. "Not if he's listening to God."

"So obviously God didn't tap you on the shoulder when you met me?"

"No. Sorry."

*Not as sorry as I am. What would I do if she had said yes? Holy crap! This gal is not having a blond moment. She's having a blond life. I need to visit the powder room. Do I even want to bring up the gay thing? Oh, well. I'll probably never talk to her again, so I better warn her while I can. "Is there any chance I saw you on television last night on a news story about —"*

"You're not the first person to ask me that today. Yes, that was me. I mean that was I."

"I'm not worried about your grammar, but I am worried about your safety. Do you know how dangerous some of those people are?"

"Which people?"

"The Rainbow Warriors."

Angel nodded. "I'm not oblivious of their mission."

"And you're not afraid?"

"Look, Brian, I really appreciate your concern, but God will watch over me, unless it serves his purpose that I am hurt."

*OK, now I'm convinced this woman is certifiably crazy. How do I respond to a comment like that? "It must be nice to have so much trust."*

"It is wonderful. Obviously you haven't got it if you're questioning it."

"Afraid not."

"Do you believe in God?"

Brian shrugged. "It's an open question for me. I'd like to, but I don't see any proof of a deity."

"Depends where you look. You're not going to find him looking in the wrong places."

"Or wrong faces?"

Angel nodded. "That too. God is like a woman. He wants to be pursued. Jesus said, 'Seek and ye shall find. Knock and the door will be opened to you.' If you hang around with a bunch of doubters, you'll never seek the truth."

"Is that the Christian version of 'if you want to soar with the eagles, don't roost with the turkeys'?" *Soar with the eagles? Where did that come from?* He looked over at Soaring Eagle again. *This guy is the raspberry seed in my wisdom tooth.*

"You might say that."

Brian watched Soaring Eagle get up and head toward them. "Well, it's been nice chatting with you, Angel. I hope you're right about your God looking out for you. I'd hate to see such a pretty lady get hurt."

"Thank you. I don't really appreciate compliments about my beauty, since God is the one who made me the way I am. Your wishes for my safety are appreciated."

Brian ditched his apron and made his escape before Soaring Eagle arrived. After getting Zeke's attention and giving him a surreptitious signal that he was ready to leave, Brian returned to his car and drove back to the pickup spot for Zeke. After an extended wait, the bodyguard made his appearance.

"What took you so long? It's only six blocks."

"You didn't want me to rush, did you? I might have suffered from indigestion or something."

"Whatever. I really don't care about your intestinal tract right now. It's my indigestion that I'm worried about."

Zeke got into the car, and Brian pulled out into traffic. Zeke snapped his seatbelt shut. "Went oh for with Miss Angel, huh?"

"What do you mean oh for?"

"It's a sports term. Zero for the number of times you try something – like shoot a basketball, or at bats in baseball, or passing in football or –"

"I got the point. I went oh for one I guess. But that's OK. The woman is loony. A sandwich short of picnic. Her elevator doesn't go all the way to the top. Bats in her belfry. Choose the cliché of the day to fit the situation. She's bonkers, and I was wasting my time down there today."

Zeke shrugged. "I don't want to tell you that I told you so, but you know I did tell you."

"Yes, you did, and now I finally believe you. She thinks God is going to tell her who to marry. What a waste of beauty! Let's drop the subject and never bring it up again."

"Never?"

"You don't talk about Angel, and I won't talk about your father."

"I don't have a father."

Brian nodded. "And I don't have a guardian angel."

"Fine, but before I drop the subject, Miss Angel isn't crazy. I know her better than that."

"Think what you want to. And I'll think what I desire."

Zeke scratched his head. "You want to think Angel is crazy?"

"No. I don't want to, but I can't avoid it."

"Suit yourself. I'm relieved that I don't have to worry about it anymore."

Brian snorted. "What were you worried about?"

"I saw two people involved that I like. I didn't want either one of them getting hurt."

"I'm extremely relieved to find out my bodyguard doesn't want me to get hurt. That means we have one major thing in common. But one thing is clear here, I've already been hurt by this."

"How?"

"My dream just died."

"Wow, your twenty-four-hour goal just went up in smoke."

"Don't make fun of me, Zeke!"

"I'm not. I'm just trying to make you see that you were the crazy one to start dumping all your eggs in a basket that you couldn't see or feel the bottom of."

"Maybe you're right. That was crazy. I set myself up for a fall."

"And winter, too."

Brian coughed. "Not a good time for the comedy routine. You're just going to piss me off by trying to cheer me up. OK?"

"Yes, boss!"

"I'm glad that's settled. Now I concentrate on my real dream."

"Your book?"

"Exactly."

"Are you going to have to write Angel out of it?"

"What for?"

"She's crazy, in your opinion. Remember?"

"Perfect. People love to read about wackos. Look at Boo Radley in *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* and on and on. Deranged people make great novel characters. I don't recommend them for spouses though. Speaking of spouses, I didn't see your lady friend at the shelter today."

"I don't have a lady friend."

"Bull hockey. That lady with the three kids draws your eyes like flowers draw honeybees."

"Someone told me her hubby convinced her to go home and give him one more chance. If he messes with her or the kids again, she's out of there for good. And I might have to step in to convince him to stay away."

"Isn't that something the courts should do?"

"In theory, maybe. In real life lots of women are killed every year by a husband who was forbidden to go near her by the courts. Those restraining orders don't mean crap to a bad guy."

"You amaze me, Zeke. I had you pegged for a real tough guy, but you're actually a softy. You may do some things that are wrong, but you have definite ideas about good and evil."

"Yes, I do. And beating up a woman is among the crimes that put a guy on my 'S' list."

"I'll try to refrain from doing that while you're staying with me."

"You better."

"Lighten up, Zeke. I don't hammer on women."

"Most of them are stronger than you are."

"Keep it up, new buddy, and you might be on my 'S' list."

"That's a thought that would keep me from sleeping at night."

NOT!"

"Just remember, you live at my house. I could slip into your room while you're sleeping."

Zeke faked a shudder. "And do what?"

"Put your finger in cold water."

"Oh no, not the old make 'em pee their pants, routine. You're sadistic."

"I have my moments."

Zeke nodded. "Boy, I'll say. I'm ready for a nap right now. I guess I better lock the door."

"There's no lock."

"Figures. Anyway, you better get your finger tapping the keyboard. Did you get anything out of your visit today that might go in the story?"

"I don't know yet. One thing struck me."

"Besides the mashed potatoes when they bounced off the garbage pile?"

"That happened too. When I was playing doorman, all of sudden it struck me how I hate placing myself subservient to those bums. I stood there admitting I was below them by holding the door open for them. And then it dawned on me that men will fight for position. So by overcoming my desire to get my own respect, I gave those people theirs and avoided confrontation."

"And what's the big point here? There must be some kind of revelation for all the excitement you're showing."

Brian threw his hands up in the air. "World peace. If we just hold the doors open for people, men or women, say please and thank you, treat people as equals, we avoid a lot of fighting."

"How are you going to open the door for the Taliban? Or Al Qaeda? Or the Aryan Nation and Ku Klux Klan? I think your idea has some merit, but sometimes it seems that fighting is necessary."

"OK, maybe at the international level and such, it doesn't make sense. But at the personal level it might be effective. Maybe some of those people who join hate groups or start them, never would if they were treated right."

"I don't know, man. I have a feeling that there is always going to be evil fighting against good in some fashion."

"That sounds like a God versus the devil type of idea."

Zeke nodded. "Maybe. When you come to think about it, the majority of literature deals with the theme of good versus evil. Are you going to have that in your book?"

"I don't know where my book is going yet?"

"Don't you make an outline first of the major events and characters or something?"

"Not me. I'm flying by the seat of my pants. The story is being written at my typewriter. One event leads to another."

"Sounds like you might end up with literary SOS."

Brian's eyebrows arched upward. "SOS?"

"The food they use to give us in the army on a shingle."

"Oh, that SOS. It could end up that way, couldn't it?"

"Duh."

"I hate being so inflexible and organized."

"You want this to be the best book you can write, right?"

"Damn echoes." Brian nodded. "Of course. And what you say makes sense. I have to sculpture something that comes together seamlessly. That sounds too much like the kind of work I have to do at the office. I was hoping to have more freedom, but the handwriting is on the wall."

"You can thank me later."

"I hope there's reason to thank you. I hope you know this is a long shot?"

Zeke nodded. "I know. You're going up against the best writers in the world, and you're a rookie. You've heard the proverb about the snowball in hell."

"Of course."

"It might have a better chance of making it than you do. You might have a better chance of landing Miss Angel than getting your book published."

Brian sighed. "I thought we were done talking about angelic beings. I'm not interested anymore."

"Sorry. I forgot. You wanted to talk about nothing else for a whole day, so it's hard to not talk about it."

"I know. I have this emptiness inside me that's just screaming out to be filled. I'm speeding up to get to my computer faster."

"Just be careful."

"Yes, sir. Keep my eyes on the road and two hands on the steering wheel."

Zeke held his thumb up. "You can teach an old dog new tricks."

Brian held his middle finger up.

## Chapter 6

The next morning, Brian walked out of the bathroom after taking a shower. Zeke was standing in the hallway.

"What is all the singing?" Zeke asked.

"Oh, was I singing?"

"Well, I'm not sure that is the term I'd use for it, but I'm not sure what else to use. Did you forget I was sleeping?"

"I forgot you even lived here."

"That's really complimentary."

"Sorry, Zeke. I just spaced. My mind was in work mode. Back in the old routine you know."

"So am I supposed to cook you breakfast?"

"No time for a big meal. Just a couple of pieces of toast, and I'm headed down the road."

"And I can go back to sleep?"

"If you want to. You could make me a ham sandwich to take to the office with me, if you can before you start sawing zeeks again."

"Will do. By the way, maybe I can use your computer while you're gone."

"Not a chance. Nobody touches that machine but me."

Zeke's face fell. "Bummer."

"But I do have a laptop you can use. I use it for trips. Hang on." Brian went into his computer room and came out with a laptop case. "Here you go."

"What's the password?"

"Not protected. It's got a wireless Internet connection so you can go surf the net. Maybe you can find me an agent in your spare time."

"And find the cure for cancer as well."

Brian grinned "Work on the agent first, though."

"Right. Are we going to the shelter tonight?"

"Let's skip a night. Are people going to ask you questions if you don't show up?"

Zeke grinned. "They know better than to ask me questions of a personal nature. If I don't volunteer the information, they never find out."

"OK. I'd like to work on my outline tonight. Bob will reappear at the shelter tomorrow night."

"So I'm on the hook for supper tonight?"

"That would be great. I'm tired of frozen pizzas and TV dinners."

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, Brian headed down the street toward the office. Zeke wandered around the house checking out things he had not noticed before. "I can't believe this guy trusts me to stay in this nice house all by myself. I could call some buddies from the streets and have this house emptied of anything of worth in a couple of hours." In perusing the pantry he discovered a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label. His eyes lit up and then glossed over. A vision appeared in his head followed by a voice, his own. "I'm Zeke Matthews, and I'm an alcoholic." He put the bottle back where he found it and retreated to his bedroom. The voice rang through his head for a little while until it was no longer necessary to fight off temptation. With the thoughts of going back to bed long gone, he opened up the computer and went to work. After a couple of hours of research, he scratched his head. "I'm afraid Brian is going to find it hard to even get an agent, much less a publisher. This really is a cutthroat business. I don't think Brian's tough enough to make it." A gleam came into his eyes. "Unless I help him."

\* \* \*

While Zeke was surfing, Brian was trying to concentrate on a complex flowchart for a new database he had to design. Thoughts of Angel interrupted from time to time until he chased them away. Like a bad penny, they always returned. A call on his intercom startled him. "Yeah, Brian here."

"Brian, I need to see you in my office, ASAP."

"Sure. Be there in a second." *What's going on now? Did I screw something up?*

His manager pulled the door closed behind him. Brian's heart went thud. He hated it when the door got closed.

"Brian, let's try to make this as painless as possible. You know the economy is in a funk and cutbacks are necessary. I'm afraid you're one of the victims of a layoff we hate to make but must for the health of the company."

Brian blinked. "What about my house? I just sunk almost all of savings into the down payment a little while ago."

"I know, Brian. We're sorry. But there's nothing we can do except give you a little severance package to tide you over for a

little while. Then you can draw unemployment for a season as well."

"That's wonderful, Steve. And when that season is over, I'll be out on the streets unless I find a new job. With everyone cutting back, that makes it almost impossible to find a job. Every day there are more people chasing fewer jobs."

Steve sighed. "I'm aware of the statistics. I know it doesn't help to say I'm sorry, but I am. You're not the only one involved."

"Why couldn't you have done this to me before I bought my house?"

"Brian, things were different then. This all happened so sudden. Also, there is a security guard waiting for me to finish this conversation so he can escort you to your office and then out the front door after you gather your things."

"After giving this company fifteen of the best years of my life, you're giving me the bum's rush?"

"Company policy. I'm –"

"Yeah, I know. You're sorry." Steve nodded and walked over to the door and opened it. A uniformed employee walked in.

Brian struggled to his feet. His legs felt rubbery. The whole thing seemed like a bad dream. *When I read in the papers that 20,000 were laid off at General Motors did I feel any pain? How about the 10,000 at Caterpillar? Those were just numbers to me, not actual people. Now the statistic of one is an overwhelming number because I'm that one.*

It took him an hour to gather all of the personal effects he'd accumulated over fifteen years. The guard stood with folded arms the whole time doing a Sphinx imitation. *This whole routine sucks. Can't they at least let me have some dignity to go along with my pink slip?*

He pulled up in his driveway a short time later. The full shock of what had occurred struck him in the solar plexus. Tears were about to break loose from their reservoir when a tap on the window startled him. He looked up to see Zeke standing outside his door. Reluctantly, he opened it.

"I heard a car pull into the driveway so I looked out. Didn't recognize you. Since nobody got out, I came out to investigate. What are you doing home so early?"

"I've been downsized."

"Dude, you were too small to start with."

"No, I mean the company downsized, and I was one of the pawns that got thrown off the chessboard."

"I think this is the place where the expletives get deleted."

Brian nodded. "Except I'm too numb to shout out any expletives or anything else right now. I feel like I got kicked in the stomach by a mule."

"Not a good feeling."

"You're a freaking prophet. Only one thing in my life comes close to this experience."

"Puberty?"

"No, divorce papers."

"You were married before. You never told me."

Brian shrugged. "I don't talk about it if I can help it. Luckily we didn't have any kids so it was just a split of assets and the loss of my true love. This one seems to hurt more, but that might be because it's a brand new wound."

"I'll carry your stuff into the house."

"And I'll let you. I'm going to take a nap and escape this pain."

Zeke grabbed a big box. "I'll try to hold down the singing."

Brian didn't even register that he heard him but staggered to his front door. "Looks like that boy needs a big hug from his momma. My jokes and chicken soup ain't gonna do the trick in this situation." He followed the sidewalk up to the house and deposited the box of Brian's things on the living room floor.

Zeke entered the kitchen and found Brian sitting at the table. In front of him in all its glory stood the bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label and a glass. The bottle was partly empty. The glass was almost empty. Brian picked it up and tossed the rest of the contents down his throat.

"Come on. Sit down and share in my celebration."

Zeke walked over and took a chair at the other end of the table. "Celebration? I thought you just got laid off."

"I did, my friend, but don't you see that now I can write full time. No eight to five to keep me alive. In other words, I'm free."

"You may be free, but the food, electricity, taxes, and fill in the blank here are not. And what about your health insurance? I assume you had that?"

"Had is right. I can still buy it through Cobra."

"Can you afford it?"

"No. On the surface, it looks like I'm screwed. All my savings went into the down payment on this house. The value of houses is falling fast. The real estate market is in the toilet, so I probably won't be able to sell. Unless something comes down the pipeline, I'm actually going to end up homeless."

"Damn. If you end up homeless, that means I'm on the streets again."

"Zeke, my good old rescue shelter friend, you are so right. So pour yourself a glass of liquid cheer and drive the demons of downsizing away."

The big black man studied the bottle. He felt sweat break out on his brow. "I better not."

"What's the matter? Too early in the day for you to imbibe?"

"Any time during the day is too early for me."

"A big strong man like you is a teetotaler? I don't believe it."

"Brian, I'm a recovering alcoholic. If I help you down that scotch, you're going to regret it."

"I didn't know. Forgive me for tempting you."

"No problem."

Brian looked at the bottle. "Somehow I've lost my thirst. I have doubts that this magic elixir is going to make my problem go away."

Zeke nodded. "Never does. Just causes more problems. To paraphrase an old saying 'if you want to soar with the eagles, don't roost with the Old Turkey.'"

Brian's head snapped upward. "Why does that phrase keep coming up? I swear Soaring Eagle has put some kind of hex on me or something." He screwed the top back on the bottle. "I better get back to work on my book."

"Good idea."

"By the way, I've changed my mind. Since I'm getting to work on the book during the day, I want to visit the shelter tonight."

"OK. Saves me from making supper. And you already have your lunch."

"Wrong. I left it in the refrigerator at work. I hope the stench is significant before someone discovers a sandwich in the crisper with stuff growing on it."

"Gotcha. I'll fix lunch for you at noon then."

"Have I told you that I appreciate you, Zeke?"

"Not that I remember."

"Well, forgive me for the oversight. I appreciate you."

Brian studied Zeke's face. His black face hid any trace of telltale blush, but Brian could tell he was emotionally touched. Without uttering a word, Zeke padded off to his bedroom. Brian shrugged and returned to his computer.

\* \* \*

On the way to the mission, Brian laid out his plans to Zeke. "I want you to introduce me to Nervous Nelly tonight. What's his real name?"

"Nelson."

"Is that a first name or a last name?"

"Yes."

Brian's face revealed agitation. "What the .... Oh, I forgot. No last names."

"You're learning. Anybody else you want to interview?"

"Funny. I'd better go home and get my secret spy tape recorder."

"You'd have to get great reception on that thing when you talk to Nelly. He almost whispers as if he's afraid some one will hear he's talking."

"This guy sounds like a real winner."

"You might feel sorry for him after you talk to him. It's pretty pathetic."

"How am I going to write a boring character into my book? If he won't even talk to me, it'll just increase my frustration level."

Zeke shrugged. "Maybe you can reach him. He's scared of me."

"Geez, I wonder why. You carve yourself out a reputation as a tough guy and then you seem surprised people are afraid of you."

"I don't want everyone afraid of me. Miss Angel for example isn't intimidated by my size."

"You forget, God is watching over her. Her bodyguard is bigger than you," Brian said.

"That really bugs you, doesn't it? That Miss Angel depends on God instead of wanting to let a man be her protector."

"That topic is verboten."

"It's what?"

"Verboten is German for forbidden, off-limits, no-go zone. Get my drift?"

"That was yesterday. I figured you'd be over the hurt on that and ready to bring up the topic again."

"You figured wrong. Maybe you'd like to talk about dear old dad? After all, twenty-four hours have passed since you told me you didn't want to talk about him."

"Don't push me into a corner, Brian. You won't like the results."

"Maybe you need to talk about it. Maybe you need to get it out of your system. Your anger problem might be caused by holding it all in."

Zeke exploded. "What anger problem? I had a drinking problem. It's over now. Not an anger problem, got it?"

"You just convinced me that I'm totally off base. No trace of anger problem in you."

"You know I'd hate to punch out the driver of a car that I'm riding in. However, when we park this SOB, I'll have no reason to hold back. So save your sarcasm for somebody else."

Brian didn't say a word the rest of the trip. Zeke confined his oral activity to singing along with the radio.

When the duo arrived at their normal parking spot, Brian eased into the space and the two got out. Brian started hiking toward the shelter.

"Hey, hold on there speed demon," Zeke said.

"What for?"

"Are you forgetting something? You're Bob again. Slow of mind and foot Bob. Do you want to blow your cover?"

Brian rolled his eyes. "At this point I'm starting to not give a rip."

"Blow your cover here, and kiss the cover of your book goodbye. I hate to point this out, but without a job you'll be relying even more on having success with your book."

"Fine. I'll play the game again – at least for tonight."

"Good, so slow down and get into character now. You're probably a little rusty after being Brian all day yesterday."

The mission was already open when the two men arrived. Zeke took Brian directly to Nervous Nelly's table. Zeke spoke to Nelson, but the man made no response. Zeke put his big paw on the slender man's shoulder and squeezed slightly. Nelson turned to look at him.

"Nelson, I want to introduce you to a friend of mine. His name is Bob. He got hit in the head, and he don't think so well. I need to leave him with somebody for a few minutes while I get our food. I would like to leave him with you."

Nelson turned to look at Brian. The fear in his eyes was evident. "Whatever you want, Zeke. Just don't hit me."

"Nobody's going to hit you, Nelson. Bob, sit down here and talk to this nice man. OK?"

Brian nodded his head like a bobble-head doll. Zeke rolled his eyes as he walked away talking to himself under his breath.

Brian looked at Nelson. The young man pushed his food around his plate and occasionally forked some of it into his mouth. He didn't speak between mouthfuls.

"Hi," Brian said. "My name's Bob."

"I know that."

"I'm scared."

A funny look flickered over Nelson's face. "What you scared of?"

"You."

"Me? I won't hurt anybody."

"I don't believe you. Everybody wants to hurt me."

"Not true. I don't." Nelson laid his fork on the table.

"Why not?"

"I don't want to hurt you because Jesus taught us to do unto others as others do unto you. I don't want anyone hurting me again. So I don't hurt other people. Do you understand?"

Brian nodded. "Who hurt you?"

"Lots of people."

"Zeke?"

Nelson looked over at Zeke in the line waiting to be served. He shook his head.

"Soaring Eagle?"

"No. Soaring Eagle is like me. He doesn't hurt anybody. He's a Jesus person too."

"Show me who hurt you."

Nelson looked around the room. "No one here."

"Zeke told me you're always afraid. Like me."

"They might find me here."

"Who might find you?"

"Warriors."

"Basketball team?"

Nelson shook his head.

"Other Indians that don't know Jesus?"

The head went side to side again.

Brian thought for a minute. "Rainbow Warriors?"

Nelson's eyes widened and his body stiffened. "Please don't tell them."

Brian held up his hand. "I'm not going to tell anyone. Only the Rainbow Warriors hurt you?"

Nelson made another negative gesture. "Men at my job. That's how I ended up homeless. Some men got me fired."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want to do what they told me to do anymore?"

"You didn't want to work?"

Nelson showed a sign of anger. "I like to work."

"But they fired you."

"Not because of work. They wanted me to do personal stuff with them."

"I don't get it."

"Have sex with them."

"Oh. Did you?"

"For a while. But then I wanted to quit, and they fired me. I haven't been able to find a new job since."

"Anyone else hurt you?"

"Kids in high school."

"Bullies?"

Nelson nodded. "And priests."

"What? Priests hurt you?"

The young man turned to both sides and scanned the area before answering. "Well, just one actually. He's the one who started it."

"Started what?"

"My problem."

Brian leaned over closer. "What problem?"

"Sex."

"A priest forced you to have sex with him?"

Nelson nodded. "That's what made me become ...."

"Gay?"

The agitated young man clenched his teeth tightly. With his mouth barely open enough to create clear speech, Nelson answered in the affirmative.

"I thought people were born gay, not became gay."

"I don't know. Maybe so. Some people tell me one thing and other people tell me something else."

Brian pressed a finger against his jawbone. "Who do you believe?"

"I told you, I don't know who to believe. Too many voices." The speaker clenched both of his fists. "I just want to die."

Brian swallowed hard and looked back to see where Zeke was. *Crap, he's going to be a while still. What do I say to a guy after a comment like that?* "I know what you mean."

Nelson's head popped up. "You do? You want to die, too?"

"I did earlier today. Bad thing happened."

"Someone beat you up?"

Brian bit his lip. "You might say that. Kind of beat me up, yeah."

"I thought Zeke said you don't think so well".

"It's a temporary condition. It comes and goes. Sometimes I can talk good and other times I must visit Dizzyland or something."

Nelson laughed. "That's funny. Bob, you just won the Super Bowl. Where are you going next? I'm going to Dizzyland."

Brian grinned. "That is funny, Nelson. You're a funny guy."

"I am?"

"Definitely." *Zeke, get back here quickly.* "I'm going to help Zeke get the food."

"OK, Bob. You're not going to tell anyone what we talked about, are you?"

"Can I tell Zeke?"

"OK. I trust Zeke, but don't tell anyone else. Please!"

Brian nodded and stood up. He almost forgot to stay in character as he made his escape from Nelson.

Zeke was just getting the plates loaded when Brian arrived. Angel was dishing up the meat.

"Hi, Bob. Remember me. I'm Angel."

Brian tried not to look at her but failed. His heart did a loop-de-loop. *Why does she do this to me?* Brian tried to make his voice sound like a five-year-old. "Yes, ma'am. You're an angel."

"Oh, he's so cute."

Zeke handed Brian a tray. "Isn't he though? Too bad about his brain injury. He'd been quite the catch for a lucky gal."

Angel laughed.

Brian seethed. *I should have known better than to come up here. He loves getting a laugh at my expense. How am I going to get him back? Oh, should I? Why not?* He leaned against Zeke while saying, "Daddy."

Angel laughed. "How precious."

Brian looked at Zeke who had to hold his anger in because of his respect for Angel.

Zeke patted him on the head. "Oh, yeah, precious little eagle just waiting to open his wings and soar."

Brian decided to hold the comment about Old Turkey that rose to his tongue. *Discretion is the better part of valor after all.* Instead he said. "Sit down, OK?"

"OK, Bob. Let's go sit down. Have a good evening, Miss Angel."

"You too, Zeke. Take good care of daddy, Bob."

Zeke laughed as he led Brian away from the food line.

"I thought you wanted to talk to Nelson? Wouldn't he say anything?"

"He said plenty. I've heard enough. That's one messed up dude. He needs help. Said he wants to die."

"I told you. Do you want to go sit by him again?"

"Not really. We can't talk about him if we're with him. How do we help him?"

Zeke shook his head. "Beats me."

"Maybe you can be his bodyguard, too. He might not be so nervous then."

Zeke dropped his tray onto a table and sat down. Brian positioned himself next to the black man who hadn't answered yet.

"Nobody down here bothers him."

"He's not convinced of that. Maybe the protection he needs is more mental than physical. I don't know. I work with computers not with basket cases. And another thing, he mentioned the Rainbow Warriors as someone who had hurt him."

"What? He's gay. Why would they hurt him?"

"Good question. I was wondering the same thing myself."

"Brian, you were the one doing the interrogation. Why didn't you ask him?"

"I didn't want to get too deep, at least the first time. He looked like a rabbit getting ready to bolt for the nearest thicket."

"Kind of reminded you of yourself. huh?"

"Bite me. I'm not that bad."

"Maybe not, but close. Oh, don't look now but Soaring Eagle is headed this way."

Brian turned and looked and got a full exposure of the Native American's gaze. He turned back to his food.

"I told you not to look," Zeke said.

"Smart ass!"

"One out of two ain't bad."

Brian felt Soaring Eagle walk past and then watched his torso as it circled their table and stopped in front of them.

"Mind if I sit down, Zeke?"

"It's a free country, Chief."

"For some people."

Chief took a seat right across from Brian who if asked for his Indian nickname would have replied Soaring Stomach. His appetite was spoiled, but he attempted to look busy with the food in front of him.

"What's on your mind, Chief?"

"Saw your friend talking to Nelson."

"So?"

"Do you want me to call him Bob, or should I call him Brian?"

Brian dropped his fork on the floor. Zeke and Brian both dove under the table for it. Their eyes met as Zeke released the utensil into Brian's fingers. The alarm and surprise was evident in the whites of both men's eyes. Reluctantly they returned to the surface of the table.

"Your fork's dirty now, Bob. You go get a clean one. Understand?"

"Fork dirty. Yucky. Need clean. I go."

"Good idea, Bob."

Brian got up and shuffled toward the table where the silverware tray resided.

*Do I have to go back to the table? Maybe I could hide out in the men's room until he leaves. With my luck he'd come in there and have me trapped. What is with that guy? He's like a shadow.*

After dawdling a while hoping the uninvited guess would depart, Brian made his way to back to his seat. His food was no doubt cold by now. No way was he going to eat cold food tonight. He held up the fork when he arrived. "Fork." He made a fake jab at Zeke's arm. "Fork you!"

Zeke's eyes opened wide again and then he let loose with a belly laugh. "Bob told a joke, Chief. Did you get it?" He put a heavy accent on the word 'Bob.'

"My Father in Heaven allows me to understand much. Of course, I don't appreciate everything that I comprehend."

"I hear you, Chief. That was a little on the gross side. You'll have to forgive, Bob, though because his brain is addled. He doesn't know any better."

"Now I need to deliver a message from the Holy Spirit that I don't fully understand at this time. It is my task to deliver the word. It is not for me to comprehend."

Zeke wiped his brow. "A message for me?"

"No, for Brian."

"Why do you call him Brian?"

"That is the name God calls him. Brian, the Lord wants you to know that things look bad right now for you. He wants you to be at peace because He has called you into His kingdom. You are on a path that will lead you to Him and which will bring life to many. Be at ease and know that God holds you in his hand as you continue the journey to your destiny. Fear not though warriors the colors of the rainbow shall encircle you. The love you seek lies at the end of your initial journey. Do not fret for Nelson. He is also in my hands, and he will help you find yourself." Soaring Eagle stood up and walked away without another word.

Brian threw the fork onto his tray. "What the f—"

"My sentiments exactly. That was strange."

"No, way beyond strange. He must have recognized me. Probably my eyes gave me away. He's always probing my pupils like he's trying to stare down into my soul. He thought he knew me yesterday. Now today he saw my eyes again, and they gave me away."

"Maybe, but where did he get the part about the warriors and the rainbow. Didn't that send chills down your spine?"

"Everything he said sent daggers of cold into my heart. I thought that knife you used on me was bad. That guy is out to get me."

"Hold on, dude. Did you hear what he said? All of it?"

"I don't know, Zeke. It was hard to hear above the noise of my knee's knocking together. The part about the warriors and rainbow came through clear. I'm making a journey, and God has got things in control for me and Nelson, and I'm going to find myself."

"What about the love at the end of your initial journey?"

"Initial? That means there would be more travelling."

"I picked up on that. The part about no fear was interesting. If you reach a point where that happens, I'll know God is involved. And what about the thing involving love?"

Brian glanced over at Angel who was scraping plates. "This is insane. I feel like the hero in Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court. He woke up in the time of King Arthur and thought he was in an asylum because everyone was so weird. I'm going through the same thing right now."

"You think I'm weird too?"

"Zeke, you're the only normal thing around me right now."

A smile lit up the big black man's face. "Sorry about embarrassing you in front of Miss Angel. I couldn't pass up the chance at such a cool joke."

"Totally cool. Ditto on the daddy remark."

"It's funny. I felt your spurs digging into me with that one, and my original reaction was to wring your scrawny neck, but then something hit me."

"Your conscience for beating up a ninety-eight pound weakling?"

"No, I got a little glimpse of the pride of being a father. It kind of felt good."

"Serious?"

"I know that if I ever have kids, I won't abandon them."

Brian nodded. "Oh, so that's what fuels your anger. You're torqued off at your old man for ditching you."

"No doubt about that. Not a day goes by without me thinking about it. The memory makes me feel so worthless. I wasn't even good enough for my own father. What's the story on your parents? Did you let them know about your layoff?"

"They're beyond caring about that."

"What do you mean?"

"They both died in a plane crash about three years ago."  
Zeke made a face that Brian interpreted as remorse. "I'm sorry."

"That's life. One minute you're laughing and talking and dreaming and the next minute you're fodder for worms and bacteria. Kicker is that they had found God shortly before that. They were on their way home from a missionary trip to Mexico. God did a really good job of watching over them, didn't he?"

"Doesn't sound like it."

"You got that right. So why should I feel at ease if Soaring Eagle says God is watching over me. Somehow I feel I should worry more."

"Did your parents try to muscle you into accepting their religion?"

"Of course. Well maybe muscle would be too strong of a word, but they did try to push their gospel off on me. I told them I wasn't interested. In fact, I stayed away from their house after that to avoid their guilt trips."

Zeke put his finger up to his lips and signaled with his eyes. Brian got the message and shut up.

"Come on, Bob. Take a bite of your food. Maybe you want to play airplane. You open your mouth, and I'll fly the food in."

"No! Not hungry. I want ice cream!"

Brian felt a hand descend on his shoulder. The touch was light and the scent of perfume penetrated his olfactory senses.

"Hi, Miss Angel. Did you come help me convince Bob to clean his plate?"

"No, Zeke. I felt God has a word for me to share with Bob."

Brian swallowed hard. *Twice in one night? Do they have some kind of conspiracy to drive me off the deep end?*

"Bob, Father in Heaven wants you to know that He loves you. He knows your brain is confused right now, but in time the confusion will go away and you shall see clearly. Crossroads lie ahead. It is important that you take the right ones to reach the Promised Land."

Zeke scratched his head. "Were you talking to Soaring Eagle?"

Angel's brow furrowed. "Not tonight. Why?"

"Just wondering. He's a cool guy, isn't he?"

"Soaring Eagle is a man anointed by God."

Zeke nodded. "Like I said, cool."

"I'd better get back to work. I don't know if Bob can't grasp what I'm saying, but I feel that he is in a process of healing, and he will

be restored. And I sense that he has some type of calling in his life that will lead him to do great things for the Lord."

"That's really encouraging, Miss Angel. I'll try to remember what you said, so I can tell Bob when his brain is back to normal."

"Thanks, Zeke. Good night, Bob."

Brian waved his hand over his shoulder. He didn't trust himself to turn around. The scent of her body and music of her voice were enough for him to look for his flag of surrender.

Zeke waited a few seconds before resuming the conversation. "She's gone."

"Are you ready to get out of here? I need to get home and make sure I'm not really brain damaged. The events of this evening are blowing me away. Do you think Angel is lying about talking to Soaring Eagle?"

"Miss Angel doesn't lie. Maybe they talked yesterday and hatched a little plot to mess with your head."

"That's possible. They certainly succeeded if that was their plan."

"What if it's really God trying to get your attention?"

"What?"

Zeke held up one hand. "Just hear me out. What if there really is a god and he's trying to communicate with you?"

"You're talking about God Almighty, creator and king of the universe and everything in it?"

"I'm not talking about the Burger King."

"What if somebody claiming to be Ted Turner or Donald Trump or Bill Gates called and left me a voice message? How do you think I'd react?"

"I don't know."

"First of all I'd be stunned that out of all the people in the world they were calling me. Next of all I'd wonder what the con game was."

"Ah. A healthy dose of skepticism. And if it really was Bill Gates?"

"I'd be flabbergasted."

"And if it was really God?"

"Double flabbergasted. Why would God choose me to do something for Him? It doesn't make any sense. How many religious nuts are running around out there that would cut off their left arm to have God talk to them and give them something to do?"

"I haven't counted lately."

"Me either, but I suspect it would be a hefty number. Why would he choose a guy like me who isn't even sold on the fact that He exists?"

"You better ask God that question."

"Yeah? Does he have a listed phone number?"

Zeke smiled. "He does have a Facebook account. I saw Jesus on the Internet this morning."

"Done deal. I'll send Jesus an email on Facebook. That ought to clear up the mystery. Speaking of you and the Internet. Did you find out some info about me obtaining a literary agent?"

Zeke nodded. "Looks like you might have more chance talking to God than one of those folks. And if you're lucky enough to land one of them, your chance of their selling your book are pretty slim. The economy is causing publishers to cut back. First timers are being put on the back burner to allow the publishers to work with the known authors who have a record of success."

"Crap. That was my take on the situation, too. I was hoping I was reading it wrong. My only chance is to write a Godfather novel."

"The Godfather has already been written."

"I mean a book that they can't refuse."

Zeke grinned. "I gotcha. And hope they make you an offer you can't refuse."

"That works for me. Speaking of work, let's get out of here so I can get my nose back to the grindstone."

"I'm ready."

"Do me a favor, please. Take my tray back. I don't want to get close enough to Angel to smell that perfume again. I might lose it."

"Lose what?"

"I'm not sure. My dignity for one thing."

Zeke nodded. "I sure don't want to see you lose your dignity. You'll never pick that up at the lost and found window." He stiffened and his eyes locked on something.

Brian turned around to see what had his friend's attention. Three black children and their mother were headed for the food line. Despite the distance between them, Brian could detect a bandage on the woman's face. He looked back at Zeke and saw the same murderous expression that Zeke had worn the first time Brian laid eyes on him.

## Chapter 7

"I'm gonna kill that SOB!"

"Hold on, Zeke! She might have cut herself shaving."

"Don't try being funny with me. Humor ain't gonna defuse this boy."

"How about imagining you're back in prison again? Does that float your boat?"

Zeke clenched his eyes shut. His fist came down on the table causing the trays to defy gravity for a second.

"If you're counting to ten, I'd suggest you keep going to a hundred. Or maybe a thousand. And while you got your anger under control for the minute, consider the fact that Mr. Brutality might not take kindly to being killed and might try to repay the favor in advance. He probably carries a gun. Your knife is no match for a gun unless you plan on ambushing him."

"That's the coward's way to fight. I don't take anybody by surprise."

"Then you're going to be the one going down. I hate losing a new friend so soon."

"Shut up!"

"Just telling it like it is. You did say this is a free country a minute ago."

"I'm not always right, you know."

Brian faked a look of shock. "No kiddin'! If you go after this guy, you'll definitely be wrong."

"If you're so all fired up to stop me from a big mistake, I'll make a deal with you."

"Oh, oh. Why do I have this feeling that I'm going to regret stepping into the middle of this one? What are the terms of this deal?" Brian asked.

"Pretty simple on my end. I just refrain from deep sixing the guy."

"Yeah. That was pretty much a given. But what do I have to do to force you to stick to your end of the bargain?"

Zeke turned and looked toward Miss Angel.

"Let me guess. You want me to stay away from Miss Angel?"

"Nope."

"You want me to go after Miss Angel?"

"Nope. It's got nothing to do with blond angels"

"Then why did you look at her?"

Zeke sighed. "Maybe it's like the kid making his dad think he wrecked the family car when he's going to announce he got an F at school. When dad gets the real bad news, it doesn't seem so hard to swallow."

"I'm not sure I get your point. Why don't you just tell me the terms of surrender?"

Zeke turned and looked at Nelson sitting by himself. "You have a big house, right?"

"At least for now I do?"

"Do you have a spare bedroom?"

Brian turned to find out what Zeke was looking at.

"You're not asking me to let Nervous Nelly become our roommate?"

"Does that scare you?"

"Yeah, a little bit."

Zeke grinned. "I thought it might. Would it be easier to have a woman and three youngsters?"

Brian's face fell. "No. That's four more roommates, some of them kids? Are you nuts?"

"Not yet. I will be by the time I get to that guy's house."

"This is blackmail."

"No, I believe it's black female."

Brian clunked himself in the head lightly with his fist. "If you had a day job, I'd suggest you not give it up to become a comedian."

"Right back at you, dude. We're both a couple of out of work funny guys."

"Except I'm writing a book so I am working, even if I'm not getting paid for it yet. And how am I going to write with three kids running around the house along with a woman?"

"Good point. We'll have to figure something out. In the meantime, before you answer, I want you to come with me."

Brian threw up his hands. "Sounds like another interview coming up."

"Kind of. Let me ditch the trays, and I'll introduce you to my friend. Remember you're back to Bob again."

"What if they come live with us? Is she going to have to be let in on our little secret?"

Zeke paused. "Didn't think of that. Could be a problem, huh?"

"Duh."

"We'll just have to cross that bridge when the time comes."

"Great. Another fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants operation."

"Good thing I got some big pants."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that makes me feel really warm and cuddly about the whole thing." He watched Zeke deposit the trays with Angel and stride back to Brian's table. He noticed that Zeke had lost his aimless shuffle walk. "You're out of character."

"What are you talking about? I'm not playing any character."

"Your gait. You're walking with a man with purpose in his life."

"Really. Yeah, I guess I was. I do have purpose right now." He helped Brian up from the table and pretended to help him walk to the table where the mother and children were finishing their dinner.

After a few minutes of visiting with them, the two walked toward the exit.

"Well, boss, what did you think of Rosie and her brood?"

"Those kids are adorable."

"I know. I was wondering how they got that way with the father they have. Tonight is the first time I heard that the deadbeat is not their biological father."

Brian winced. "Rosie is very nice, too. I just don't know if it would work out though. A man's home is his castle. I'll feel like I've been invaded and maybe dethroned."

"Could be. Or you could feel like you're saving some people from a nasty fate. Which is more important?"

"That would be a sacrifice on my part."

"Guess you're right. You probably don't want to sacrifice your comfort for someone's survival."

"Hold on, don't make it sound so . . . so . . . black and white, pardon the pun. This is complicated stuff. What makes you think she'd even want to move in with us?"

"Maybe she won't and you'll be off the hook. You'll get the satisfaction of making the offer but not have to go through the sacrificial part."

Brian wrinkled his brow. "I don't know, man. I gotta be freaking crazy to even consider something like this. You realize her husband could find out where she's staying and come over and waste all of us?"

Zeke held up his hand. "You're right. I'm asking too much of you. If it were my house, I'd do it. But this is my fight not yours. Sorry I even asked you to do this."

"That's darn white of you. Oops, I don't think that's the right expression."

"It is if you're looking for a can of whoop-ass."

Brian grimaced. "Yeah. What I meant was that's very kind of you to consider my feelings here. But in this situation, I have to

overrule you. You can ask them to stay, but only until they have a good place to go."

"Really? Are you sure?"

"You better go ask her before I change my mind. By the way, I'm putting the house up for sale tomorrow, so we all might have to leave soon if I get lucky and find a buyer."

Zeke didn't answer. He wheeled around and returned to the table they had just left. He came back a little while later. "She is so grateful. The shelter where she usually stays is full. She didn't know what they were going to do tonight."

"Tonight? Does she have a car?"

"Nope."

Brian blew out a deep breath. "That means I either have to run home and change clothes and come back for them or let them in on our secret."

"True."

"And what about all their stuff?"

"I haven't thought that far ahead. They'll have to sneak in and get in when the old man is away. But he doesn't have a job so they never know when he'll be gone."

Brian sighed. "Nothing can ever be easy, can it?"

"You mean that's not just a black person phenomenon?"

"Not even close. Hey, something's going down. The police are coming in."

Zeke turned around. "I know those two guys."

"You probably get lots of chances to mingle with the local constables."

"And the police too."

The two watched the police approach Angel.

Brian's eyes widened. "Are they going to arrest Angel for harassing the Rainbow Warriors with her street sign?"

After talking to her a minute, she led the officers to the table where Rosie sat.

It was Zeke's turn to freak out. "What do they want with Rosie? Maybe they want her to press charges against her husband. If they put him in jail, it would solve a few of our problems."

They watched two of the kids break into tears and Angel give Rosie a big hug.

Zeke shook his head. "I can't stand it anymore. I might not have an invitation, but I'm crashing this party. You stay here."

Brian had no desire to mix in affairs involving the police so he gladly followed Zeke's instructions.

Zeke came back a few minute later. "There have been some changes."

"What kind of changes?"

"Rosie now has a car."

"The police came down here to tell Rosie she won the lottery?"

Zeke shook his head. "But she doesn't have a husband any more."

"Serious?"

"The fool got blown away trying to pull off an armed robbery."

"Wow. Then she can go back to their house."

"Apartment. Yes she can. But not for long. They haven't paid their rent and they're getting evicted at the end of the week. So the original plan is still in place but it won't kick in until Saturday. She'll have a week to bury her husband and tie up the loose ends."

"That'll give us some time to figure out the living arrangements and rules of conduct so we can preserve some order in the household."

"Exactly. Taxpayers will probably be footing the bill for the burial. I don't know why the garbage man can't pick him up."

"Come on Zeke, don't hold it back. Tell us how you really feel."

"I'm sorry, but the guy was a scumbag."

"OK, that fact seems to be well established. I'm going back to work on my book. You can draw up a plan, and I'll critique it."

Zeke nodded. "I can do that. Let's get started."

The two men sauntered toward Brian's automobile. After they were three blocks away from the shelter, they picked up the pace a little. The noise of a disturbance from an alley brought them to a halt half a block away from the car.

"What's going on back there?" Brian asked.

"Sounds like a fight?"

"Or a mugging?"

"Maybe."

"What do we do?"

"Walk to the car."

Brian shook his head. "What if some innocent person is getting mugged back there? We might need to save their life. They might even be a millionaire and would reward us for saving them. Could even be a book publisher who would agree to publish my novel as a reward."

"Go back and save them then."

"I'm the brains of the team. You're the brawn."

A cry for help rent the air.

Brian grabbed Zeke's arm. "Somebody needs our help. Come on. We'll both go."

Zeke let Brian lead him into the alley.

After a few steps into the alley, Zeke yelled, "What's goin' on in here?"

"None of your business, mister. Get lost."

"I'd suggest you're the one that takes a powder. The police are on their way."

"Yeah, right. That's why you told us they're coming, so we can get away. Nice try asshole."

Brian saw Zeke's face transform. He reached into his boot and pulled out his knife as another faint cry for help sounded. The voice sounded like an old man. Zeke moved forward. Brian tagged along behind him trying to figure out what he'd do if they actually had to fight.

When they reached a driveway near the end of the alley, they saw two young men beating on someone.

Zeke held up his hand and whispered. "There's only two of them. I can handle this by myself. Stay here."

Zeke tiptoed up behind the young men who had their back turned as they kicked their victim. He grabbed both of the assailants and cracked their heads together. The sound reminded Brian of the noise of a thumped watermelon but much louder. The two dropped like flies after being swatted. Brian moved in to check on the victim, while Zeke made sure the bad guys were not going to cause any further problems.

Brian leaned over the old man. The smell of wine was strong. The man was obviously intoxicated. "Are you OK?"

"I've been better. If you hadn't come along, I'm sure I'd be worse."

Zeke came over to take a look. "Well, Doc, how you doing?"

"Zeke. Thanks for dropping by."

"My pleasure. Wished we'd gotten here a little sooner."

The man's eyes closed, and he didn't stir.

Brian tapped Zeke on the shoulder. "I think he just passed out or died. Do you know this guy?"

"He's a doctor."

"Really? Maybe we did just hit the good Samaritan lottery."

"He hangs out at the shelter."

"Volunteer?"

Zeke shook his head. "Resident wino."

"But you said he's a doctor."

"Was. The state took his license away. This is Doc Holiday I was telling you about."

Brian's face fell. "Crap. So much for a reward. Well, we better call 911 in any case."

"How?"

"I have my cell phone in my pocket."

"What are you waiting for?"

Brian pointed to himself. "I'm impersonating a bum remember. I better call this in and let you handle it from there so I don't have to answer any questions."

"I can handle it."

Brian retreated to the alley and made the phone call. By the time the ambulance and police arrived, he was comfortably sitting in his car reading a book he kept in the back seat. It was almost too dark to read when Zeke finally arrived.

"Is he going to be alright?"

"I think so. He was talking to me again before the ambulance took him away."

"What's the deal? Were they robbing him?"

Zeke snorted. "Ya think? All they get from the doc would be an almost empty wine bottle. They were joy beaters."

"Joy beaters?"

"Like the kids who steal cars to go for a joy ride? Beating up transients just for kicks, no pun intended."

"That's pretty lame."

"No that's totally lame. And sometimes their victims are afterward, if they survive."

Brian started the car. "I hope nothing happens the rest of tonight. I don't think my heart can take any more excitement."

## Chapter 8

Brian went to the kitchen to get a glass of water just before he hit the sack. Zeke was sitting at the table nursing a cup of coffee and reading a book.

"Whatcha reading?"

"*Connecticut Yankee*."

Brian laughed. "You wanted to find out all about the asylum, huh?"

"You made me curious. How's the book going?"

"I made a decision tonight. What are really selling now are books that knock traditional views of God and religion. Angel fits right into this plot. She's going to fall in love with this guy at the rescue shelter, and he's going to convince her to tone down her religious fervor and just be a good person and love everybody. What do you think?"

"What about Soaring Eagle?"

"He's not going into the book."

"That's not what I mean. What about those words he said over you last night? Call me crazy, but maybe Soaring Eagle isn't. Maybe he's the sanest of all of us. He and Miss Angel that is."

Brian shook his head. "I think I'll just call you crazy and say goodnight."

"You're going to chuck it out the window, poof, just like that?"

"Are you turning into a religious nut, too?"

"Not hardly, but I don't see how you dismiss it without giving it a chance."

"Fine. You want I should give it a chance? Tomorrow noon I'm going to the shelter as Brian again. If Angel tells me that God told her I'm the man she's supposed to marry, then I'll accept that God does exist and that I'm supposed to follow Him. Is that enough for you?"

Zeke shrugged. "It doesn't matter what I think. Is it enough for God?"

"Well, it going to have to be. Do you hear that God? If you really exist, tell Angel to marry me. You've got one shot."

"What if she isn't supposed to marry you?"

"I'm going to bed before you make me so mad that I can't sleep."

"Sorry. Just playing the devil's advocate here."

"Great. Now I've got both God and the devil involved here.  
Good night."

"Sleep tight. And I'm staying home tomorrow and read Mark Twain, if you don't mind. Oh yeah, and to work on the plan for Rosie's family."

"I don't mind at all. It'll be nice not to worry about you embarrassing me."

"True. Now you only have to worry about embarrassing yourself."

Brian held up his middle finger over the top of his head as he walked away.

\* \* \*

Brian sang to the radio as he drove to the shelter the next day. His spirits were high after a productive morning at the keyboard. Now that his plot was etched in wet concrete, he felt like all systems were reading go. This time he stayed in his car until the guests of the shelter had all entered. He had seen nothing of Angel, a matter that concerned him as he entered the building. *God, if she doesn't show up, you blew your chance.*

When Brian was done tying his apron, he turned around and beheld a vision of loveliness headed his way. He grabbed another apron and walked toward her.

"You're late," he said, holding out the apron.

"Thanks, for the apron that is, not for telling me I'm late. I already knew that."

"Welcome. Do you want mashed potatoes or gravy?"

"You choose."

"Beauty before age. Your choice."

Angel smiled, "Fine. I'll man the potato tray."

"You mean you'll woman the potato tray."

The tinkle of laughter tickled Brian's heartstrings and coaxed a note of warmth to reverberate through his body.

"You're funny."

Brian was about to say that Zeke didn't think so when he remembered he couldn't avow his friendship with the big black man. "It's easy to be funny when you have such a beautiful laugh."

"That's twice you've mentioned beauty in this conversation. I must tell you I'm a little put off by the typical compliments that men give women about their looks. In other words, to be blunt, flattery will get you nowhere."

"What will?"

"I believe I already told you."

"The God thing?"

"Exactly."

Brian bit his lip. "Somebody told me that you have a gift. God tells you things to tell other people?"

"That's true. It's called a word of knowledge or a word of wisdom. In some cases I prophesy over people."

"You mean like a fortune teller?"

"I hope not. Those people deal in the occult. God provides the words of prophecy and I just speak it. I can't produce it at will whenever a customer plunks down some coin."

"So you don't know anything about my future?"

Angel deposited some potatoes on a plate. "Eat hearty, Sam. Sorry, Brian, God hasn't spoken to me at all about you."

Brian looked at the clock. *That gives Him about fifty minutes to make up for lost time. I might as well change the subject. This one's going nowhere right now.* "How come you were late today?"

"I stopped by to see a patient at the hospital before I left. A really sad case."

"Someone dying?"

"No. It's a doctor I used to work with. His drinking problem caused him to lose his right to practice medicine. He actually is a patron here."

Brian's first reaction was to tell all and let Angel know he was involved in rescuing the poor doctor. *Wait, idiot. You can't tell her that either.* "Really? Is he sick?"

"Beaten by some punks. Maybe you remember, Zeke, a big black man who eats here. I don't see him today. He saved the Doc's life. I wish he were here so I could give him a big hug."

*Maybe you could give it to me 'cause I talked Zeke into being the hero.* "I bet he'd like that."

"He's a good guy."

"Has God spoken to you about Zeke?"

"Not about being my husband, but yes, God has shown me that Zeke is someday in the future going to accept Jesus as his savior."

"Did you tell Zeke that?"

"Nope. God didn't tell me to."

"Right. You just do what God tells you to do?"

"When Jesus was on Earth, he only did what the Father told him to do. I'm supposed to be like Jesus, so that is how I try to live."

"Does God tell you what to wear every day?"

"I'm a nurse. The hospital tells me what to wear every day."

Brian grinned. "What about your days off? Do you ask God what you should put on when you go somewhere? Or what you should eat for breakfast?"

"I guess I have to say that I only consult God on important matters. What I wear is of little consequence."

"So you can wear low cut blouses?"

Angel's face took on a pink tinge. "I don't have any. God doesn't want me showing off the temple that He gave me to house my spirit."

"Could I get some gravy, dude?" an impatient young guy with a shaved head asked.

Brian jerked his head around. "Sorry, I spaced there, guy. Here you go, and I'll even give you some extra."

"I think I'm distracting you from your work. Maybe we better not talk and concentrate on serving," Angel said.

"Maybe." *No use in pursuing this anyway. This gal is sold out to her God and there's no way that I'm going to get a wedge in there. I don't think the richest or most handsome man in the world is going to sway Angel from her beliefs. I might as well punt.*

Nelson came through the line. Brian was just about to say hi to him when he remembered that Nelson only knew Bob. He gave him a big smile. *Hang in there kid. Life is worth living.*

As soon as he could make his getaway, Brian bolted for the exit, after taking one last look at Angel. The glow from her face filled him with a longing that reminded him of his teenage years. *I guess this is what people refer to as eating your heart out.* With a feeling of sadness, he got into his vehicle and made the trip home.

Zeke was cleaning the kitchen when he entered.

"Hey boss man, how did it go?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"No proposal from Miss Angel."

"I said I don't want to talk about it."

Zeke grimaced. "Cool off, dude. I guess I have my answer. Are you hungry?"

"I just spent an hour working with food. You'd think I'd be famished, but food doesn't appeal to me right now. I'm going back to my manuscript. Don't disturb me, please, until you call me for supper. I have an idea I'm going to be ready to eat a horse by then."

"Sir, yes, sir." Zeke saluted.

"At ease private."

"One last question, sir. Do we have a horse in the freezer or do I need to run down to the market?"

Brian laughed. "Good thing I don't have a pet horse in the back yard. I'd come out here to find him on the kitchen table."

"Or in your bed."

"Why would a horse be in my bed?"

"The Godfather thing."

Brian slapped himself on the cheek. "Speaking of books, I'm getting back to mine now. You can practice your standup comedy routine on the refrigerator."

"How am I going to get up on the refrigerator?"

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" Brian walked away and gave Zeke the flying fickle finger of fate again.

"Is that your IQ or how many friends you had before you ate your horse?"

Zeke laughed and slapped his leg. He turned and looked at the refrigerator. "What did the mayonnaise say to the refrigerator? No clue, huh? Close the door, I'm dressing. No laugh, huh? Tough audience. You've probably heard that one a thousand times or maybe a thousand islands, ar, ar, ar. Get it? Dressing? Thousand Island? Ah, forget it. At least you don't give me the bird every time I come up with a zinger. Brian's going to wear out the muscles in that finger. What would my friends at the shelter think about me talking to a refrigerator? I guess I'd fit right in. They talk to everything."

\* \* \*

The week went by quickly and on Saturday, Zeke moved Rosie and her children into their new digs. Brian moved his computer into his bedroom and gave that room to Rosie. The kids got the other spare bedroom. Brian thought it was ironic when he turned on the TV that night and found the current channel was airing a rerun of Full House. He switched over to the local news station. A story on the arrest of the two boys involved in the beating came on. Zeke's name was mentioned.

"Damn. I was the one who pushed him into that alley, and he gets all the credit. And there's absolutely nothing I can do about it. It's not fair."

Another story about the Rainbow Warriors came on. In this situation they invaded a church and terrorized the congregation before making their getaway. The story made Brian think of Nelson. *How can I help that dude? Oh, yeah, Soaring Eagle said*

*that God has it under control. I guess that means I don't have to worry about it anymore.*

Zeke entered the room. "Hey, boss. You won't have to worry about noise tomorrow. I'm going to church with Rosie in the morning and then we're going to visit her sister. We'll be back tomorrow night."

"Church?"

"Did I stutter?"

Brian laughed. "Do they have a pew big enough to hold you?"

"Flattery will get you nowhere." Zeke turned around and walked out.

*That's what Angel said. Even her words haunt me. Why does she have to be so hung up on that God thing?* He flipped the TV off and got up. *Maybe I can't change her in real life, but I can in my book.* He spent the rest of the evening hammering on his keyboard.

\* \* \*

The weeks and months passed as Brian devoted most of his waking time to completing his novel. When the severance payment ran out, Brian discovered that his unemployment check was not enough to make the house payment and cover expenses. There had been not even a nibble on the sale of the house. Values continued to spiral downward. Brian decided he needed to talk to his banker and seek some relief. He broke away from his computer one day and made the trip to the bank.

He approached the information desk. A nicely dressed woman looked up. "Maybe I help you?"

"My name is Brian Anderson, and I need to talk to someone about a home loan."

Her face brightened. "OK, you'll need to see one of lending officers. I'm sure they'll be able to set you up with a new loan."

"Wait. Maybe I said this wrong. I need to talk to someone about my existing loan because I'm having a little financial problem right now."

The smile vanished. "I see. In that case you need to talk to a different person. Let me see if he's available."

Brian nodded and pulled his tie a little tighter. Maybe the neckwear was a liability at the shelter, but here at the bank it certainly couldn't hurt anything. He watched the lady hang up the phone.

"Mr. Peterson will see you in a few minutes. Please take a seat in the waiting area over there." She pointed to a section with chairs and a table full of magazines.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"You're welcome."

*If Mr. Peterson makes me any less welcome at this place, I'm going to find a new bank. Who am I kidding? I have no money and no job. If they take my house away, I won't have a home or a bank.*

He picked up a copy of Sports Illustrated and started leafing through it. He was right in the middle of a good article on the NBA playoffs when Mr. Peterson showed up.

"Mr. Anderson?"

Brian stood up and extended his hand. The man took it but let Brian squeeze down on limp fingers. *The old cold-fish handshake. Hate those.*

"Simon Peterson. Come with me."

"Nice to meet you." Those words were delivered to Mr. Peterson's back as he headed toward the office. Mr. Peterson made no response. *Maybe he's taking me to the dungeon where I'll be imprisoned until I pay off his loan which means forever. Maybe prison wouldn't be a bad place. I think Charles Dickens wrote some of his novels there. And Pilgrim's Progress was written in jail.*

The less than bubbly bank employee ushered him into an impressive office and closed the door. "Have a seat, Mr. Anderson."

Brian surveyed the expensive leather chair in front of him, "Think it will fit into my car?" Mr. Peterson gave him a stern look. "Just a little joke." Still no response. *Very little, I guess. I should have brought Zeke with me.*

"Exactly what is the nature of your business with us today, Mr. Anderson?"

Brian cleared his throat. "I have a little problem."

"I do need a little more detail than that."

"I can't make the full payment on my house loan this month."

Mr. Peterson nodded. "Will you be able to catch it up next month?"

"Afraid not, unless something falls into my lap." *Like a gold nugget the size of this guy's ego.*

"What kind of job do you have?"

"That's the origin of the problem. I was one of the statistics from the layoff at the Russell Morris Company you might have read

about in the paper maybe a while back. My severance package just ran out." *And maybe my luck with it.*

"So you were laid off and have not found new employment."

"That is correct."

"Exactly what do you expect us to do for you, Mr. Anderson?"

"Maybe you can call me Brian. I don't know what you do in these types of situations. Can I make payments? Maybe take out a second mortgage? Reduce my house payments?"

"First of all, you can't make installments of a payment. We need the full amount. As to obtaining a second mortgage, qualification for a new loan is based on employment. Since you have none, you won't qualify. The only way to reduce your payment is to refinance the loan."

"How do I do that?"

"Let me check over the numbers for you. What is your middle initial?"

"B as in Bruce."

"One moment." The man's fingers danced on the keyboard and then the right hand moved to click the electronic rodent.

"Hmm. Doesn't look good. You already had a thirty year mortgage. The rates have fallen since you took out your loan but since you've only had the loan for three years, the amount you save in payments won't be considerable. And we charge for the refinance with the fees due up front."

"What would those be?"

"About four thousand dollars."

Brian swallowed. "I can't swing that."

Mr. Peterson shrugged. "Doesn't sound like we'll be able to help you, Mr. Anderson."

*I bet it breaks your pea pickin' heart, Mr. Peterson.* "What am I going to do?"

"My advice is to sell your house."

"It's for sale already."

"In that case, hope that it sells before we have to foreclose."

Brian ran his fingers through his hair. "How long before that happens?"

"We usually start the process after the client is three payments behind."

"In other words three months."

"I guess you did the math. Now if you don't have anything else for me, I do have another client waiting."

"Hold on. This house is all I have. All of my savings went into the down payment. I've haven't been late with a payment in three years. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Sorry. Banks are a business, Mr. Anderson, not a charity. When you took out the loan, supposedly you understood the risks."

*Thanks a lot, Mr. Potter. Don't you have to get ready for your lunch with Ebenezer?*

Mr. Peterson got up and walked toward the door. "Bye, Mr. Anderson, and have a good day?"

Brian got up and followed. "How the hell am I supposed to have a good day after what you just told me?"

"Don't shoot me. I'm just the messenger."

*Oh, no you're more than a messenger. You're a pain in the derriere as well. If I ever see you on the street, you'd better hope I don't have Zeke with me or that I'm in a charitable mood.*

Brian walked out of the bank trying to cast off the memories of the smiles and royal treatment he got when he bought his house. Thoughts of polishing off a bottle of Scotch made his mouth water. Crap. I already drained the Red Label. I can't afford to buy more. *If I didn't have five extra mouths to feed, it might help. No good deed goes unpunished. At least Rosie gets some food stamps to help out.*

A bunch of kids playing catch with a football blocked the street that led to his house. They saw him coming but didn't move out of the way. The insane urge to drive right through them zoomed through his brain, but he fought it off. He closed his eyes and counted to ten after he braked. When he opened his eyes again, they were moving slowly out of his way. He gunned the engine and sped past them. *You kids don't know how close you came to finding out if God exists or not.*

When he got home, Zeke and Rosie were feeding the kids.

"How'd it go, boss?"

Brian held up three fingers.

"Three percent interest?"

"I wish. Three months until we're out on our ear."

"Not necessarily."

"What do you mean? The jerk at the bank made it crystal clear."

"He said three months of payments, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so. What's your point?"

"If you save your unemployment money for the next three months, can you make a payment?"

"Yeah, with some left over."

"That'll give you another month."

Brian circled his finger to indicate 'a big whoopee.' "That'll give us four months. That's a huge relief."

"Hold on. Will you have most of the money you need for the next month payment?"

Brian did a quick calculation in his head. "Yeah, but close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades."

"And atom bombs, but if we can scratch up a little money to help, we can limp through a fifth month."

"We'd be buying time. Stalling the inevitable."

"Maybe. When are you going to have the book done?"

"Tough to tell. At least a month away."

"So if you sell the book, we might make it?"

Brian shook his head. "If I sold the book today, it would a year or so before it actually came and started paying me royalties."

"What about an advance?"

"Haven't we already discussed this? Possibly I could get an advance. Lots of publishing houses are doing away with the advances, especially for a rookie author. However, I don't even have an agent yet."

"I'm working on that. I need you to write a chapter by chapter synopsis of the book so I can submit a query letter."

"Most agents want the manuscript finished before you query them. And also most agents take about two months to answer the queries."

Zeke nodded. "You just stated the answer to your problem."

"What? How'd I do that?"

"You said it takes them sixty days or so to get back to you. How do they know you don't have the book done yet? You'll have it done in sixty days, right?"

"I should. But what if the agent wants the manuscript in fifteen days or something? They'll be mad."

Zeke held up a finger and pointed in Brian's direction. "Will they sue you?"

"No, but they'll probably refuse to accept me as a client."

"Their bad. We'll submit to lots of agents, so who cares if one drops out of the race?"

"You've got this whole thing figured out."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures."

Brian nodded. "Well, I might not qualify for a home loan refinance, but I certainly qualify as desperate. Do you have a plan B?"

"Go on American Idol."

"You or me?"

Zeke snorted. "The good looking one, of course. That would be me."

"Naturally. We'd better skip right to plan C, in that case."

"Hey."

Rosie put up a hand, timidly. "May I speak?"

"Sure, you can't do any worse than Zeke."

"I think we need to pray."

Brian rolled his eyes. "And then again, maybe I was wrong."

"Jesus can help, Brian," said a little voice at the end of the table.

Brian looked down. "Was that you, Gemma?"

The little girl nodded.

Brian studied the cute eight-year-old. *Poor kid. If Jesus was going to help them, why hadn't he zapped her step-father with a bolt of lightning and scared him into being a good husband and father? The girl looked at him expectantly. "All right, Gemma. You say the prayer."*

Gemma grabbed the hand of her sibling next to her at the table. She held her other hand out to Brian. He stood in shock as the rest of the group grabbed the hands of the person next to them. Zeke even had Rosie's hand and held out his other hand to Brian. *Crap! How do I get out of this?*

"Brian, we need you in the circle," Gemma said.

Brian looked over at Zeke expecting his usual smart aleck comment. Zeke stood with his head bowed, hand still outstretched toward Brian. *I can't let the little girl down.* He carefully wrapped the little hand inside his own and then let Zeke engulf his own. He stared at the floor.

"Father in Heaven, we need your help. Brian is in trouble, Lord, send him money so he can keep this nice house. He's a good man and we love him and we really like living here with him. Please give him what he needs to get out of trouble. Send a special guardian angel to watch over him. Give him strength to soar like eagles and never get tired. Bless him real good. In the name of Jesus. Amen."

Everyone echoed amen except Brian. He was fighting back tears and also trying to conceal that fact from the others. He turned his back on them. "OK, thanks, Gemma. I have to go to my room now and work on my book." *All the way to the room the little girl's word's haunted him. Special angel and soar like eagles. Did Zeke put her up to that? Was I set up? Wait, I was the one who asked Gemma to do the praying. This is too crazy. They love me? Why do I feel the warmth inside? I must be going insane.*

\* \* \*

Later that evening Brian summoned Zeke to his bedroom to have a man to man chat.

"What's up, boss?" Zeke asked.

"Would you quit calling me that? You run this house more than I do now."

"I'm just –"

"I'm not complaining. You're doing fine. I just wanted to find out what the scoop is with you and God. You haven't become one of them, have you?"

"Them?"

"Believers, Christians, whatever term you want to use."

"Not me, man."

"You could have fooled me, Zeke. Seemed like you were right in there praying with them."

"Just playing the game. Rosie wants a man who is a Godly man, especially after her last disaster. I need to make her feel that I'm interested until we get married."

"Get married? You can't even support yourself? How the Sam Hill are you going to support four more people?"

"I didn't say we're getting married tomorrow or even soon. Life is going to change for the better. My attitude is good when I'm around her."

"What about me?"

"I don't know. How is your attitude around her?"

Brian grinned. "I stepped into another booby trap. I meant what about my influence on your attitude?"

"I don't know, man. Some days I think you keep me from soaring."

"Are you calling me a turkey? After all the lowlifes you've hung out with, you're going to consider me a bad companion?"

"Simmer down, hotstuff. I'm just kidding. You've been a good role model for the most part. You're like the brother I never had."

"Really?" Brian asked.

"Man, it's hard enough making confessions like this without you dragging mushy details out of me. Just take it at face value, OK?"

"Alright, brother. Don't you feel a little guilty leading Rosie along?"

"Dude, if I remember right, the plot of your book is pretty much what I'm doing now. Isn't your hero leading on the Angel look-alike in your story?"

Brian nodded. "Yeah, but this is a novel. Not real life. You're being deceptive. Don't you feel weird pretending to be something you're not?"

"Like you when you put on your Bob outfit?"

"Exactly."

Zeke blew out a deep breath. "Maybe a twinge."

"And maybe you're on the way to becoming the real deal. Maybe you're going to be really praying to your heavenly father, too."

Zeke shook his head. "Afraid not. I can't tolerate the thought of another father abandoning me if I make a mistake. Rosie keeps talking about sin all the time. There's no way I can live up to all the rules they have. So get off my case about it."

"Fine. Let's change the subject to the other topic I wanted to bring up." He handed Zeke a small device wrapped in plastic.

Zeke scratched his head. "What's this?"

"That is called a memory stick or a thumb drive or a bunch of other names. It's a portable storage device for computers. A mini disk you might say."

"So why do I want it?"

"I put my synopsis and first three chapters on it. And I wrote a query letter as well."

"I was going to do that."

"That was your plan, Zeke. This writing gig is mine. I'll do the writing. You find the agents to submit this stuff to."

"Some of them want paper instead of emails."

"Fine. I'll print off a few copies and give them to you. You mail them out. Let's try to target the ones who don't cost us any money first though."

"Makes sense. How do I use this thing?"

Brian showed him how to open the device.

"It's like a switchblade," Zeke said.

"I'll take your word for that. Just plug this into a USB port on the laptop. It's the only opening where this thing will fit."

"That sounds easy enough."

"When you plug it in, the computer will ask what you want to do with it. Click on Open Files. Then double click on the documents named Synopsis, SampleChapter, and QueryLetter."

Zeke nodded. "Sounds easy enough."

"If you need help, Rosie's kids can probably make time."

"Bite me."

"You think I want to ruin these perfect teeth? I think we're through here. Start earning your room and board."

"Isn't my cooking and cleaning enough? And I've been mowing the lawn, too. You don't do squat around here."

"I just pay the bills. Want to trade roles?"

Zeke hung his head. "Sure, play the trump card on me and then stand over my body and taunt me."

"Quit play acting with me. I know you. Maybe someday Rosie will see through you too. Maybe she already does and is pulling you along thinking she'll really get the hook of God into your mouth and mount you on her trophy wall."

"She doesn't have her own wall. When she does, I'll be the one providing it."

"It's probably none of my business, but are you two, uh . . . ."

"Sexually active?"

"That's a good term."

Zeke shook his head. "She don't believe in sex before marriage. She's gets mad if I do anything out of line."

"Good. Then I don't have to worry about funny noises from down the hall."

"Your virgin ears are safe."

"Cool beans."

\* \* \*

Two weeks went by. Brian's current house payment was delinquent past the penalty stage. That was going to cost him an extra \$50 when he made the next payment. He hadn't counted on that. He was busy going over the financial bad news when Zeke knocked on his door.

"What's up, dude?"

"You have a problem."

Brian's face fell. "How much more of this 'sky is falling' thing can I handle? Give me second to brace myself. Now what is it?"

"You have a request for a full manuscript."

"Pardon? You said that near my trick ear. Sounded like you said a full manuscript."

"That's from that Jimmy Stewart movie about the angel and Christmas."

"Yeah. Don't change the subject. What about a full manuscript? Who wants it?"

"Some agent. How long can we put them off?"

"Don't know. If I work on it eighteen hours a day, maybe I can finish in two weeks. But, Zeke. This is only a rough draft. I need to

go through and polish the whole thing again. That will take some time."

"We don't have that much time. Let's just send the rough draft when you finish. I'll delay my response for a couple of days and then write back and say that I'm Mr. Anderson's secretary and I'm sorry to inform the agent that you've gone to Canada on a fishing trip and are unable to communicate until your return."

"Administrative assistant. They don't call them secretaries any more. Use the term administrative assistant."

"Whatever you say, boss. This will give her the impression that you aren't desperate to land a contract."

"Her?"

"You got a problem with a woman agent?"

Brian furrowed his brow. "I guess not. What's her name?"

"I was afraid you'd ask me that. I had to write it down. It's like Mexican or something. Angela Agweela or something like that."

"Let me see that." Brian took the paper from Zeke and studied it. "Are you kidding me? Is this whole thing a joke?"

It was Zeke's turn to act perplexed. "Why would you think that?"

"Do you know what that last name, which you butchered the pronunciation on, translates to in English?"

"I haven't a clue."

"Aguila is the word for eagle. And Angela is Spanish for Angel."

Zeke thought about it for a moment and then broke into laughter. "Shades of the Twilight zone, huh? Cue the spooky music here."

"Shut up. Why do I even tell you this stuff and encourage you? It's just a freaking coincidence. Send the eagle lady the manuscript when I finish and hopefully she'll be a real angel."

"You got it. You better get back to the keyboard since you have a serious deadline now. Good night."

"You better get enough sleep for both of us. I might make this one an all-nighter."

"Tomorrow's another day."

"Yeah, one that I might need to make an all-nighter again."

Zeke threw up an arm. "Wait a second. I need to proofread the new pages. Maybe I'll be up all night as well."

"I forgot about that. They're on the thumb drive. Have at it."

"You're all heart."



## Chapter 9

The next night Brian staggered out to get some hot coffee. While he was pouring it, a car pulled into the driveway. A minute later, Zeke and his entourage entered the back door. Rosie and the kids departed for their rooms.

Brian waited until he and Zeke were alone. "Where you guys been?"

"Down at the shelter."

Brian frowned. "What for?"

"No sense us eating you out of house and home, and food too if we get sick of swallowing drywall."

"Funny. Besides you don't have to cook or do dishes."

"That's true. Never thought of that."

"Yeah, right. So what's new down there?"

"Angel asked about you. She wondered what happened to you."

"She asked for me Brian or me Bob?"

"Bob, of course. She said God keeps revealing that he is going to do great things for God's kingdom."

"Man, how far off can someone be?"

Zeke shrugged. "She seems so sure, and Angel is usually right about things. Oh, yeah. Rosie got hooked up with Nelson. She had us sit with him tonight. During the meal, she asked him to go to church with us."

"That probably scared him into silence."

"Nope. He accepted."

"You're not planning on hitting me up for another adoption, are you?"

Zeke shook his head. "Not me. I wouldn't be surprised if Rosie did though. She's got a heart for hurting people."

"Then she should have a heart for me 'cause you guys are killing me here."

"You want us to move out?"

"Zeke, that's not what I said. I was more or less joking. There have been some challenges but it's been fun having family for a change. I've been alone ever since my divorce. I had plenty of privacy and peace and quiet then. It's good to have some life in the house. But I don't know if I can handle another one."

"I hear you. Especially an odd duck like Nelson. I have been thinking though about the way your book ends."

"What about it?"

"You know how the hero and his new wife start a commune and invite people from the rescue shelter to live with them."

"Fairly well, since I fabricated the plot."

Zeke's chest puffed out slightly. "With a little input from me."

"Very little, but what is your point?"

"You've kind of started doing that for real with me and Rosie's family. What if we kept going and really created a home for those without one?"

"Earth to Zeke. We don't even have enough money to pay for this house. How are we going to purchase a commune?"

"I'm just thinking out loud. What if you had the money? Would you do it?"

Brian paused to ponder the possibilities. "The concept is kind of cool, but it sounds like a logistical nightmare. Not everybody is as well behaved as Rosie and her clan."

"What about me?"

"Surprisingly, you've proved to be a domesticated type yourself. People have troubles though. Life brings us enough trouble without our human weaknesses involved. I couldn't deal with trying to help an alcoholic or a druggie break away from the chains of addiction. What about violent people who can't control themselves? I really have more than I can handle with my own issues."

Zeke nodded. "You're right. You're not big enough of a man for such a mission." He started to walk away.

"Hold on there, master manipulator."

"Who me?"

"Don't play dumb with me. I know you throw out those caustic remarks to get me to rise to the challenge."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Zeke said.

"Eat a rock. Well, it won't work. I don't care if you think I'm a weenie. I'm not taking the weight of the world on my shoulders so you can think that I'm a real man."

Zeke took a white handkerchief out of his pocket and waved it back and forth.

"What's that all about? Are you surrendering?"

"You called it. I won't try to encourage you to be the best that you can be any more."

"You stole that phrase from the army."

"Didn't steal it. I earned the right to use it by serving my four years."

Brian shook his head. "Whatever, but I can't use it because writers are supposed to slay the cliché."

"That's cool. I just want you to know that my opinion of you has changed since I've been with you these how many weeks. I've lost track of how many. You are a man in my eyes already, Brian."

The blood rose into Brian's cheeks. "I never thought I'd hear those words."

"I never thought I'd say them. But you've earned my respect."

"When you threatened to slice me open like a science class frog that day, I never dreamed I tell you some day that I had great respect for you either. I still don't understand why I ever asked you to move in with me. That was basically insane, but it's had a profound impact on me."

"Maybe it was a God thing."

Brian looked at Zeke and they both broke out into hysterical laughter.

"Well, brother Zeke, I'd love to sit around the campfire with you here and discuss all the good things that God has done for us, but my manuscript calls and I must answer. You should be getting back to your prayer room and blessing my work."

"Roger that. Your work no doubt needs a lot of blessing."

Brian clenched his fist and circled it in front of him.

"Now I'm really scared. I won't sleep tonight."

"Good, you can catch up on your proofreading. I put my thumb drive in your room with a new file on it."

"They abolished slavery you know."

Brian grinned. "I heard a rumor about that. Good night."

"Catch you in the morning."

\* \* \*

Nine mornings later, Brian staggered into the kitchen and put the thumb drive on the table. "There's the ending. I'm going to sleep."

Zeke picked up the miniature drive and headed to his room to get to work. Unknown to Brian, Rosie also was reading the manuscript and suggesting changes.

When Brian got up again, Zeke handed him the drive. "Ball's in your court. Two minute warning."

"Wait a second. You're mixing your football and your basketball analogies."

"So sue me. In other words, this is the final installment. Fix these pages and we're ready to submit."

"I hope you don't mind if I eat first. The last time I ate George Bush was seeking his first term."

"You're probably exaggerating, but I'm cool with you having some breakfast before you go into full court press mode. Just remember that the sooner you get it into my hands, the sooner the agent gets it."

"Ah, yes. The eagle lady. Mustn't disappoint her. Have you heard from any other agents?"

Zeke nodded. "A couple of Dear John letters. Most of them don't bother to notify you one way or another. I'm afraid Angela might be the only game in town for you."

"Where is she located?"

"Portland."

"Maine or Oregon?"

"Oregon. If you have to meet in person, you can drive down."

"Or maybe she can drive up here. After all, I am a pretty hot catch."

Zeke laughed. "And a legend in your own mind."

"Just you remember that when I'm rich and famous."

"If that ever happens, you'll be a legend in my mind as well."

Brian laughed. "What an honor that would be. How about rustling me up some fried eggs? I'm going to dash into the shower so my body doesn't totally forget what water feels like."

"Coming right up. Don't dawdle too long under the shower, or your eggs will be getting cold."

"Give me five minutes before you start. If I finish the rewrite today, maybe we could go down to the shelter tonight."

"As in me and Brian or me and Bob."

"Bob. That's the one that Angel seems to favor."

"I thought you quit thinking about Angel."

Brian chewed a tiny piece off a fingernail. "Do you ever think of booze?"

"Yeah. I was addicted."

"Bingo. The more I try to toss her off my train of thought, the closer she comes to my engine."

"It's torture looking at something you can't have. I remember peering in the window of the bakery and wanting something from there so bad, but knowing I had no money in my pocket. It was a bittersweet experience."

"That pretty well sums up the way I feel. Did you keep walking by the bakery and pressing your nose against the glass?"

"Are you a psychic?"

Brian rolled his eyes. "I said that to her once. She was upset. Why is it that every where I turn something reminds me of her?"

"I have no answers for you. I thought you were going to shower."

"Right! On my way. Give me seven minutes."

"I thought you said five."

"I'm adjusting for inflation."

"Take off, eh."

\* \* \*

It was nearly five o'clock when Brian finished his edit. He delivered the precious cargo to Zeke and watched as the big man forwarded the document to the agent via email. Brian raised his hands to indicate a touchdown. "It's gone. Ball's in her court now. We probably should send out more query letters now, but not until tomorrow. Let's go down to the shelter and celebrate."

"My favorite place for a party. Are we taking the whole gang?"

"Might as well."

"Then it's time to introduce them to Bob."

"Wait. We can't do that. The kids might accidentally tip somebody off. How about you drive the car and pick me up a couple of blocks away? Tell everybody that Brian is sleeping but he wanted you to pick up an old friend of his."

Zeke shrugged. "As you wish. I do like driving the car myself so I'm not worrying about getting there safely."

"Yeah. Now I get to worry."

An hour later, Zeke herded everyone into Brian's car. Gemma sat in the front seat with Zeke.

"How come you're driving Brian's car?"

"Because your mom's car is too small for all of us plus a friend that we're going to pick up."

"Oh, I get it."

"And there's my friend."

"Oh, that guy. I remember him. He's the mental retard."

Zeke grimaced. "Not quite, honey. He had an injury. His brain just doesn't function right any more."

"Yeah, like I said, he's a retard."

"OK, honey, but it's not nice to call people that so please don't mention it while Bob's with us."

"Alright, Zeke."

Zeke stopped the car, and Brian got in. The kids did most of the talking on the way to the shelter.

Brian felt he should be elated that he had finished his book, but he still felt empty inside. Hopefully seeing Angel tonight would help fill that void. He didn't even mind if she brought up the topic of God if she'd put that delicate hand on his shoulder again. His expectations of a warm greeting were exceeded when he went through the food line.

"Bob, you're back. We missed you. How have you been?"

He nodded. "K."

"Wonderful. You enjoy your meal."

"K." *How I wished I could pull off this disguise and shout to the world that I am Brian. I'm the same man. How could it really be God who talks to her if she doesn't know that Bob and Brian are one and the same? She's hearing voices in her head. Gotta be.*

After the six were seated, Nelson walked by.

Rosie yelled out for him to sit by her. He thought for a moment and then accepted her request. Brian and Zeke exchanged glances. While they were eyeballing each other, Soaring Eagle arrived and sat down on the other side of Nelson.

Brian had a forkful of food headed to his mouth when Rosie announced that her church was having a couple of ex-gay people speak on Sunday. He put the fork back down on his plate. After making eye contact with Zeke, he tried to signal something to him. Zeke shook his head.

Brian's frustration level was going off the chart. *Maybe I should have a sudden healing and thus have the brain power to ask this question that's burning in my head. Or can I present the question clumsily but still clearly enough to elicit a proper answer? Yeah, let's try that approach.* "How become ex-gay?"

Everyone looked at Brian.

A hand fell on his shoulder. The scent that rose to his nose had resided in his memory for weeks. He closed his eyes and drank it in.

"Let me answer that question."

That voice was familiar to Brian also. He looked up to see Soaring Eagle staring at him. He couldn't pull his gaze away this time.

"Homosexuality is a choice man makes. God made male and female to populate the earth and to produce children that would teach their adults what it was like to be a parent. And parents were to model the love of God to the children."

"I hate to interrupt this," Rosie said, "but Bob has some brain damage. I'm afraid that he won't be able to understand this complicated explanation."

Soaring Eagle shook his head. "Bob has been healed of his brain injury. He is able to understand everything I say. Is that not correct, Bob?"

All eyes returned to Brian. *"Oh, my aching butt! What do I do now? Fake like I don't understand his question? Pretend a miracle has just occurred?"*

"Praise the Lord! God is good!" Angel said.

The angelic female voice behind him clinched the deal. *Just because I lose the bogus handicap Zeke pawned off on me doesn't mean my cover is blown. What are the disadvantages? It might be safer to stay dumb, but I can have meaningful conversations with Angel if I'm back to my normal brilliant self.*

Brian nodded. "I feel different. My head seems cleared. Your name is Soaring Eagle, and I can understand you." He turned around and looked at Angel. "And you're Miss Angel, the queen of the mashed potatoes."

Everyone laughed.

"That's right, Bob. I'm the mashed potato lady."

"You're pretty."

A blush sprang up on Angel's cheeks highlighting her beauty. "Thank you, Bob. Let's listen to Soaring Eagle's answer now, OK?"

"Yes, Angel." Brian dutifully turned around to face the man who scared him witless.

"Those of our world who would like to think themselves to be wise have written that a person is born to be a homosexual. God has written that he created them male and female. Satan has confused people in every area of life. He feeds them lies and keeps them from finding the truth of those who worship in spirit and in truth. Those who totally lay their life down for Jesus find that when he gives it back to them, they are no longer held in bondage to anything on earth, including sexual practices which find disfavor in God's eyes."

Everyone looked at Brian again. *What? Now that people think I've become like the Scarecrow and got a brain, the pressure will be on for me to say something intelligent. How do I comment on that religious nonsense?*

Brian was rescued from his discomfort by a voice next to Soaring Eagle. Nelson looked straight into Soaring Eagle's eyes. "So Jesus can set me free from this problem which causes me to live in two worlds?"

"Yes, Nelson. Jesus can do anything, if you give him permission."

The sad young man nodded. "I want to hear these people speak."

"Me too," Angel said. "How about you, Bob? Would you like to go?"

"I like women not men."

A few people snickered. Brian recognized Zeke as one of the contributors.

Angel smiled. "That's good, Bob, but you can still go."

Brian felt a sudden inspiration. "Can I sit by you?"

Angel's smile deteriorated. She rolled her eyes from side to side, obviously deep in thought.

"Sure. If you go, you can sit by me and Nelson and Rosie."

It was Brian's turn to smile. This one was not fake. "OK." He caught Zeke's eye and winked slightly at him. He could sense that Zeke was in jeopardy of biting his tongue in half.

Brian was quiet on the way home, but his brain was churning at a prodigious rate. *Not too shabby. Finished my book, got a brain, and reached first base with Angel all in one day. Things are looking up. Now if I could stumble across about ten thousand smackeroos, things would be downright peachy*

Zeke dropped off Rosie and the kids first. He drove down the street for a couple of blocks and parked. "Are you really going to church?"

"Hellooooo. I have a date with Angel."

"I don't think she considers it a date."

Brian shrugged. "That's her problem. This is just the start of a new reality for her. I'm going to rescue her from those Bible pushers."

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe Miss Angel is as special as she is because of her beliefs?"

"Are you implying that if I succeed in wresting her from the clutches of the zombies, she's going to transform into some kind of monster?"

"It could happen. If you mix all the ingredients for a batch of cookies and leave out the sugar, you'll have some good looking cookies that make you barf."

"That's a pretty crude analogy."

Zeke nodded. "Crude is good sometimes. It gets people's attention."

"I'll take my chances. By the way, I got an idea for improving my book. What if I added a gay angle to it?"

"How would you do that?"

"Not sure. I'd have to work the Rainbow Warriors into the action. I know! I'd have militant gays versus gays that want their rights but want to get along in peace with their heterosexual neighbors."

"And they fight?"

"Yep."

"Who wins?"

Brian threw up his arms. "I don't know yet. The details are foggier than a prostitute in church."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. It's something my dad used to say."

"I thought he was a missionary."

Brian snorted. "That happened after I grew up. When I was in high school, my dad was a crackup with toilet humor being his specialty."

"So a prostitute in church is foggy? What will you be when you're there?"

"As out of place as a porcupine in a balloon factory, probably."

"Or an Oakland Raider fan in the old Kingdom."

Brian nodded. "Or an Oakland Raider fan anywhere where people are civilized."

Zeke laughed. "You will be definitely out of place. Poor Angel. Poor me. I'll be there, too, suffering by having to watch you squirm."

"If I was going as Brian, I might squirm. As Bob, I'll be as laid back as a surfer dude."

"Just before you wipe out. Let's get back to your book changes. You know the agent already has your book."

"So. It's just the agent. If she decides to represent me, I can send her a new copy to present to publishers. I'd probably have to do some rewriting anyway."

"True. With all the hubbub about the same-sex marriage issue, you might be increasing your audience appeal. That might help you hit the big time."

"My exact thoughts. I'd be happy just to hit the middle time. I suppose it's time for me to duck into the phone booth and change into my much more attractive alter ego. Your story, if anyone asks when we get home, is that you saw me out for a walk and picked me up."

"Got it."

Brian pulled some clothes out of the trunk, jumped into the backseat and began assuming his real identity. "I'm getting sick of

putting this costume on. Angel better not take too long in falling for my charms, or I might give up."

"If your chances went online in Las Vegas, I'm afraid the bookies would be making you a billion to one long shot in this game."

"Makes no difference. I always did like beating the odds."

"Whatever. Did you want me to chauffeur you home, or do you want to get back in the front seat again?"

"Home, James. I'll check out chauffeur uniforms tomorrow."

"Save your hard earned cash for making the house payment and your jokes for somebody who appreciates your sense of humor."

"Come on Zeke, give me a break."

"Arm or a leg?"

"So I suppose you consider yourself funny?"

"Along with handsome, intelligent, and suave."

Brian snorted. "Suave. Sounds like some kind of shampoo. Whatever happened to that dirty street rat I dragged home whose opinion of himself was about equal in altitude with the gutter?"

"Just like a desert flower that emerges when the rain brings refreshment, I was just waiting for the right environment to blossom."

"And you owe it all to me."

"Well, boss, as a matter of fact, I do owe a lot of it to you. It's kind of hard for me to say this, but . . . ."

"But what?"

"Thanks."

Brian ran his fingers through his hair. "It really is easier when we're hammering on each other. It's embarrassing to get serious sometimes. I'm just glad I could help out. I don't know if I could have finished my book without your encouragement."

"You mean my strong arming techniques?"

"That too. Anyway, I'd be remiss if you didn't know that I do appreciate you."

Zeke was silent and rubbed at his cheek. Brian was pretty sure the thick fingers had lifted away teardrops.

## Chapter 10

Brian slaved away on the proposed changes to his story. He did not visit the shelter the rest of the week. On Sunday, he prepared to attend his first church service since he attended with a friend in elementary school. Back in those days, he dressed up to visit. Today he was dressing down in his Bob costume. His thoughts dwelled solely on the thrill of being seated next to Angel. He remembered wishing the services would get over sooner when he was younger. Today he was thinking about offering the pastor a bribe to deliver an ultra long sermon. He was almost finished putting on his costume and singing *You Are My Special Angel* when he heard a noise next to him.

"Gemma, what are you doing in here?"

"Brian? Bob? Which one are you?"

"Oh geez, why did you come in here?"

"I wanted to hear you sing."

Brian rolled his eyes. "That's really nice honey, but you can't just barge into a man's bedroom."

"The door wasn't locked."

"Gemma, what are you doing in there?"

Both of the participants in the mini-drama looked up to see Rosie standing outside the now open door.

"Sorry, Mom. I was just talking to Brian or Bob. I don't know which one it is."

Zeke and the other two kids appeared next to Rosie. Zeke let out a whistle. "I think I'll let you explain this one yourself." He exited.

"This is a little embarrassing."

"I'm sorry, Brian, she just doesn't behave some times. Come on Gemma, and let the man finish dressing."

"How do you know it's Brian, Mom? He looks like Bob just without a beard. Maybe he shaved it."

"Gemma! Now!"

"Oh, look, Mommy. He did shave his beard and here it is." Gemma lifted the fake beard off the dresser.

Rosie stormed into the room. Gemma dropped the beard and started toward her mother. When the two met, Rosie swooped down and picked the little girl up. "Don't you ever go into someone's bedroom again! Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mom. I'm sorry, Bob" The youngster dissolved into tears. Rosie began to carry her precious cargo out of the room.

"Hold on, Rosie."

She stopped and waited for Brian to approach. He reached down with a finger and gently brushed Gemma's cheek. "What you did wasn't right, but I forgive you. OK?"

The girl nodded.

"I'll explain to you guys later about the, you know, Brian and Bob thing. Will you ask Zeke to come back here?"

"Will do. Again, my apologies for the intrusion."

Brian shrugged. "She's just a kid."

Rosie shepherded her daughter out of Brian's room and shut the door. A minute later a knock sounded.

"Is that you, Zeke?"

"Yes, Bob? Or is it Brian?"

"Shut up and get in here!"

The door opened, and Zeke entered grinning like a Wheel of Fortune contestant who just solved the puzzle. "What's up?"

"Obviously, I won't have to sneak out of the house any more so you can pick me up. Perhaps you can explain to Rosie and the kids why I've been doing this and why they need to keep their mouths shut about it. "

"I can do the first part, but what is the problem with them spilling the beans? Are you afraid Miss Angel wouldn't want to sit next to Brian?"

"Especially after she found out that I was deceiving her, even though it was for a good cause. She will probably feel the urge to dump that big tray of mashed potatoes over my head."

Zeke surveyed Brian's head.

"What are you doing?"

"Just trying to get a vision of how you'd look with mashed potatoes dripping off your ears."

"It wouldn't be pretty. You can be sure of that."

"That's no problem. You can't make a silk purse out of sow's ears."

Brian let his mouth dangle open. "Where did that come from?"

"Something my grandma used to say."

"Between your gram and my dad, I believe we might have inherited all the clichés in the English language. I just got an idea about the kids. Bribe them with a reward of candy or something tasty, but they don't get the reward until my need for the disguise is over."

Zeke scratched his head. "They might want a down payment."

"I have some Snickers stashed away if you need them. Get the best deal you can and don't let Gemma sucker you with those doe eyes."

"Why don't you handle this transaction yourself?"

"Because I'd let Gemma sucker me with those doe eyes."

Zeke laughed as he departed from the room.

\* \* \*

An hour later, the laden sedan sped toward the church. Brian kept his eyes shut most of the way to avoid getting nervous about Zeke's driving. One Nervous Nelly in the group was more than enough for today. Before they exited the car into the parking lot, Zeke reminded everyone not to talk to or about Bob.

The kids ran ahead with their mother. Brian shuffled to the front door and stopped.

"What's the matter, boss? Feet getting cold?" Zeke asked.

"Let's just say I've been more comfortable."

"Maybe your conscience is pricking you. God is digging into your flesh just a little bit to jerk your chain."

"Shut up. I don't need any reminders that this whole approach might be considered a little bit . . . I don't know . . . immoral maybe."

"Better you than me. You know, you could always go back to the car and sleep while we're in the service." Zeke opened the front door. "I kind of wonder sometimes what it would be like to go after God the way that we pursue a woman. Maybe we'd find answers that way."

Brian opened his mouth to fling back a snappy answer, but before the words escaped the vision of Angel in a white dress grabbed his attention. He stepped through the entrance without another word. Despite his single point of focus, the profile of Soaring Eagle registered on his brain and dropped a wet blanket on his fire. For some reason the thought of sending smoke signals struck him. *I could tell Angel I love her in smoke language. Why don't I just come out and tell her in English? Because she'd be horrified.*

The party from the rescue shelter meandered into the sanctuary where they almost took up one whole pew. Brian sat between Angel and Nelson. Soaring Eagle sat on the outside edge on the other side of Nelson. Brian surveyed the room. The décor was nothing to write home about. He had expected to behold an ostentatious display of art, statues, or stained glass. The only

decoration appeared to be a large wooden cross on the stage. Brian peered at it for a minute, but jerked his glance away from it. Previews of the Mel Gibson movie about the crucifixion still burned into his eyeballs. *I never should have watched that emotional propaganda.*

Brian watched Soaring Eagle look around the room. It appeared that something had caught his interest. Brian tried to follow his line of sight to figure out what his nemesis was eyeballing. He noticed three or four guys in the crowd who stood out in his mind. He couldn't precisely explain what he saw, since it was more like a feeling than an observation. Soaring Eagle got up and went to the front of the church where the man Angel had identified as the pastor was talking to people in the front row. Brian watched him closely.

"Is something the matter, Bob?"

Brian turned to Angel. "I don't know. Soaring Eagle is acting funny."

Angel frowned. "God has a way of talking to that man that I've never seen before. I'm totally jealous, in a good way of course. I get words from the Lord often, but our Indian friend seems to dwell in God's presence."

*Our friend? Speak for yourself.* He turned back to observe Soaring Eagle get the pastor's attention. After a few words, the pastor lost his smile and looked out into the congregation. After a few more words he nodded, and then the Indian retraced his steps back to the row where his puzzled comrades sat. Brian groped for the words he could use to probe into this mini-mystery. Angel beat him to the punch.

"Is the Holy Spirit telling you something?"

The man gazed at Brian, even though Angel had asked the question. "Do you know the song *Earnest Prayer*?"

Angel nodded. "It's one of my favorites."

"Be ready to sing the chorus with me when I do."

Brian furrowed his brow. "Are you going to provide music for the service?" He looked back at Angel to see her reaction to his question. She was looking at Soaring Eagle. Brian's gaze switched back to him.

"It appears we have some spiritual warfare going on here today. God told me to be ready to lead the congregation into that song. If the event arises to call forth the heavenly hosts, that is exactly what I'll do."

Brian felt like he was getting claustrophobic. *What am I doing here? This was supposed to be a chance to talk to Angel. Instead*

*I'm in the middle of crazy people and a spiritual war, whatever the hell that is. And to top it off, I'm dressed in this hot and strange costume. On second thought, maybe I'm the crazy one here.*

Brian looked over at Zeke. *That looks like one big happy family. Instant fatherhood.* He looked back to Angel. She was studying him.

"A penny for your thoughts, Bob."

"I don't have change for a penny."

Angel laughed. "That's a cute joke, but sounds like a self putdown to me. Of course your thoughts are worth more than a penny."

Brian felt a tingle go up his backbone. "That's very kind of you to say, Miss Angel." *This is more like what I had in mind.*

Brian's tingles were extinguished by the beginning of the service. A group of musicians led the congregation in singing four songs. Brian found himself tapping his foot to the pulsating beat of the drums. *They didn't have drums where I went to church with my buddy. This isn't so bad.*

The worship team finished their portion, and the pastor took the stage. A man and a woman came out and sat down on chairs placed behind microphone stands on the right side of the platform

Brian looked over at Soaring Eagle. *Doesn't look like he's going to sing. The program appears to be over, and the commercial is ready to start.*

The pastor's voice came through the sound system loud and clear.

"Today we have unusual treat. Instead of you having to listen to me deliver a sermon, I'll be interviewing two special guests. These two brave people have volunteered to share their testimony of how they were saved from a homosexual lifestyle. They –"

A shout from a couple of rows behind them startled Brian.

"Homophobes!"

"Gay Power!"

The sounds of running feet caused Brian to look into the aisle. Two men with scarves over their faces sprinted toward the platform. The pastor shepherded the two guests out of view of the congregation. The intruders reached the stage and each grabbed a microphone.

"Rainbow Warrior Power!"

"Burn in –"

The end of the sentence did not make it to the speakers overhead. After the two men spoke through the microphones without success, they threw the devices on the floor and moved up

to stand on the edge of the stage, probably to be heard more clearly.

Brian saw a movement in his peripheral vision. He looked up and saw Nelson hiding under the pew in front of them. Brian also beheld Soaring Eagle rising to his feet as he began to sing. "Let the fire fall. Let the wind blow. Let the glory come down."

Angel and Rosie stood up and joined in. The pastor reappeared on the stage and dashed to the drum set. He grabbed a drum stick and starting pounding to the beat of the song. All around the room more people stood and added to the volume of their song. Many raised their hands toward the ceiling. The men on stage looked dazed by what was going on. Brian felt confusion growing in himself as well. He felt drawn to the music at the same time it scared him and made him want to escape from the pulsating melody. He looked back and saw men in the aisles. Some of these were the same people he had felt Soaring Eagle had been interested in. A couple of them continued to yell, but their noise was drowned out by the singing of the congregation and the pounding of the drum. Brian couldn't understand how so few singers could produce so much volume. The quality of the singing far exceeded that of the previous tunes they had sung. He had a strange thought going through his head that they were being accompanied by a heavenly chorus. *I'm losing it.*

One of the wannabe terrorists ran up to Soaring Eagle's side and hoisted the club he was carrying into a cocked position. The Indian turned to face the man, folded his arms, and looked the man directly in the eye. The man hesitated, dropped the club, and ran toward the back of the church. The other men who had invaded the sanctuary tried to blot out the sound of the music by holding their hands over their ears. They began writhing as if the music caused physical pain before fleeing the church, screaming unintelligibly as they ran out.

The congregation continued to sing. They repeated the same chorus over and over. Brian felt himself being swept up in the emotion that emanated from those around him and from the vibrations of the music. He had to force himself not to join in. Contemplations of escaping to the outside also went through his mind.

Finally the pastor stopped beating the percussions and returned to the front of the church. "I do believe that the glory of the Lord just fell on this place. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!"

A chorus of amens greeted him.

"And it fell right on the toes of those who would mock the Lord God almighty and try to prevent His word from going forth in the world. Can we have a clap offering to the Lord of Lords who has just delivered us from the enemy's plans?"

More amens sounded as the people begin to applaud and lift their gazes upward. Brian glanced at Angel. He had never seen her more beautiful. Her arms were outstretched over her head, and her body swayed as she brought her hands together to pay homage to her creator.

Nelson crawled out from under the pew. He looked at Brian. It appeared he wanted to say something but the noise of the congregation was too loud. Brian read the question in his eyes as "what the hell is going on here?" Brian was hoping to get the answer to that himself.

When the noise was dying down, the pastor walked into the wings of the stage again. He returned just as the last echoes of the applause were fading into the woodwork. The two guest speakers were with him. They righted the chairs which had been tipped over by the unwanted guests and retrieved the microphones. After a little testing, they were satisfied that the equipment had not been broken. The pastor sat down in the middle chair.

"Now, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?"

The congregation erupted in laughter.

"Obviously the Rainbow Warriors weren't planning on encountering the one who created the rainbow. My friends, if you ever had any doubts of the existence of Satan, those moments of skepticism should have been overshadowed by what we witnessed here today. God's spiritual plan for the salvation of His people has always been under attack by the enemy. But also God's plan for the physical world, the coming together of man and woman to form a unit which produces offspring as well as a nurturing environment of love is in the crosshairs of the Devil's rifle. The destruction of the foundation of our society, holy marriage, is the goal of the evil one.

"Homosexual activists like these are just one front to a much bigger war. The plan is to force this deviant lifestyle upon us in the name of freedom and of tolerance. The name of science is also invoked as people step up to claim that people are born as homosexuals. We have two people with us today who can help dispel that myth. They lived the lie. Jesus set them free from it and they're here now to testify of their experience. The Bible says that we overcome by the blood of the lamb and the word of our testimony. We've just had a visitation from the lamb and now let us build our own testimonies through hearing the stories of two people

who lived a lifestyle they are not proud of – as we all have at some point. The big difference is these people are on center stage to tell the world about their misadventures. Most of us are content to hide our sins where no one will ever find them. So others will never suspect we've been less than perfect. I know that's where I'm at. These people are sacrificing their own privacy to share their shame with us. However with the bad memories of being prisoners in the enemy's camp, these people have stories of victory that show that greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world."

The man and woman shared their stories of deliverance. Afterward the pastor thanked them. "We've just seen the violent reaction of some of the homosexual community to religious groups who stand and make the statement that they refuse to let America become another Sodom and Gomorrah. We know that the people who renounce their homosexual orientation are among the chief targets of these people. Why did you decide to go public with this information and risk the wrath and perhaps physical attacks of these people?"

The man cleared his throat. "First of all, it was laying down my life and giving it to Jesus which freed me. I'm already a dead man. As Second Corinthians 5:15 says, "I live not onto myself but onto Him who died for me. As Paul said to live is Christ and to die is Christ. I speak out because I feel led by God to do so. The gay spokesmen accuse the Christian community of hatred. I find it ironic that people who led me to the Lord were some of the most loving people I have ever met. They didn't and don't hate homosexuals. They do hate sin, one of which is the use of our bodies in ungodly acts. Ironically some of most blatant hatred I have seen poured out of people at demonstrations that I attended when I was gay. These were the people railing against the hatred of those who opposed same sex marriage. I guess this might be a situation where the pot was calling the kettle black, or maybe the crackpot.

"Speaking of blacks, the most I have ever heard the word nigger was at some of these rallies. The gays want to compare their struggle for civil rights with those of African-American heritage. Black condemnation of homosexuality is the highest among all the racial breakdowns. And speaking of civil, ironically, this issue seems to have enough dynamite to blow up the entire United States. Hate crimes legislation is being passed that will make it a crime to preach that homosexuality is wrong. How much further down that road will we go? How soon is the government going to be telling us exactly what we can preach and believe?"

"People say sexual activity of any kind is just natural. Jesus said the natural man is at enmity with God who has called and commanded us to rise above nature. Supernatural is thought of as being miracles and also applies to a creator who resides outside of nature. However, I submit the idea to you that whenever you rise above fleshly desires to do the will of God, you are performing supernatural acts, behavior that goes against the nature of man. Water running uphill. People sacrificing their own lives or resources to save others. We are called to have our bodies subject to the Lord Jesus Christ and His commandments. God has ordained the institution of marriage and said that this is where sexual activity is condoned. Outside of this, that activity is akin to that of the animal world. Not only is it not holy, but it is destructive. The world does not want to hear this message. My mission is to deliver it in love. My words will likely be of little importance in this battle, but the glory of the Father revealed in a combination of love and truth might be enough to win over those who truly are seeking God."

The woman nodded. "I completely concur. One of the two things that bothered me the most and caused me to make my stand is the lying that takes place by people who condemn those who refuse to accept homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle. The second thing is the number of churches and pastors who have risen to the defense of this sin. Jesus said we should love our fellow man. Telling people that anything they do is just fine and dandy is not love but rather patronization. If you love someone who is headed down a path of destruction, you don't tell them that everything is cool so they feel good about themselves. Truth requires that people suffer pain on both sides – those delivering it and those receiving it. We don't like to be told we're wrong. Let me use an analogy. If we're practicing for a spelling bee championship and we misspell a word, it hurts to be told that we're not right. It might hurt the parent as well to deliver the news because they want their child to be happy. But not learning the correct spelling of the word could cause a loss of the competition. We have to suffer a little pain now to prevent the big pain later, similar to a vaccination. What all parties need to do is to ask what God wants of them. If people truly sought God's will instead of their own, this problem, and many others, would just go away.

"Another factor in causing me to relive the pain of my past is the mobilization of pro-gay forces like an army. Their intent is not just to have same sex marriage legalized. Their goal is to annihilate any resistance to their agendas and to try to move the teeter totter in the opposite direction so that heterosexual people

will become the targets of discrimination. You've seen the tip of the iceberg. They will be using every legal weapon available to them to prosecute churches and businessmen who won't hire homosexuals. The educational wing is already seeing the effects of the new legislation. Kindergarten kids are being invited to the same-sex weddings of their teachers. And the most heinous and hidden part of the process is that they will be recruiting to their ranks. They like to use the theory that homosexuals are born and not made, but if they really believed that, why would they have plans to recruit youngsters into their lifestyle? Maybe you don't believe that is happening. I've been there and done that. My goal is to prevent that from happening."

The pastor nodded. "I'd like to thank both of you for coming today. I've learned a lot, but I know there is more I need to learn. These two have volunteered to stick around and answer your personal questions if you want to talk to them. Now some parting words for all of you in the congregation, Jesus said in Matthew 19:6 what God hath joined man should not put asunder. Perhaps the reverse is true. Maybe God should put asunder those things which man hath joined together. Bottom line, we will not succeed in this battle using man's techniques and the flesh. You saw this morning how the power of the living God puts his enemies to rout. Our only hope ultimately is to usher in the power of God upon this nation. Our praises and prayers need to rise up to Him along with the sacrifice of our obedience so that he blesses this nation with such a powerful anointing of His spirit that the strongholds of the enemy will come crashing down like the Berlin Wall. Remember what happened here this day. We could have physically challenged those men, and people would have been hurt or worse and terrible memories would have resulted for the people of this house. Instead we now know how Joshua felt when the walls of Jericho fell down. It seems like a paradox, but I bid you now to go in peace and in war. If you trust in the Lord to carry the battle, you will be at peace during this conflict which we can no longer afford to ignore. Father in heaven, I pray that you watch over and protect each person here today as they go back into a world that is increasingly growing hostile to those who choose to love and to serve you. Remind each person here that they need to enter your presence daily. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen. "

The congregation stood up and some began to file out. Nelson touched Soaring Eagle's arm. "I want to talk to them."

Soaring Eagle nodded. He put his hand on the young man's shoulder and led him to the front.

Brian turned toward Angel.

"You don't know what to think about the service, today, do you Bob?"

The use of the name Bob struck a nerve. Brian looked down the row at Rosie's kids who were being forced to gag themselves on his account. He made a quick decision, one he hoped he wouldn't live to regret. "Angel, you're right. I'm not used to that kind of thing. To use the phrase 'like a duck out of water' would be appropriate here, but I'm afraid a cliché."

"You have a problem with clichés?"

Brian nodded as he watched Zeke and Rosie's family exit the pew on the other end leaving them alone. "I think it's time to explain why. Can I have a few minutes of your time?"

"Sure. Shall we sit?"

"That would be good." They both plopped down in the pew again, and Brian looked up to the front to see what was going on with Nelson. Brian tried to formulate his new plan as quickly as possible. This scene was definitely not in the script he had mentally written for his quest for Angel's heart.

Angel patiently waited for him to begin.

He looked up into her face and the feelings that invaded his body when their eyes made contact almost made him swoon. "I'm afraid I have a confession to make."

"We all are sinners."

"Different kind of confession here, though you might think it is a sin. My name is not really Bob."

"I suspected that a long time ago."

"You did? But that's not the bad part. You also know me with a different face and name of course, my real name."

"I'm glad you decided to tell me, Brian"

"You knew? How'd you know?"

"After you asked to sit with me in church, Soaring Eagle had a little chat with me. He told me that God had revealed your identity to him right away. The reason for your impersonation was not clear, but Soaring Eagle felt that God was at work even though he sensed you don't have a relationship with the Father through his son Jesus Christ. He did want to warn me though in case he was not reading the voice of the Spirit accurately."

"And you still chose to let me sit with you? I know you didn't like Brian."

"Brian was just another guy out to manipulate and conquer. I've been shooing guys like that away my whole life."

"The curse of beauty."

"I guess so."

"But surely among all of those typical guys, you had to attract some men with the right stuff."

"I told you. I was waiting for God to tell me who he wanted me to marry. None of the men that came along was ever the right one. I enjoyed their friendship and fellowship, but we never went beyond that. I've been asking God to send me a special man who would share my vision I've had since I was a young teen and formulated the dreams for my life."

Brian wrung his hands nervously. "Obviously I'm not the man you had envisioned. You're right about me not being a believer in your god. I think there might be a god, but if there is, we can't prove it."

"Depends on what you accept as proof. I've had lots of encounters with God. To me that is proof. However I can't produce a picture of God like the legendary one of Big Foot and let scholars argue whether that really is God in the picture or somebody dressed up in a God costume."

Brian smiled. "Speaking of costumes, I should explain why I became Bob in the first place. It wasn't to stalk you, I hope you know."

"I do now. Thank you."

"Actually Zeke is at fault for the Bob I became. I went to the rescue mission to research a novel I wanted to write. I bumped into Zeke, long story, and he coaxed the information out of me about the reason for my visit to the shelter. After I spilled the beans, he suggested that I needed a more convincing identity. So he did a bum makeover on me and turned me from a prince into a pauper."

"Instead of a frog?"

Brian laughed. "Maybe an impoverished frog. Anyway, I had no idea you even existed until that first day when I went through your lunch line and . . . ."

"And?"

"You don't want to hear it."

Angel smiled. "How do you know?"

"It's pretty obvious that you don't take kindly to obvious compliments."

"True."

"So no sense bugging you with this one."

"I suppose you were going to say that you fell in love with me."

"Remember, I didn't say it."

Angel laughed. "You're right. I've heard that line a million times, too. It doesn't impress me."

"But you might find it a little flattering?"

"Brian, let me explain something to you. I watched boys operate over the years. I saw them turn girls' heads and get them to do things they normally wouldn't do by complimenting them and using the term love. I swore I would never fall for words like that."

"So what will you fall for?"

"As they used to say in the westerns, talk is cheap hombre, pardon my cliché. I want a man who loves me through action. Love is a verb. His confessions of love are nice, but when he lays down his life for me, I know that he truly loves me."

"But if he lays down his life because you want him to, is that not another form of manipulation on your part?"

"Oh, I certainly hope not. I wouldn't want to be guilty of that crime."

Brian scratched his head. "These things are foreign to me. Maybe you can give me an example of how this theoretical man could lay down his life for you."

"Fair question. Let's say for instance that I wanted him to go shopping with me. He wants to watch the ballgame on television. What I want is for him to decide he wants to share time with me instead of with Joe Quarterback."

"But you —"

"Wait, I'm not done yet. Once I know that he would sacrifice to be with me, it's as good as if he were with me. I'd change my mind perhaps and let him stay home. Maybe I'd even stay home and watch the game with him, and we could go shopping together later. God works the same way with us."

"What do you mean?"

"He wants us to lay down our life for Him. We are supposed to surrender all of our dreams and hopes to Him. After we do that, He is free to give us the desires of our heart as his children, but only if He knows those things are the best for us. Sometimes he gives us something we never asked for and it turns out better than the original request because God knows better than we do what we need."

"Sounds . . . complicated . . . and maybe wonderful."

"It is, wonderful that is. I don't think it's complicated, but it is hard for humans to do. Every time we think we've laid down our life we take it back again."

"Like an Indian giver?"

Angel coughed. "I wouldn't recommend that you use that cliché in front of Soaring Eagle, though he's as harmless as a bunny

rabbit. It would hurt his feelings though. Another Native American might hurt you instead."

"I know, I know. My bad. One of the expressions that I grew up with. I'm sorry."

"No apologies necessary to me – at least for that comment."

"OK, in that case I want to apologize for deceiving you."

"How did you deceive me?"

Brian bit his finger and then hastily pulled it out of his mouth when he realized what he was doing. "Well, you know, being two guys. I came here as Bob to research the feeling and experience of being homeless. My trips as Brian were to do research on you."

"Oh. How is your book coming, by the way?"

"I finished it once though I'm making modifications to it again. Should be done next week."

"Can I read it?"

"Ahh. I don't think that would be a good idea."

"You don't have any confidence in your writing."

Brian felt his face grow warm. "I think I have confidence that you'd be offended by the story I came up."

"Oh, dear, did you write about me, by any chance?"

"I don't think you should call me dear, and I plead the Fifth Amendment to your question."

"Surely you didn't make me a bad guy?"

"I don't think you should call me Shirley either. I certainly didn't make you the villain, but I did have the book end in a way that you wouldn't find in accordance with your dreams."

"So your research as Brian paid dividends?"

"To tell you the truth, I think I got more words from my experience slinging gravy with you than I did of slinging the . . . ah . . . breeze with Zeke and his pals while I ate the potatoes you so beautifully dished up for us."

"Speaking of words, I'm at a loss for them myself right now."

Brian sighed. "I'm sorry – again."

"What made you tell me all of this?"

"I don't know. It was a spur of the moment, whatever that cliché means. Ever ponder where clichés come from? I mean, does this deal with cowboy spurs or what?"

Angel sat there with a blank face.

"Sorry, I changed the subject there. I sometimes go off on rabbit trails when I talk. Anyway, I have no definitive explanation for my coming clean. I guess I felt guilty all of sudden for what I was doing and just had to purge myself of this feeling. I knew it was the end of the game, but I had to do it. You deserve better than my

little plot, and you deserve someone better than me. Of course, since God is your matchmaker, you have no doubts that he'll pick somebody better than me."

"Perhaps God was convicting you. His spirit was very powerful here today. You saw what it did to those thugs."

Brian grimaced. "I know. I wanted to ask you about that. Why didn't I run out of here like them, if I'm a bad guy? Actually I did have the impulse to do that, but I fought it off. It didn't look like those guys had much choice. That music had the effect on them of those high pitched noise devices."

"Maybe you're not such a bad guy after all."

"Really?"

"If you remember, I told you that God was working in your life."

Brian shook his head. "You told Bob that."

"You're the same guy. Don't tell me you're confused about your identity now?"

"In a way, but I'm sure you never told me anything when I was Brian."

"That doesn't mean that I what I said to Bob was only for the you who was a bum. Sometimes God has a word about people that He doesn't want delivered. Maybe he told me something about Brian too that I didn't share with you."

Brian's face contorted. "Did He?"

"Who?"

"God."

"I thought you didn't believe in Him?"

"Well, I'm not sure yet, but if He does exist, I certainly want to hear what He has to say about me. Besides, if someone as sweet and intelligent as you believes in Him so strongly, I have to admit that is definitely a piece of evidence I have to consider."

"Now that's a compliment I can live with."

Brian's face lit up. "Really?"

"If I can be of use pointing the way to God for anybody, then my life is not in vain."

"Take my word for it, Angel. Your life is blessing many. The shelter wouldn't be the same without you."

"Thank you for your kind words, Brian."

"I'm speaking as Bob for that compliment."

Angel laughed. "OK, thanks, Bob."

Soaring Eagle and Nelson returned.

"How are you doing, Nelson?" Brian asked.

"Better. I was pretty scared when the Rainbow Warriors showed up."

"Did you know any of those guys?"

Nelson nodded. "One of them used to be my significant other."

"Did those guest speakers have any answers for you?"

"I think so. The picture is getting clearer anyway. They explained how homosexuality is a sin like pornography or adultery. Even heterosexual fornication is a sin. It's not God's desire that I participate in any of those activities."

Angel put a hand on Nelson's shoulder. "Are you ready for Jesus to set you free from it?"

Nelson looked like he was about ready to weep. "I think so. My life is in shambles. What I've been doing in my life is not working for me or anybody else for that matter. It's time I found freedom."

"You could do this alone, but we're here for you if you want some help. I'm sure Soaring Eagle would be glad to pray a blessing over you."

The bronze-color man nodded. "Holy Spirit has asked me to do so."

Nelson sighed loudly. "Well, let's do it. What do I do or say?"

The Indian put his hand on Nelson's head. "You should be baptized later. At this time you need to repent of your past sins and surrender your whole life to Jesus. You promise Him that you will serve Him the rest of your days and obey Him. But if you aren't serious, this is not going to have any impact. You'll continue struggling with your confusion and longing for unrighteous behavior. Are you sure you are ready to take this step?"

The young man thought for a minute. "Let's do it."

"Then start your prayer."

Nelson closed his eyes. "Dear God, this is Nelson speaking. You might remember me from my altar boy days. I learned about you when I was a kid but now I'm learning more about you."

Soaring Eagle began to speak softly in a language Brian didn't understand. He assumed it was Soaring Eagles' native tongue.

"I'm tired of screwing up my life. My friends tell me that you have a plan for my existence, a plan of good and not of evil. I just claim that now and surrender myself unconditionally to your great mercy. Please forgive me for all the sins that I have committed during my lifetime. Many of them I don't even remember, but God forgive me for my homosexual activity, which I realize now displeases you." Nelson sank to his knees and began to cry softly.

The weeping led to sobbing, causing him to emotionally jabber words that Brian could not recognize. The raw emotion of what transpired in front of him took Brian totally out of his comfort zone.

His desire was to slap the young man and tell him to suck it up and be a man.

. When Nelson was able to talk again, he continued his prayer. "I wave the white flag and ask you take me into your camp and equip me to fight on your side. My fervent wish is that you remove from me any desires for sexual activity. In the future should you present me with a chance for marriage, I pray for normal desires to enjoy and love my wife. I present this request to you now in the name of Jesus, your son who died on the cross for me. Amen."

Soaring Eagle continued to pray. Brian watched in amazement a shudder went through Nelson's body like the electricity from a shock treatment. The young man crumpled and Soaring Eagle caught him and laid him gently on the floor.

Brian mouth fell open. After a minute of staring he asked, "Is he dead?"

Soaring Eagle smiled. "He has fallen under the power of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing physically wrong with him."

"Is he unconscious or asleep?"

Angel put her hand on Brian's shoulder. His body shuddered. "Somewhere in between normal consciousness and unconsciousness."

Brian continued to study the prone young man to detect any sign of life. He could see his chest rising and falling. "Are all churches doing this kind of thing these days?"

Angel shook her head. "I'm afraid in some churches, this kind of demonstration would be considered demonic in nature."

"Demonic? As in from the devil?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Are you saying there are people who would think you are involved with Satanism?"

Angel grimaced. "Not exactly. There is a difference between Satanism and being demonized. I'm afraid there are people who would accuse me of dabbling with demons."

"You've got to be kidding!"

"I really wish I was. Believe me, I wish it with all my heart that people who criticize this could partake of it themselves. God has many blessings for his people which go unclaimed because people fear the unknown. And in some cases, there are excesses or people faking and claiming things that aren't true. You see, Brian, there is a spiritual realm. People like witches and psychics tap into that realm, but they go through the back door. Jesus said he was the gate that led to life. We go through that gate to our Father in

Heaven through Jesus and he blesses us with an outpouring of his spirit if we let Him."

"This is a bit much for me. There are no such things as witches, are there?"

Angel stroked a golden tress to the side of her face. "Again I wish I could say no. We have counterfeit access to the spiritual realm and the genuine. Lots of people who embrace Jesus refuse to believe in either."

Brian felt a heavy weight descend onto his shoulder. He turned around and saw Zeke.

"Bob, are you coming home with us or are you taking up residence in the church? Or maybe Miss Angel was dropping you off somewhere? The kids are clamoring for food. My stomach is in total agreement. What's up with Nelson? Or should I say what's down?"

"That's a long story, pal. Sorry, about making you wait. I guess I could find out later how this turns out."

Angel held up her hand. "Soaring Eagle and I could drop you off, if you want to stick around."

Brian studied the speaker and her beauty filled him with a longing that he hadn't felt in many years. The decision wasn't difficult. "If it's not too big of a bother, that would be cool."

"No bother. I took the day off from the shelter, so this afternoon is going to be a time of rest and recreation. Driving around town is a good way for me to unwind."

"Done deal then. Take off, Zeke. I'll scrounge up something to eat on my own."

Zeke nodded. "See you later, folks. Try to have a lovely day, Miss Angel, even though you're hanging around with a bum."

Angel laughed. "So you've been living with Brian, huh? That's why we haven't seen you as often lately."

"Brian? Brian who?"

"The charade is over, Zeke. I told her everything," Brian said.

"Everything?"

"Just about. No more secrets from the Angel lady."

Zeke blew out a deep breath. "That's one big weight off my back. I've been busting my rear end to keep your cover from getting busted. And you go and blow it yourself. Go figure. I'll go tell the kids they can quit worrying about Bob."

"Good idea. See you later. And give them the candy after lunch."

As Zeke was moving toward the church exit, Nelson began to stir. Brian watched as he rose to his feet with assistance from Soaring Eagle.

Brian studied the young man's face, convinced he could see a difference in the demeanor. There was no trace of the fear that had been present every time that he had seen Nelson. He could not remember ever seeing him smile before.

"That was amazing! I feel like a different person!"

"You are a new person," Angel said. "You've been born again."

"Born again?"

"That's right. You've put off your old man and have taken on the life of Christ."

"Does that mean that even if homosexuals were born that way, that if they are born again, in the next birth they could be heterosexual?"

Angel shrugged. "I guess so. I never thought of it that way since I believe that sexual orientation is by choice."

Brian wanted to ask Nelson if he was cured. He resisted the urge. If Angel or Soaring Eagle wanted to broach the topic, he certainly wouldn't plug his ears when Nelson answered.

Angel looked at the clock. "Time has flown. Too late to get you back to the mission for lunch. How about I take you guys out to Jack in the Box or Wendy's?"

"Works for me," Nelson said.

Soaring Eagle nodded.

Brian felt in his pocket to see if he brought money with him. A feeling of relief swept over him when he detected the familiar feel of cash. "I like them both."

Brian followed the little troupe to Angel's car. Soaring Eagle and Nelson got into the back seat. *I guess that means I get to ride shotgun.* His excitement was somewhat subdued by the events of the day, but it was still an honor for him to ride in Angel's vehicle. He watched her elegant fingers grip the steering wheel as she backed out of the parking space. The soft sound of music emanated from the sound system. Brian recognized the song was the same one that Soaring Eagle had started in the church service. It was like déjà vu all over again as he replayed the whole scenario in his mind. It was like a dream sequence. Brian thought of how Angel's voice, along with her sweet nature, made him think her parents had given her the perfect name.

When they entered the restaurant, Brian's gaze fell on a booth where three men sat. He couldn't help but think they looked familiar but couldn't place them. He turned back to the menu behind the

counter and decided what he wanted to order. Before he reached the cash register, he pulled the bills out of his pocket to see how much he was carrying. *Four bucks*. He did the math in his head and decided his bill would come to just short of the four dollars. *Hopefully I calculated correctly or this could be a very embarrassing situation.*

He placed his order and felt relieved when the clerk asked for \$3.94. When he got his change, he threw it into a plastic receptacle where donations were being taken for a charity.

The foursome waited in silence for their food orders to be announced. When they were all seated at the table, Angel asked if she could pray for the food.

Brian sat there trying not to look around to see who was eyeballing the crazies praying in public over their food.

When she finished, Nelson leaned over and spoke quietly. "There are three members, at least, of the Rainbow Warriors, here."

## Chapter 11

Nelson smiled. "Funny thing is that I'm not frightened by them anymore. However, I feel apprehensive about you guys."

"I saw them when we came in, but I wasn't sure who they were. Did they see you?" Brian asked.

"I'm not sure. I tried to turn away from their view as soon as I spotted them, but I'm not sure I succeeded."

Brian turned to Soaring Eagle. "What is God telling you right now?"

The man shook his head. "Sorry, not a thing coming at this point."

"Is no news good news? Does that mean that everything is cool?"

"I have no clue what it means."

Brian tried in vain to enjoy his burger. Thoughts of his bodyguard sitting at home went through his head. *If Zeke were here, they wouldn't try anything. Against a woman, two skinny men, and one real man their odds would be good. But would they attempt something in the middle of the day? They have stormed two churches now. I don't think a Wendy's would be any safer from these wackos.*

To get his mind off the potential showdown Brian asked Soaring Eagle about his heritage. They spent most of their lunch time listening to his story of growing up on a Lakota reservation in South Dakota. Nelson seemed particularly interested in the story of his conversion to Christianity. Angel appeared to already know the story.

"Does your name have any significance?" Nelson asked.

"There is no truth to the rumor that I was named after the casino with the same name. The eagle is a highly revered creature by the Native American culture. This sacred bird which soared close to the heavens was considered the go between from the creator to earth. Thus man communicated with the Great White Spirit through the eagle and vice versa."

Brian swallowed a mouthful of fries. "Ignore me if I'm off limits here, but I was wondering why you live as a homeless person when you could go back to the reservation to live."

Soaring Eagle nodded. "That's a valid question. First of all, God has called me to minister to the homeless at this point in my life."

"Don't your people need someone like you to preach to them?"

The man nodded. "God has called me to return to my people and share His life with them, but the time has not arrived yet. I don't know the details, but He has called me for a special work here. At some time in the future, he will reveal my new mission. Nelson, you have a question for me?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

Soaring Eagle shrugged. "As my people of old had the ability to track prey based on little etchings in the dirt, I have the ability to read the trail of men's minds to a certain degree. Your question causes you embarrassment and that is why you hesitate to ask."

"Yeah, that's true. I was just wondering if there were homosexuals in the Indian communities before white men arrived."

"I know I probably look old to you, but I have just passed my fortieth winter. According to last recollection, the white men were in Vietnam about the time I was born."

"Sorry, I didn't mean that I expected you would know from personal experience. I was hoping you had some knowledge of the history of your people."

"My people were one tribe among about 500 Indian nations. The history of my tribe is not the same history of those others. I have done a little research on the topic, however, since it interested me as well. According to what I read, there were men known as two-spirit people. They had the qualities of both men and women, but normally would wear women's clothes and do women's work. They sometimes had a special spiritual power that set them apart from the others."

Nelson nodded. "I have another difficult question for you. Do you believe that all practicing homosexuals will go to hell?"

Angel made a face. "You're certainly right about that being a difficult question. First of all, none of us is God. We try to steer others into the right path when they are not walking with God, but judgment belongs to the Lord. Many evangelistic Christians believe that when you accept Jesus Christ as your savior that your eternal destiny is sealed and heaven is your reward. If that is true and the person is a homosexual, then they would still qualify for heaven as a result of their commitment to Christ, even if they sinned continuously. Other Christians will question that the salvation of that person was ever obtained, because the person didn't turn from their sin or even confess it. I have to admit it is a can of worms, one I try not to open up."

Soaring Eagle nodded. "We can only live what we believe. I have a similar issue with reconciling my faith with the history of my people. They did not know Jesus Christ and never heard of him until the missionaries came to convert them. Many generations of my people lived and died without the knowledge of Jesus. I don't know what their fate will be at the judgment seat of Christ. I have asked my Heavenly Father that question and the only answer I get is 'trust me.' And so I just trust that the judge of the all the people in the universe will judge fairly. I have a mission to deliver the good news of Jesus Christ, but at the same time exhort people to press into their Father to live holy lives. Judgment does not belong to me."

Nelson frowned. "Jesus said we need to love God and love people. If someone does that and they're gay, does it matter?"

Angel lifted a hand. "Does it matter if they're straight and they are sexually active without being married? Or married and having an affair?"

"Good point. One thing that has bothered me is that Jesus never said anything about homosexuality and neither do the commandments. I sought clear direction on this, but couldn't seem to find it anywhere, leaving me just stranded in the middle."

Brian looked at the other three. "Is that true? I mean, did Jesus ever say anything about homosexuality?"

Angel wiped her mouth with a napkin. "Not directly. I understand where Nelson is coming from. If Jesus had come right out and condemned homosexuality, there would be no basis for questioning his position. And his position should be ours since he is the master. Brian, what is your take on homosexuality from a non-religious viewpoint?"

"Putting me on the spot, huh?"

"If you prefer not to answer, we'll understand. No big deal."

Brian nodded. "Well, the way I always looked at it, and forgive me if I get a little too graphical here, that men and women are built just right for each other. Tab A is made to go into Slot B. I mean they seem designed to fit together like two Legos. What happens if you take a pair of Lego bricks and put the male sides together? Or the female sides together? You can't build anything that way. So it always seemed to me that such behavior wasn't normal. Science says that evolution and life itself is driven by reproduction. The creatures that reproduce the most survive. Obviously a society entirely made up of homosexuals is not going to survive."

"So you're against it?" Nelson asked.

Brian shook his head. "I'm not choosing sides. I'm just saying I don't find it normal, but there are lots of things I don't find normal but I'm not spending my time arguing or picketing against them. I don't find mountain climbing normal. Why do people risk their lives to get to the top of a huge mountain? It flies in the face of the instinct of self preservation. But I'm not losing sleep over it. People have to choose what they want to do with their lives."

"As long as it doesn't hurt anybody else?"

"Yeah, I better throw in that qualifier. Thanks, Nelson. Like the thugs over on the other side of the room. I'm not going to kick against their attempt to put tab A into slot C or D in the privacy of their residence. However, I will speak out against their attempts to do it in public and to terrorize and in some cases hurt members of society who don't think the same way."

Angel cleared her throat. "So you don't think very highly of my attempts to picket for the sanctity of marriage between one man and one woman?"

"There again, you gotta do what you gotta do. You feel you're serving your God in that capacity. If you find fulfillment in that, I'm cool with it. I'm not much of a social activist, so I can't really relate. I do understand that we all need to feel we have a purpose of some type in life. You know, some kind of dream that motivates us to keep on trucking."

"And your book is your motivation?"

Brian nodded. "Right now it is. Well, are you guys ready to get going?"

Nelson looked around the room. "I think we should use the exit on this side of the room and walk around the back to the car so I don't have to walk by those guys again. Actually you guys could go the short way without me and I'll go around the long way."

Angel shook her head. "I don't speak for the others, but I don't have a problem with a little walk. Exercise does a body good."

Brian shrugged. "I never argue with a pretty lady. Lead on."

The foursome walked through the glass door and turned right toward the back of the building. They had almost reached the other side when two masked men with clubs appeared in front of them. Brian who was the caboose in the parade wheeled to return the way they came. He had only taken three steps when another club wielding man sprinted around the corner. They were trapped.

"If Nelson comes with us, the rest of you can walk away unhurt," one of the pair said.

"Over our dead bodies," Soaring Eagle replied.

"That can be arranged." They closed in on their prey.

Soaring Eagle moved toward them.

Nelson yelled, "No, let them take me. You guys don't have a chance against their clubs."

"And what are they going to do to you?" Angel asked.

"Doesn't matter. I don't want you guys to get hurt on my behalf." Nelson started walking toward the men.

"Stop him, Brian!" Angel yelled.

Brian reacted to Angel's plea without thinking. He dashed by her and grabbed Nelson by the arm. "Don't be a fool, dude." His voice increased in volume. "They won't do anything in broad daylight. There are too many potential witnesses, and everybody is familiar with the Rainbow Warriors."

One of the men cursed and raised his club to strike Soaring Eagle. Brian watched waiting to see some slick military tactic that no doubt someone of the Native American's experience would have up his sleeve.

Soaring Eagle did not move a muscle. "I rebuke you in the name of Jesus Christ!"

The club stopped in mid air. A terrified look came into the eyes of the assailant, and he ran away screaming. The second man turned to look at his friend. When his gaze returned to Soaring Eagle, the second man's eyes widened in fear just before he made his own escape.

Brian heaved a sigh of relief just before a sickening noise from behind struck his ears. He whirled to see Angel dropping to the pavement, blood already escaping from the back of her head. The man wielding the club wrestled with Nelson. Brian frantically looked around for a weapon. He spotted a brick used to keep the lid on a trash can. Adrenaline pushed him toward the can faster than he had ever moved in his life. He seized the brick with both hands and ran back to where Angel's attacker had his back turned. Brian brought the brick down on top of the man's head crumpling him and causing him to fall near where Angel lay. Brian lifted the brick to give him a second dose. The prone body was spared an additional blow when Soaring Eagle's strong arm deflected the blow. The Indian then pried the brick from Brian's hand before kneeling next to Brian's victim.

In the meantime, Nelson had leaned over Angel's fallen body. "She's still breathing. She's hurt bad though."

Brian stood there dazed looking at both of the bodies on the concrete.

"Do you have a cell phone?" Nelson yelled.

Brian dug into his pocket. When he remembered he was wearing his Bob pants, he shook his head. "It's at home."

Nelson jumped up. "I'll run into the restaurant and call 911."

"This man's dead," Soaring Eagle said.

"What?" Brian head spun out of control. He sat down on the concrete. Nausea threatened to engulf him. "Oh, my God. What have I done?" Visions of orange jumpsuits and handcuffs filled his mind. *They're going to put me away. I'm toast. My life is down the toilet.*

Brian watched Soaring Eagle place both hands on the man's body.

"Father, I need your help on this one. I pray that your Spirit be with me that I might have the faith and the power to bring this man back to life."

*What the hell is he doing?*

"In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to rise in life and in wholeness."

The screech of car tires sliding on the pavement diverted Brian's attention in the direction where the bad guys had exited. The two thugs were back. Brian returned his gaze to Soaring Eagle. The man he had been praying over was now standing.

"What the f—"

The man staggered toward the automobile where his friends waited. One of the men jumped out of the car and helped his comrade into the back seat. "What happened to you?"

"I don't know, but I've got a hell of a headache. Why did you guys run away?"

"Didn't you see that white thing about nine feet tall standing there with a sword in his hand?"

The man's answer was swallowed up in the noise of a slamming door. The car backed up and sped away.

Nelson arrived with some people from the restaurant. "This man's a doctor. Ambulance is on the way."

The man bent down over Angel's still figure. "Oh my, God. It's Angel."

"You know her?" Nelson asked.

"She works at my hospital."

"How is she?"

"Not good I'm afraid. I need to stem this bleeding now."

Brian stood up and stumbled to the doctor's side. "Let Soaring Eagle pray for her. He just raised a man from the dead."

The doctor looked back, concern written all over his face. "Did this man take a blow to the head, too?"

"Doc, I'm fine. I'm telling you. I just watched him command a dead guy to get up, and he did. Ask him?"

"Settle down, dude. The ambulance will be here soon. I'll give you something to calm you down then."

Brian ran to Soaring Eagle's side. "Don't let her die! Pray for her. I know you can do it!"

"Brian, I know it won't be easy for you to understand, but God told me not to pray at this time. He told me to trust Him."

"That's easy for him to say. How could he raise that scumbag from the dead and this beautiful lady is lying here on the verge of death?"

"I don't know what the Father's purpose is here. He is God and I'm just a man and His servant. His wish is my command, but in this case His wish is that Angel be taken care of by professional medical staff, at least for now."

Brian clasped his hands over his head. "This is crazy. There's no sense to it. He started to pace back and forth as the sound of a distant ambulance rent the air. A police squad car arrived on the scene before the ambulance. One of the officers pushed back the crowd that had gathered to watch the spectacle unfold."

*Freking buzzards!* Thoughts of himself doing the same gawking routine brought some feelings of guilt. *An hour ago we were sitting there in perfect peace at the church and now my world is totally tipped upside down.* Brian staggered to where the crowd was held back. "Anybody have a cell phone I can use?"

Someone held up a phone. Brian grabbed it and dialed his home. "Thanks, man. I really appreciate it. Zeke, answer the phone, come on, buddy."

"Hello."

"Zeke, get your butt down here. I'm at Wendy's over in James Center. Miss Angel has been hurt."

"Car accident?"

"Rainbow Warriors."

"What?"

"Come on, Zeke, just get over here. I need you. I'll fill in the details later."

"On my way."

Brian gave the phone back. He started to return to Angel's side when a policeman grabbed his arm. "We need a statement from you on what happened here."

His head cleared fast. *I can't tell him about the guy I killed. Just tell him the Angel part.* He told the story of the attack including the information that the assailants were members of the Rainbow

Warriors. He pointed to Nelson. "There is the guy you need to talk to. He knows those turkeys."

"You don't have any more information?"

"Nope."

"OK. Thanks, Mr. Anderson."

Brian watched the officer approach Nelson and begin taking notes. By that time the EMTs were loading Angel into the ambulance. The doctor stood off to the side. Brian approached him again. "Doc, is she going to make it?"

"Are you family?"

"Brian shook his head."

"In that case, no comment."

Brian squeezed his eyes tightly together. "Which hospital will she go to?"

"Tacoma General."

"Thank you. By the way, Angel's car is in the parking lot. Her keys are in her purse. Someone in her family will probably want to pick it up before it gets towed."

"I'll pass that information along."

Brian nodded and walked over to the back wall of Wendy's and leaned against it. The cursed club which had dented Angel's head lay speckled with blood on the pavement nearby. The brick he had used to wreak revenge on the attacker lay next to the wall. Brian picked it up and returned it to the garbage can where he had found it.

Soaring Eagle approached him. "My heavenly Father has spoken to me."

"Will she be OK?"

"She will be healed when you are ready to do it."

"What? When I'm ready to do what?"

"To heal her."

"That's crazy. I'm not a doctor. How am I going to have any impact?"

"You must search and find the way." Soaring Eagle walked away to chat with Nelson, who was almost as shaken as Brian.

The police wrapped up the chunk of wood that had caused the damaged and placed it in the squad car. The crowd watched them drive away and then dispersed leaving only the three of them standing in the parking lot. Zeke arrived soon after. He parked the car, jumped out, and ran as fast as a big man could to where they waited.

"How's Miss Angel doing?" Zeke asked while trying to catch his breath.

Brian studied Zeke's face. *I think this toughened street rat is about to cry.* "She's in the doctor's care now."

"And God's," Nelson said.

"And Brian's," Soaring Eagle said.

Zeke looked up in surprise. "What does Brian have to do with this?"

"I'm sure he'll tell you when he figures it out," Soaring Eagle said and then walked away.

"Where you going?" Brian asked.

"It is time I was about my Father's business in another part of the city."

"Don't you want a ride?"

"Not necessary. Thank you." He turned and continued his journey. For the first time Brian realized his new friend wore moccasins.

Brian turned to Nelson. "We can't just let you wander the streets anymore. You're a marked man. Those guys seemed pretty determined to capture you."

Nelson nodded. "I broke their vow of silence and left their organization. They're not happy with me. But I just couldn't continue in the path of violence they are involved in. I never should have gotten involved with them, but my . . . uh . . . partner wanted to become a member. I went in because of him without knowing that they are a hate organization. They have a way of dealing with those who stand in their way."

"I noticed," Brian said. "It's not much of an offer. I've got a full house already, but I do have room in the garage for you to stay. I don't think they'll find you there. They won't have a clue who I was since I didn't have my vehicle and was dressed for the last time as Bob. Now that my vehicle is here, we'd better get out of here soon or they might be back or send back someone else to finish the job or at least get my license number and track me down at my house."

Nelson smiled and began to walk to the car. "A garage would be a step up from what I'm used to. I offer you my humble thanks."

The men made their exit from the restaurant parking lot. Brian took one last glance at the place that would remain indelibly etched into his memory banks. He thought of Soaring Eagle's prophecy. *Was it a prophecy from God or babbling from a deranged man?* Brian replayed the vision of the revival of the man who was dead. *Deranged men don't cause corpses to get up and run away.*

## Chapter 12

On the way home, it dawned on Brian that the rescue shelter would be missing one of their regulars. He decided that he would fill in during Angel's absence. He hoped the duration would be short, not for his sake but for hers.

When the trio arrived at Brian's home, they arranged the garage so Nelson would have his own living space. Brian asked Zeke to give Nelson a tour of the house and went up to his closet. He surveyed the racks of clothes he had accumulated over the years. Most of them he didn't wear any more, but he had been reluctant to part with them because he still liked them and they still fit. Since Nelson was about the same size as himself, Brian could kill two rabbits with one tomahawk. He'd prune his closet and at the same time give the young man something else to wear. New clothes and a chance to get clean and do some work had done wonders for Zeke. Hopefully Nelson would thrive in the new environment as well.

After pulling four pairs of pants and as many button down shirts, Brian perused his tee-shirt collection. He had a bunch of them from Microsoft conferences he had attended over the years. He picked out three of those and added them to the stash. *What about underwear and socks? I just can't see giving a guy used underwear.* He went back to his closet and pulled down an unopened package of six pairs of briefs that he had picked up on sale. He still had two more packages in the bullpen. He tossed those on the bed and moved to his sock drawer. He grabbed three pairs of white socks and three black pairs. It felt good to help someone else out. *If I don't sell the house or get a job soon, I'll be looking for a place to stash all my stuff or get rid of it.* He thought about the possibilities for finding someone who would help him out if he were tossed into the street. His family consisted of one uncle somewhere back in the Midwest. Brian had no clue exactly where he lived, so family seemed to be a dead-end. How about his friends? How many of them could he count on to save his butt? How many of them would he even have the guts to ask? The prospect of begging seemed about as appealing as having a root canal on every tooth in his mouth at the same time.

*What am I doing worrying about myself when Angel's in the hospital perhaps fighting for her life? Maybe she wouldn't even*

*have been there if I hadn't ridden home with them. Maybe it's my fault. If she serves her God so faithfully, how could He let this happen? And why wouldn't he let Soaring Eagle heal her? I don't understand this God thing at all. Maybe the atheists have it right. Perhaps these Christians are just deluded and see things they want to see that aren't there. Maybe that guy I bricked was only knocked out temporarily and not dead. It could all be a sham. This thing with Nelson falling down could have been all fake too. If God is real, why does he allow evil to exist in the world? It just doesn't make any sense! And Soaring Eagle says I'm the key to Angel's recovery. Me? What the hell kind of god leaves the responsibility for a wonderful woman's life in the hands of a jerk like me?*

Brian purposely knocked some things off his dresser and then kicked at them. He opened a couple of drawers and then slammed them shut. He considered the use of primal scream therapy. It dawned on him that he'd end up with a sore throat and nothing would be fixed. *So, if the healing is up to me, I need to study on how healing occurs. Time to hit the Internet and do some research.*

He woke his computer from hibernation mode and connected to Yahoo. After performing a search with the word 'healing', Brian stared at the first page of a list of 280 million matches. Brian looked at the clock. How long would it take to open those matches even if I never read a word of each article? *Probably about 100 years. I don't think I'll try it. Let's narrow the search to where both God and healing appear. Oh, much better. Only sixty million.* Brian shook his head. *How about I add the word Jesus?* He did that and got twenty-four million matches. *This ain't gonna fly. I guess I'll just start reading them at the top until I find what I need.* An hour later his head was spinning from all of the information he had processed and all the stories of healing that he had encountered. All of them had one thing in common. Those praying for the healing did so in the name of Jesus Christ. Brian was studying the ceiling and pondering all of the material he had ingested and was now trying to digest, when Zeke knocked at his door.

"Come in, Zeke."

"Sorry to disturb you, boss, but I got an email you might be interested in. But first of all I want to know what happened at Wendy's."

Brian explained most of the story.

Zeke ranted for a few minutes when Brian described the attack on Angel. Brian waited for him to finish venting.

"I hate to talk business at a time like this, but what's up with email, Zeke?"

"Your agent sent some news."

"Already rejecting me?"

"Not quite. She says she has a buyer for your manuscript, though it will need some alteration."

Brian's mouth fell open. "You've got to be kidding."

"You gauged the market perfectly. She said there is a big demand for the anti-God stuff right now. It's in vogue to be an atheist and to have a story where a goody-two-shoes Christian girl leaves the faith is just what some people want to read about."

"Are they offering an advance?"

"Not much. Six thousand dollars."

"That's three months worth of house payments. That will delay the wolf at our door for a season."

Zeke shrugged. "As you pointed out earlier, the book won't be on the market soon enough to start earning you any royalties in time to save your home sweet home."

"Yeah, I did the math. That's not going to work. I might be crazier than a day-after-Thanksgiving shopper, but we have to hold out for more money."

"Holy cow! Are you sure you're not looking a gift horse in the mouth? Or maybe in the rear end? What if you sell the house in the next few months? You could move to an apartment, and then you won't have to worry for a while."

"True, but I'm not getting even nibbles on the house. Nobody is even coming to see it. I think there's some wiggle room in their offer. Only stupid people offer the maximum amount they are willing to shell out on the first pass. I don't think twenty-five thousand is exorbitant."

"And if you screw the pooch and scare them off?"

Brian bit his lip. "I think that is a chance we need to take. I doubt they would pull the offer but rather just say no to the bigger number. But I could be wrong. "

"OK. I'll email her back and make our counter offer. Or did you want the honor?"

"Go for it. I'm trying to figure out how I can help Miss Angel."

"I wish I could help there. She's too innocent to be taken away from us at this early age. But there is a song about only the good die young, and she certainly qualifies on both ends."

"Zeke, you're not helping with those kinds of comments."

"Sorry, you're absolutely right. Think positive. If you go to the hospital, I want to go along."

"Are you sure?"

Zeke shook his head. "Actually I'm torn between going to visit Miss Angel and going out hunting for the cowardly skunk who put her in the hospital. I want to bust his head open."

Brian cleared his throat. "Well, I sort of did that already."

"What? You left that part of the story out. What do you mean sort of?"

"You're not going to believe this story."

Zeke folded his arms. "Try me."

"I did more than bust his head open. I bashed the damn thing. Enough to kill him."

"So which hospital did they take him to?"

Brian ran a hand through his hair. "No hospital. Last time we saw him he was running toward the getaway car."

"Why wouldn't I believe that story, except the word bash when you meant tapped or something?"

"Zeke, I tell you I did a number on that guy. I caved his head in with a brick."

"Then how did he run away?"

"You think that's unusual. To tell you the truth, the guy died."

"Brian, hold on. First you tell me he ran away and then you say he died. Which is it?"

"I guess it's both."

"Maybe we can get you an appointment to see a doctor, too."

"Zeke, there's nothing the matter with me. The guy was dead and Soaring Eagle prayed over him and the next thing I knew the dude was escaping."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I told you that you wouldn't believe me, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did, and for a change you were right – big time. Do you have another witness? Nelson for instance?"

"Nelson had run into Wendy's to call for help. It was just me and Chief and the corpse."

"I think I'll go back to my room and hope this dream comes to an end soon." Zeke chuckled. "Looks like our Native American friend was practicing some positive thinking."

"Positive thinking doesn't raise somebody from the dead."

Zeke nodded and shuffled out.

*What and who could raise somebody from the dead? Brian vaguely remembered a story he heard as a kid about a guy that Jesus raised from the dead. He had thought that was totally radical back in those days. But probably Jesus was the only one who performed that miracle. What about Soaring Eagle? Hmm. I don't know. Back to the Internet.*

After reading several more articles, Brian was impressed. The stories about raising people from the dead abounded. However, he remembered stories of people coming back to life in the morgue. One of the stories that always triggered a claustrophobia attack was the tale of coffins being dug up and opened in the days before embalming and fingernail scratches discovered on the top. The thought of waking up in a coffin gave Brian the willies now and a shudder traversed his body. The thought of Angel occupying one of those in the near future drove him to despair.

The worry over Angel's condition was driving him crazy. It was time he went to the hospital to see what he could find out. He thought of leaving Zeke behind, but changed his mind when he realized how mad his friend would be and how vulnerable he would be without his 300 pound gorilla at his side. *Maybe it's time I buy a gun. Trouble is that I don't know to use one, and I'd probably shoot myself or a friend instead of one of the bad guys.*

## Chapter 13

Brian parked the car along side of Wright Park and the two men climbed the slight hill to the entrance of the hospital. He turned once and looked back at the peaceful park. He had lots of memories from spending time there in his youth with his parents. He vowed that he would take Angel for a walk along the gravel path that traversed the circumference of the grassy recreation area which was residence for many exotic trees. The two men approached a receptionist desk where an older man stood leaning against the counter.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" the receptionist asked.

Brian looked at the man who was there before them before turning back to the girl. "I'm trying to find out some information about a friend of mine who was hurt. Her name is Angel . . . ." Brian turned to Zeke. "What's Angel's last name."

"Brannen".

"Angel Brannen".

"I'm sorry, sir, due to privacy laws we are not allowed to give out information on patients here unless you are family."

"But you don't understand. She was hurt really bad, and I've got to know if she's OK."

"No exceptions. Sorry I can't help you. I know how helpless it makes you feel."

Brian bit off an angry retort. He walked a few steps away from the desk before he buried his face in his hands.

"Excuse me, gentlemen. I think I can help," the man next to the receptionists desk said.

"You think?" Zeke said.

"I was just talking to a Mr. Brannen whose daughter was injured. Could be the father of your Angel."

"It's worth a try," Brian said. "Where is he?"

"In the waiting room down the hall. I'll take you there."

"That would be incredibly nice of you."

The man smiled. "Glad I can do something. Sitting around these hospitals waiting makes a guy feel as useless as boxing gloves at the bowling alley."

"I think I know what you mean, though I've never heard it expressed in those words before."

The man led Brian and Zeke down the hallway and into a large room where a number of people sat in chairs. Brian spotted a man that he was sure was Angel's father. His gut feeling was not wrong.

"Hi again, Mr. Brannen. I believe these gentlemen are seeking information about your daughter."

Mr. Brannen looked over at Brian and then sized up Zeke.

"Sir, excuse us for barging into your life like this, but is your daughter's name Angel?" Brian asked.

The man nodded. "Her name and her character."

"We're well aware of her angelic character."

"What is your relationship to my Angel?"

Brian bit his lip. "Just friends. I was with her when it happened."

"Oh. In that case, you might have information that I want to hear."

"Fair enough, but you go first, please. How is she?"

"Stable. She is still unconscious. They're afraid there might be a brain injury."

"Coma?"

"Possibly. It's too early to tell yet. It's a wait and see proposition."

"Do you suppose I can get in to see her?" Brian asked.

The man sighed. "They won't even let me in to see her right now. If you come back tomorrow about 10:30 AM, I'll do my best to get you in. Does that work for you?"

"I'll make it work. Do you have a cell phone?"

"I do. Would you like the number?"

"Please."

They exchanged numbers. Brian filled in Mr. Brannen with the details of their misadventure at Wendy's. When he finished, he felt strongly that it was time to leave the grieving father alone.

"Thanks for everything, Mr. Brannen. If Angel wakes up, tell her that Brian from the shelter sends his best."

Zeke cleared his throat loudly. "Brian and Zeke."

The man nodded. "Brian and Zeke."

Brian held out his hand to shake. "You got it. Thank you very much."

As the man was shaking hands, Brian noticed his eyes light up suddenly.

"Son, you might think I'm crazy, but I feel that God just gave me a word for you."

"For me? What did He say?"

"His words are 'you must prepare for your task to succeed.' That's all I'm getting. Hopefully that means something to you."

Brian bit his lip. "Yeah, I think it might. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wait one more second, please. God has given me a word for Zeke as well."

Zeke's eyes got as big as fifty cent pieces.

"God wants you to know that He wants to be your father."

Zeke's eyes narrowed quickly. Brian studied the man closely. *Is he going to explode or cry? I've never seen him at a loss for words before.*

Zeke nodded and walked away. Brian hurried to catch up with him. "Are you OK, Zeke?"

The big man refused to look at Brian. "I'm just worried about Miss Angel."

*Bull hockey! He's chewing big time on what Angel's father said. I hope he doesn't need the Heimlich maneuver.*

\* \* \*

On the way home, Brian was determined to let Zeke break the silence. The big man did not do so until over half the distance to home had been covered. "There's something that I've wanted to ask you for a while."

Brian glanced at him and then shifted his eyes back to the road before Zeke freaked. "What's that?"

"Why haven't you married again or at least had a girl friend?"

"Getting a little personal, aren't you?"

"That's what friends do, isn't it?"

Brian finished turning a corner before he answered. "Fair enough. I was burned once. When I choose another girl to fall in love with, she'll be one I can rely on to be faithful."

"To you or to God?"

Brian frowned. "To me, of course." Wheels started churning in his head. "What is there that will guarantee that a woman will stay the course with the man she promised to live with for better or for worse?"

"You're old enough, Brian, to realize there are no guarantees in life when it comes to people."

"That's true. I had a weak moment when I thought perhaps there was hope somewhere."

"I'll tell you one thing though. If a gal is faithful to God, she will bend over backwards to make a marriage work. She won't run off with a better looking or richer guy."

"Why not?"

Zeke shrugged. "Her belief system. Rosie would have dumped her guy a long time before it got to where it was, but she believed that God rewards those who obey Him, and Jesus said that He hates divorce. That's what matters to her."

"I'm sure Angel thinks the same way. I think that's why I fell for her. Maybe I sensed that built in loyalty she was carrying around, and I felt safe to let my heart out again."

"Maybe. Or maybe you just fell for her beauty."

Brian shook his head. "I've run into plenty of beautiful women, but they scared me to death. They're the most likely to dump you. When you've got a beautiful woman, everyone else wants her too. If you have an ordinary looking babe, guys don't usually pay much attention."

"So why didn't you find a plain Jane?"

Brian sighed. "Probably because I'm just as shallow as the next guy. The crazy thing is that I know that women are going to lose their beauty. Ever seen a rose wilt? It's just a question of time before fat and or wrinkles take over. My head tells me it's stupid to fall for a woman because of her appearance. My heart however doesn't listen. I guess I'm just as big of a scumbag as the next guy."

"Not if you're sitting next to me. You're only half the scumbag I am."

Brian laughed. "Misery loves company. Maybe we could hold a scumbag joke telling contest. I'm such a scumbag that yada yada. You know, the bottom line is, why in the world would a woman as wonderful as Angel even consider me?"

"I hate to say I told you so, but the very first day I told you not to let your heart out of its cage."

"I remember very well. Now it's too late. I can't cram it back in there again. I feel like I can't go forward and I can't go back. And if Angel dies or is . . . gosh . . . I can't even bring myself to say it."

"A vegetable?"

"That's the word I was trying to avoid, Zeke. I don't know what I'll do. How can a guy get so attached to a woman who pays him no real attention in such a short period of time?"

"I think you were just ripe for the picking. Those years of being alone made you really hungry."

Brian scratched his head. "You're getting me confused. First I'm ripe for eating, and then I'm the one who's hungry."

"What I'm trying to say is that you were ready to fall big time. You could do what I'm doing, but since I love Miss Angel so much, I'd be torqued off."

"What's that?"

"Pretend to be interested in her god."

"Do I detect a double standard here? It's OK for you to deceive Rosie, but not for me to do the same to Angel? What if I said that I love Rosie as a friend and that your behavior toward her makes me furious?"

"What are you going to do about it? Last time I checked, I'm still twice your size."

"Wait, Zeke. Think this through. Might does not make right. Just because you can kick my butt into Oregon doesn't give you the right to mess with other people's lives. I wouldn't feel right lying to Angel. And you shouldn't feel right lying to Rosie."

"I didn't actually say I believed or anything."

"You don't have to. Lying goes beyond just telling a falsehood."

Zeke frowned. "And you're the poster boy for truth and justice?"

"I didn't say that. If I remember right, I was just mentioning what a scumbag I was. But even in my condition, I still have standards that I won't stoop to go under."

"Your point has been made. Why don't you put your brick away and quit hammering on this horse?"

"Fine!"

They drove in silence for two blocks. Brian felt Zeke's eyes boring into the side of him before words left his mouth.

"I've been thinking about something kinda crazy, Brian."

"I know, but we better leave the revenge up to the police."

"No, I'm not talking about the Rainbow Warriors whose principal color is yellow. I've been thinking about life . . . and death."

"More details please. It's pretty hard not to think of those things from time to time."

"What I'm trying to spit out is that I'm been wondering if somehow we could be wrong about God. What if we've just plain missed out on the truth which has been right smack dab in front of us?"

"I haven't noticed it, Zeke."

"Bear with me here. Can you tell me what color the house on the north of yours is?"

"On the north, that house is . . . I don't know."

"And how many times have you gone right past it?"

"Who counts? A thousand I suppose."

Zeke nodded. "Yet you don't know what color it is."

"It's no big deal."

"I'm not saying it is. I'm just trying to make the point that you don't know the color because you've never paid attention. You never put your focus on it. You never set a goal to remember the color."

"I certainly have more important things to do with my time."

"Don't we all? But what if the truth about God was just as noticeable as that house next door, but your failure to examine it has caused you to miss something as plain as a wart on Miss America's face?"

"Miss America has a wart?"

Zeke pounded a fist on the dashboard. "I don't even know who Miss America is. That was just an expression. And you've dodged my question – again."

"Calm down. No more dodgeball. So you're saying that we could both be missing a plain truth because we're not paying attention. Have I captured the essence of it?"

"Bingo."

"I see that this situation doesn't lie outside the realm of possibility. I don't know where it fits in the world of probability. So you think we should turn over some rocks and find out if God scurries out from under one of them?"

Zeke shrugged. "It can't hurt, can it? It's not like we're tied up by demanding careers."

*Maybe that father remark had more impact on him than I thought.* "To tell you the truth, after Angel's dad made that comment about me being prepared, I did some soul searching. I figured I would have a chat with Nelson when we got home and see what caused him to decide to swear allegiance to Jesus and how he feels about it now."

"That sounds like a plan, Stan."

"Are you going to sit in?" Brian asked.

"Absolutely. Wouldn't miss it for a root beer float. And believe me, I love my root beer floats, which I haven't had for a long time."

"Well, my friend, when we get a chance to celebrate, we'll get some A&W root beer and some vanilla ice cream and pig out."

Zeke's face lit up. "My dad used to make us root beer floats."

*Hmm. Looks like something inside Zeke has shaken loose and is rolling around inside. Maybe he'll be able to jettison the pain and bad memories and be able to move forward in his life. When the hell did I become a psychologist? Hmm. That might not be a bad trait for a novelist. I guess I'll hang onto it.*

\* \* \*

When the men arrived at home, they cornered Nelson, who was watching a music show on TV. Brian thought he heard the name Jesus before they extinguished the sound.

"We want to talk to you," Brian said.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"Relax, Nelson, we just want to learn something here. Why did you decide to . . . how do you phrase it . . . become a Christian or something like that?"

Nelson started singing. "I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back."

Brian rolled his eyes. "That's nice, Nelson. We knew that already. That's why we asked you the question."

"I'll do my best. It sounds like it's important that I give a really good answer."

"Just give an honest one," Zeke said.

Nelson nodded. "Well, I have to go back into my boyhood. I was a good boy. I loved God and loved to serve as an altar boy. Then when I was molested, I got really confused. I felt that I was no longer a good boy. I wasn't worthy of God's love. And when I became a practicing homosexual, I was sure that I was out in left field. Some of my gay friends thought it was OK to be homosexual and Christian at the same time. I just never thought the two went together. I was torn between them. Finally I made the choice that I was going to be a prodigal son and return to my father."

Zeke winced. "What do you mean prodigal?"

"There's a story in the Bible about a son who left his father and went out into the world and spent all of his inheritance. When he was broke and starving, he humbled himself and went back home, hoping he could be one of his father's servants. Instead the father welcomed him with open arms."

Zeke jumped up. "It was different in that case. The son left the father and not the other way around!" He stormed out of the room.

Nelson turned and stared at Brian. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Zeke has a little problem with fathers. His ran away from home."

"Oh. I had a problem with my father too. I just never felt he loved me, and he never told me to dispel my doubts."

Brian nodded. "It's hard for a man to show another male love, even his son."

"I'm not totally aware of the situation, but one of the explanations given for people becoming homosexual is a bad

relationship with the father. In any case, after I talked to the two speakers yesterday, they made it clear that if I repented of my sins and gave my life to Jesus Christ, I would be born again and become a new creature in Christ. All my sins would be erased, and I'd start over with a clean chart and be a new person."

"Kind of like do-overs when we were in school?"

"Exactly. A second chance. A new life."

"Hmm. That sounds inviting. Exactly what do you mean by the word repent?"

"That means to feel sorry and to turn away from sin."

Brian stood up and paced. "I'm not a murderer. I don't steal. What sins do I need to repent of?"

"Sin is not always what you do but also what you don't do but should. Jesus said there were basically two commandments. One is to love God with all your heart and the second is to love your fellow man the way you love yourself. The golden rule is involved in that. Those are positive commands. If you love in that manner, you will not break any of those negative 'do not' commandments. Does that make sense?"

Brian sat down again. "As much as anything in this discussion. There is a compelling reason for me to want to be a different, a new man. All this talk about loving everybody is kind of hard to swallow. There are a lot of jerks out there. How am I supposed to love the Rainbow Warriors and Ku Klux Klan and all those other guys that hurt people?"

"Jesus said we're supposed to love people. He didn't say anything about liking them. When you love people, you want the best for them. And you know what the best is?"

Brian scratched his head. "Not really."

"For them to find God and love everybody else in the same manner. Becky explained that true happiness can only come from God."

"Becky?"

Nelson blushed. "That's the girl who gave her testimony at church. She's pretty special. If it's OK to use your phone, I'd like to call her."

"Be my guest. Actually you are my guest."

"Thanks. Anyway, Becky says that everyone's life ends with death. Some people are taken early and suddenly due to an accident or murder, including self-murder. Others reach a ripe old age and die from the aging process. And the rest of us succumb somewhere in between due to cancer and all the other array of

illnesses just waiting at our doorstep. Nobody has a happy ending on this planet."

"So only in finding God can we have any lasting happiness?"

Nelson nodded. "Can you pick holes in that logic?"

Brian thought for a moment. "Seems pretty sound to me. So how do I accept God? Can you help me?"

"I can walk you through doing it, but it really is between you and Him. Jesus said you need to accept him as the son of God and the savior of the world. So you need to communicate with them about it."

"You mean praying?"

"Prayer is just talking to God. The most important thing to remember is that the language and motivation need to come from your heart and not your lips. You can't fake it with the Creator of the world."

Brian nodded. "I was afraid of that. Do I have to stop all my sinning before I do that?"

"Do you wash your car before you take it through the car wash?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Think about it. If the car wash is going to clean your car, you take it down there still dirty and when you come out it's clean. The important thing is you want it to be clean and so you go through the effort and the cost of the car wash to accomplish your mission."

"OK. So you're saying that Jesus is a human wash or something like that. I go to Him and afterward I'll be washed clean?"

"That's the idea."

Brian bit his lip. "Can I go back to get washed again if I goof up?"

"We all goof up to a certain degree. Becky says we should ask God's forgiveness again each time we sin, so we resolve the issue immediately and nip the weed in the bud so it doesn't grow into a big problem."

"That's good to know. I don't have to be perfect, and I don't have to remain perfect."

Nelson nodded. "But, and it's a big but, you should want to be. God wants us to be perfect as He is perfect."

"But you just said that everyone goofs up. That means we're not perfect."

"True. But how many gymnasts do you know go out on the mat to try to get a 9.5 score? Don't they always shoot for a ten even though they realize that very seldom does that happen?"

"I never thought about it. I'm not a gymnast. I guess bowling would be an example I could use. When I roll my first ball, my goal is to get a strike. I never aim to get eight pins."

"There you go."

"OK. I think I have it."

Nelson frowned. "Just one thing for you to remember. If you go to God because you want to get something, it probably won't work out. You need to go to God because you truly do consider Him king. You'll be like Sir Lancelot getting down on a knee and pledging allegiance to King Arthur. Or like a bride pledging to love her husband. It is a solemn promise that one should take very seriously."

Brian grunted. "I see. Not something that one should do lightly?"

"Exactly."

"OK. Looks like I need to do some tall thinking."

Nelson smiled. "If it helps any, it was the best decision I ever made."

Brian heaved an audible sigh and nodded. "Thanks for your input."

## Chapter 14

Brian tried to work on the changes for his book. His heart just wasn't in it. He looked at the clock. It would be time to leave for the mission in thirty minutes. *No sense sitting here and drawing a blank. Why did Zeke have to run away when Nelson told me all about God? I wanted company in this decision. It's always easier to jump off a cliff if somebody else goes with you. At least I think it would be.*

"Oh, no! What am I going to do?" *If I accept Jesus, I can't publish a book about a guy who takes Jesus out of a young woman's heart. I just couldn't do that I'm sure. If I pull the trigger on this conversion process, I'm going to kill my book offer with the ricochet.*

After twenty minutes of going back and forth, weighing the pros and cons, and trying to reach a point where he had no misgivings about a choice, he decided to postpone the decision until later. The phone rang almost immediately after. He grabbed it.

"Hello".

"Brian, Pete Geller here. Anything new in your life."

Brian rolled his eyes. His father's attorney. *Why is this guy always calling me and asking that question?*

After a couple of minutes of small talk, Brian informed Pete that he was getting ready to go somewhere and had to let him go. He was grateful for an actual excuse. He had five minutes to freshen up for going to rescue mission. With Angel not there, getting cleaned up to serve food to transients seemed like a waste of time. Having some slick dressed server probably just made the diners more painfully aware of their own pathetic existence. He decided to go for a neat but a definite blue-collar outfit.

When Brian came out of his room, he found that Zeke and Rosie's clan were all waiting to go.

Nelson was with them. "Is it OK if I come along?" he asked.

Brian bit his lip. "First of all, we only have room in the car for six people. We already have six."

Gemma piped up, "I can sit in somebody's lap, maybe Zeke's."

Zeke laughed. "I'd love to have your company Gemma, but I think Brian was going to make a point that Nelson needs to stay out of public right now because those bad guys are looking for him. Is that right, boss?"

"Right on the money. This house is your refuge. If you blow your cover, you could expose all of us to danger, especially yourself."

Nelson sighed. "I guess you're right. What'll I do for supper?"

Brian pointed to Zeke. "There's the keeper of the kitchen. Ask him."

"There's a big bowl of chili in the fridge and some fresh baked bread. Rosie makes the best bread in the world."

"Sounds like that will hit the spot."

Zeke nodded. "I thought so. And before I forget, kids, you can't tell anyone that Nelson is staying here with us. Do you understand?"

"Why not?" Gemma asked.

"If you tell somebody, they might tell somebody else and they might tell the bad guys where they can find him."

"Oh, I get it. It's like gossip. Mom says gossip is like the flu, it jumps from person to person if they're not careful."

Zeke laughed. "That it does. Now, everybody move those bodies out to the car, and we'll get going."

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When the gang arrived, Brian went through first to get his apron on and position himself to serve. He informed the lady in charge that he would be coming down every noon and evening until Angel was back at her post. She probed him for information about Angel, but he pleaded ignorance. The patrons started coming through the line, so he excused himself and got to his station. He found himself remembering names that Angel had called out when she greeted the regulars.

"How you doing, Lucky?"

"If I was doing good, I wouldn't be eating down here tonight. Do you want to grubstake me in a poker game? I got some pigeons lined up to defeather if I can just come up with the coin to get into the game."

Brian laughed. "Sorry, Lucky. If I had enough for that, I'd retire."

A little while later the doctor came through. "Hey, what's up doc?"

The doc looked at him quizzically for a moment and then deadpanned. "Funny you don't look bunnyish. Do I know you?"

"Not yet, doc, but you will soon. How about a scoop of potatoes?"

"How about two?"

"You got em."

A minute later Soaring Eagle appeared in front of him. "How – would you like some potatoes?"

"Fried in peanut oil."

Brian's eyebrows arched up. "What?"

"You asked me how I wanted my potatoes. I said fried in peanut oil."

"Yeah, I heard that part. But the how part was a way of saying hello. Isn't that how Indians greet people? Maybe I've seen too many movies."

"Well, Kemo Sabe, that is the Lakota word for hello, but I was not expecting to hear you speak Lakotan, so I interpreted it as English."

Brian smiled. "Gotcha. Sorry, no fried in peanut oil potatoes today. By the way, I wanted to speak to you tonight in private if I might."

"It's a good day to talk. I also wanted to speak to you."

"Really? What a coincidence! I'll come find you when everyone is served."

Soaring Eagle bowed and moved on in the line.

Another man that looked familiar came through. Brian racked his brains trying to place him. He distinctly remembered having seen this face, and it wasn't at the mission.

"Would you like some potatoes?"

"If this is all you are serving, I guess I'd better have some."

The voice was familiar. An emotional reaction keyed Brian in on the fact that this person was associated with a bad memory. He stood there racking his brain to come up with an answer.

"Are you going to just stand there or were you actually going to scoop some potatoes onto my plate?"

It all came back to him. "Simon Peterson?"

"Do I know you?"

"Kind of. What are you doing down here?"

"You really want to know what a nice guy like me is doing in a place like this? It's called the triple whammy of getting laid off from my job, my credit card maxed out, and my wife serving me with divorce papers forcing me out of my own home. Now, you know the rest of the story, and maybe I can get some potatoes."

Brian nodded and put two scoops on the man's plate. "Enjoy."

Mr. Peterson sneered. "Yeah, right." He moved on down the line, and a new face stepped up to get potatoes.

*What a shame Mr. Peterson. Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.*

When the last person came through the line, Brian surveyed the room. In the past he had been there to research his book or to see Angel. Tonight he was there just to be a servant. He looked out on the people munching away in peace. Brian couldn't help wondering if this was the only place they found refuge from the world's problems. He did realize that he felt good about what he was doing. He remembered the line from *Brave New World*, Ford's in his flivver and all is right with the world. Right now things felt right, despite the fact that Angel was in the hospital, his house was on the chopping channel, and he was about to go talk to a guy who formerly scared the pee out of him.

Taking a circuitous route, Brian stopped by to chat with a couple of patrons on the way. Soaring Eagle was sitting alone, so Brian took the seat opposite him. "So what did you want to talk to me about first?"

Soaring Eagle looked right through him, as usual. Brian was convinced he possessed x-ray vision.

"I wanted to know how Angel is."

"Not so good. The doctors weren't quite sure yet about the extent of her injuries. They have to wait for the swelling in her brain to subside."

"White man's medicine is powerful, but in this situation won't be enough."

"That's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. God seems to talk to you. Can you tell me what He says about me?"

Soaring Eagle took a bite of food and chewed slowly. He shook his head.

"You don't know then?"

The Indian swallowed. "I know, but the Father says that you must find out from Him yourself. I have told you everything He wants me to share with you. I cannot sign your peace treaty for you."

Brian frowned. "I don't get it. I need guidance from you. Why would God withhold that if He loves me?"

Gemma walked by with her tray. Soaring Eagle pointed to her. "An example for you. Gemma's mother could have carried her instead of teaching her to walk. In that situation, Gemma is always reliant on her mother to be there to carry her places. And her mother will always be tied down having to help the child. God wants us all to walk on our own and to approach Him on our own."

"But hold on! That isn't true of a baby who can't walk. I'm a spiritual baby right now. I need the extra help. Babies have to be given time to develop."

"There is no time for you to develop. You must hit the ground running in order to carry out your calling. White man stole a phrase from the red man. You can lead a pony to the water hole, but you can't force him to drink. I can lead you to God, but I can't force you to drink from His cup."

Brian beat his hands against his head lightly. "Where is the best place to talk with God?"

"Wherever you are is a good place. The best place would be a location where there are no distractions or noise. One of my favorite places is down at Owens Beach at Point Defiance Park. I walk way down around the bend away from all the other people."

"You can't do that when the tide is in."

"God has given you much natural wisdom. Now it's time for some supernatural insight. Tide is out until midnight tonight."

Brian nodded. Soaring Eagle returned to his food. Brian got the hint he had been dismissed. He went back to help the clean up crew.

\* \* \*

After taking the rest of his houseguests home, Brian made the trip down to Owens Beach. He grabbed his flashlight out of the glove compartment. There was still light in the sky as orange streaks from the awesome sunset collided with the snow on Mt. Rainier reminding Brian of orange sherbet. *I wonder if you can eat orange snow safely.* He laughed at his own joke.

A few picnic tables were occupied, and some kids played along the beach, so Brian carried through with his plan to move down the shore until he found solitude. Stars began to pop up in the darker sections of the sky. A fallen tree beckoned to him to sit down and take the load off his feet. He couldn't refuse the offer. It would be embarrassing if someone came along and heard him talking aloud apparently to himself. A scan in both directions showed him that nobody was within listening distance. After making himself comfortable, he scanned the sky, which changed colors as he watched.

He pondered the universe appearing little by little as the dying embers of the sun receded beyond the horizon. Sunrises and sunsets had always fascinated him. The world revolved just like a well oiled machine. Every twenty-four hours the earth spun around on its axis and ended up at the same spot where it started. Every 365 days and some change the earth made the trek around the sun and returned to where it started its elliptical journey. In Brian's

reading he had come across an article that said the universe had billions of galaxies and each galaxy was comprised of trillions of stars. He couldn't even fathom the number that would result from multiplying those figures together to find out how many stars there were in the universe. The immensity of space took his breath away.

"God, are you there? If so, you did a really great job creating the universe. I mean . . . like . . . it's awesome. I suppose everybody tells you that." He looked out on the waters of Puget Sound. "I also suppose you'd like me to quit beating around the bush here, huh God? Or do I call you Lord or your Majesty or something else? I kind of like the analogy that Nelson used of Sir Lancelot. Maybe I can call you my Liege. How does that sound? You know if my friends heard me talking to you like this, they'd think I'd flipped out. Maybe they're right. Am I talking to the stars or is the creator of the circle of life listening to me right now? You know, all you have to do is answer me, and I'll have no difficulty believing in you."

The silence was only broken by the lapping of the waves on the sand. "I suppose that you want me to commit to you before you communicate with me. You are the boss, I guess, and that gives you the right to call the shots. If you're cool with me putting a little blurb in the suggestion box, I might have the audacity to suggest that you might want to manifest yourself a little more openly for us mere mortals. You might land more fish that way. Not that I'm insinuating that your followers are guppies and swallow anything dumped in the water or anything. It's just a manner of speech. I hope you know how close I am to jumping off this tree, running down the shoreline, and making the great escape in my automobile."

The sound of a jet overhead diverted his attention. Thoughts of the airplane his parents were aboard crashing into the dark waters of the Pacific struck him. He had consciously kept from thinking about the details of that accident. Tonight there was no holding them back. "What were they thinking when they realized they were going down? Did they think of me?" Tears trickled down his cheek. He had never really mourned his parents' deaths. It dawned on him that he had been mad at them for deserting him. They had chosen to serve God and leave their son behind. He realized now that when they died he already considered himself an orphan, if a thirty-something can be orphaned.

"Were they scared or did they trust that they were in God's hands and went to their death with joy? That seems unrealistic, but

people like Angel and Soaring Eagle seem to live like there is a better life ahead. It's like we graduate from one school to a bigger and more advanced one."

Brian scanned the lights on the Gig Harbor side of the bridge. He knew some beautiful houses looked out over the beautiful inland channel of the Pacific there. *Maybe someday I can be one of those rich people who can do anything they want to.* The words 'homeless like you' went through his head like someone had spoken them, but there was no voice involved. Brian felt so strongly that someone had spoken to him that he was tempted to scan the area with his flashlight. The words rolled through his head, which he shook as if to rattle them out of there like peas stuck to the bottom of a tin can. His gaze caught the bright lights of the mansions on the hill again. "God, was that you talking to me? If so, are you saying I'm homeless? And who is homeless like me? Are you talking about those people who live in those fancy houses? How could they be homeless when they live in mini-palaces?"

He waited for an answer. No further words penetrated his consciousness except the ones he drummed up. "I guess I need to figure this out for myself. They're homeless though they have big homes. Does that mean that they're all going to be foreclosed on as well? We're all going to be homeless?"

That explanation didn't satisfy him, so he continued to mull it over. "Wait, I think I get the point. If those people don't know you, they have no home after death. And that's where I'm at right now because I don't know you yet. I really have a clue after my adventure with writing this book what it is like to be homeless for a short time. I can't imagine being in that position for an eternity."

Brian pondered the breadth of the universe and the expanse of time in eternity. He realized that in the grand scheme of things he was just as insignificant as a grain of sand in the Sahara Desert.

"Don't leave me an orphan, God. Adopt me into your family and give me a room in your house." He bowed his head.

More words trickled through his head. 'In my father's house are many mansions.' Brian felt a sensation that he had heard those words before. He flexed the muscles in his forehead as he consciously tried to look back into his past. A vision struck him of his friend Billy and himself wearing baseball caps. It was little league season. He had gone to vacation Bible school and the teacher was talking about the mansions of Heaven. Brian remembered how bored he had been and how anxious he had been for the school time to let out so they could play baseball. The

only reason he had gone to the church was because he wanted to be with his pal Billy. And he was pretty sure the only reason Billy went was because his parents made him.

"Oh, God, if I had latched onto you when I was a kid, things would have been different. I wouldn't have to feel now that I'm not worthy of Angel's love. Actually that I'm not worthy of your love. Why didn't you get my attention then?"

No answer came. Other memories of the past swirled through his brain. One stuck and played over and over. It was a bad memory when he was in high school. He had gone out partying. When he had come home and attempted to let himself into the house, he discovered that the house key was not on his key chain. He had taken it off the ring for some reason which he could not remember and forgot to put it back. At 2:00 AM he was stranded outside his own house because he didn't have the key. Instead of waking his parents up, he spent the rest of the night in his car sleeping part of the time and kicking himself in the butt mentally the rest of it.

"OK, God. If you're trying to drum up memories that cause me grief, you just succeeded. Do you have a purpose in tormenting me like this?"

No words again, but he beheld a vision of himself standing outside a huge palace, attempting to fit every key he had into the lock without success. The frustration level mounted as he neared the last key on the ring. Doubts that he had the right key were already overwhelming. Brian shook his head again and snapped out of the reverie. "That was so real. I actually felt the frustration. Weird! Now what could that mean?"

Brian felt led to take his keys out of his pocket. He clicked on his flashlight and examined them. He had a key for his bicycle, his house, the shed in the backyard, a safe deposit box at the bank, two keys for his car, and a couple of keys he didn't recognize. Would any of those keys open up the door to Heaven?

The vision of him and Billy in their baseball caps returned. Another memory crowded in. At the end of vacation Bible school, some of the kids had purchased tee-shirts. Billy's parents had given him the money to buy one. There was a picture of a big key on it with the words 'Jesus is the key' over it. He remembered joking with Billy about wearing the shirt to the baseball field. Billy had joked that if he wore that, he wouldn't have to worry about people making fun of his freckles because they'd be so busy making fun of his shirt. Jesus is the key?

Thoughts of the research that he had done on healing and raising people from the dead always included the name of Jesus. Was the answer to life this simple? The frustration and a little fear from his unsuccessful efforts to unlock the door swept over him. He didn't ever want to feel like that again. That one small lock stood between him and his warm bed that night. Was he going to let a lock stand between him and an eternity with God? He thought of his parents. They must be in Heaven right now. *Maybe they're waiting for me, possibly even watching me go through this struggle now. Struggle? Why am I fighting this? I'm acting like I'm going to the dentist. I should be running toward this thing like a soldier returning home after war.*

"God, I'm ready. I don't know all of the fancy words and the other stuff that goes along with being part of Your kingdom. I just know I want in. Give me the key. Let me be part of your family. Give me the adoption papers, I'm ready to sign. I ask your forgiveness for all of the things I've done in my life which you consider to be sin. I don't understand that word entirely, but I'm sure you'll have lots of lessons for me in the future. I just know that I'm sorry I hurt you in any way. My friends talk about you being a Heavenly father and that Jesus is your son. In my way of thinking, if you become my father and you are the father of Jesus, that would make Jesus and me brothers. I never had a brother before. Billy was kind of like one, but it would be nice to have a real brother. I ask that you accept my apology and clean me up as Nelson said you could do, so I'll be clean enough to be accepted into your home. I don't want to be homeless any more. In the name of Jesus I ask you to heal my heart and my soul."

A sensation of warmth rose up from his abdomen. His chest felt like butterflies were fluttering in between his ribs. The most noticeable feeling was one that brought back memories. When he was a kid, he had occasionally felt a sensation that he could never describe. It was like the feeling when he stroked something soft. A vision of a blanket impressed itself upon him. He had totally forgotten about that feeling since it had been many years since he had experienced it. It was there now. The quote from *Brave New World* came back again except this time he recognized that Huxley was wrong. Robert Browning had coined the original phrase in a poem. 'The Lord is in his Heaven and all is right with the world.' One more memory of vacation Bible school played on his internal screen. The closing song was the same everyday. The words which he hadn't thought about in years almost were audible. He mentally sang along. "I surrender all. I surrender all. All to thee my

precious Savior, I surrender all." Almost thirty years later he was actually surrendering himself and his life. What he had been dreading and avoiding actually felt wonderful.

For several minutes Brian sat there and felt that all was truly right. The sensation of wellbeing finally faded and the fact he had gotten cold registered upon his brain. He grabbed his flashlight and began the journey back to his car. Thoughts ran through his mind like the bulls in Pamplona. He has just been given his mulligan for life. This time he would do things totally differently. No more screw-ups. The lovely face of Angel was prominent in his mind. Zeke's also came into view. Now that he had found the peace and joy he was looking for, it was time to share it with Zeke. "I'm going to need help with that one, Lord."

When Brian got home, he flipped through the keys to find the one to the front door. When he inserted it into the lock and twisted, the wonderful clicking sound that indicated success made him remember his beach visit and relive some of the feelings. He looked up at the sky before he entered. A star seemed to wink at him. "God, was that you winking?" Again there was no answer, but Brian wasn't fazed. "I think you talk to people in different ways. My goal is to find those ways, but you gotta help me." He went to his bedroom and crawled in between the covers. Being in bed was always the most comfortable thing he had ever felt. He always had the vision that a bed must be somewhat like the mother's womb, sheltering the baby from the world. Tonight he realized that he had a new shelter from the world as he drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 15

When Brian woke the next morning, the first thing that struck his mind was his commitment to God the night before. The second was the fact that Soaring Eagle had prophesied that Brian would be the key to Angel's recovery, but he had to prepare first. "I think I just went through my medical training last night. I'm ready to pray over Angel and bring her back to me."

He found himself singing I Surrender All in the shower. It was the only Christian song he knew besides Jesus Loves the Little Children and Jesus Loves Me This I Know. Everything he knew about God he had learned at vacation Bible school. Funny how it took so long for the seeds that were planted in his young mind to actually push through the topsoil of his life. He was still singing when he arrived in the kitchen.

Zeke looked at him curiously. "What in the world has gotten into you?"

"Nothing in this world, Zeke. I unlocked the door and let God in last night."

Zeke's eyes glazed over. "You found Jesus?"

"Funny thing is that I found Him a long time ago. I just never realized who He is."

"I saw plenty of guys in prison and on the streets make that claim too. It didn't last very long for most of them."

"Are you saying this is just a fad? Something like making a New Year's resolution to exercise and after a couple of visits to the gym, the urge just fades away?"

"It might be. In talking to Rosie, I can see that it doesn't happen to everyone. And Miss Angel and maybe her father too are good examples of those who live it out instead of just talk it out. I believe they refer to it as walking the walk and not just talking the talk."

"Speaking of Angel, I can't wait to get to the hospital to pray over her. It's time she got out of there and got back on the streets where she can bless people. Heard anything from my agent?"

Zeke shook his head. "I haven't checked emails yet this morning though. Nelson and I stayed up late last night talking."

"What did you talk about?"

"Fathers."

Brian arched his eyebrows. "Really? I guess yesterday was almost like Father's day."

"The coffee's ready. I'll go check the emails while you get caffeinated and float back down to the real world." Zeke walked out of the room carrying his own coffee mug.

*Float back down to the real world? Is that what is going to happen? Is this like the Euphoria I had when the Seahawks made it to the Superbowl? Is it going to go away and just be another memory which I can dial up but never seem to recapture in all its glory? God, I hope not.*

He reached for a coffee cup. *Get caffeinated?* The fact that he had kick started his day for years through a drug struck him full in the face. *I want to live differently now. I don't need drugs of any kind, even ones that everybody else considers perfectly harmless.* He pushed the cup back into the cupboard and pulled out a juice glass instead. He went to the fridge and poured himself a half-glass of orange juice. He sat down and envisioned orange groves as he sipped the nectar and envisioned the sun of God ripening oranges just for his breakfast.

He felt like he had to tell someone that his life had changed. Who would he tell? He pulled out his cell phone. The last thing that registered on it was the incoming call from Pete Geller. He was one of Brian's dad's Christian friends besides being his lawyer. *I don't know why Dad had a lawyer since he didn't have any money or anything. I might as well tell Pete.* He hit the call back option on his phone. Pete's voice answered.

"Good morning, Pete. Brian Anderson here."

"Hi, Brian."

"Pete, I wanted to apologize for having to run off last night."

"Not a problem. I understand life in the fast lane."

"Yeah, I suppose. Anyway, I do have something this morning that's new in my life, and I just wanted to share with somebody. You got nominated."

"Really. What happened?"

"Well, in your vernacular, I got saved last night."

"Saved as in you found Jesus?"

Brian chuckled. "Or maybe Jesus found me. Anyway, I wanted to share the good news with you. I won't keep you because I know you have lots of work to do."

"Yes, I do. And now I have even more."

"Have a great day, Pete."

"I will Brian. You just made my day for me. Bye."

Brian hung up his phone. *What did he mean he has more work now? Lawyers. Never could figure them out. I suppose now that I've become a Christian, I have to love attorneys just the same as*

*regular people. I knew this walk with God wouldn't always be so joyous, but reality didn't have to smack me so soon, did it?*

Zeke came back into the kitchen. "Got an email."

"Yeah. So what does it say?"

"I have some good news and some bad news."

"Shoot me the good news first."

Zeke nodded. "They accepted your counter-offer for twenty-five thousand."

Brian's eyes widened and then narrowed again when he remembered the content of his book. "And the bad news."

"You have to write a second book. A sequel."

"I don't think I can do it."

Zeke's mouth dropped open. "You don't think you can write a sequel. Dude, you're all set up for a sequel. You have endless possibilities to add on to that series as new people move into the commune."

"I know that. What I mean is that I can't accept their offer to publish this book. I have to rewrite it from a Christian perspective."

"What? The main draw of this story is your anti-Christian ending."

"Zeke, don't you think I know my own book. Right now I'm ashamed I wrote it. Much less am I in a position to put that trash on the street and convince people that people should ditch their Christianity if they had it or avoid it if they don't."

"But picture twelve hundred and fifty twenty dollar bills going up in smoke right before your eyes. You're the one holding the match."

"I get it, Zeke. My house is toast. Our lives are shipwrecked. And I'm going to toll the bell myself. But I just can't sell out Christ for 25,000 pieces of silver."

"How about you let me take the credit as the author? You won't jeopardize your new Christian reputation. And we'll save the house."

Brian shook his head. "It's not just my reputation I'm worried about. I don't want to condemn other people to being Heavenly homeless like I was. Can you get that through your skull?"

"Are all white people this difficult?"

"Zeke, I'm sorry that you think I'm being difficult. This is a big deal to me. I wish as my friend you'd respect that."

The big man nodded slowly and sighed deeply. "That's cool. We're going down, but let's go down together. I lived on the streets before. I can do it again. I just didn't want to see Rosie and the kids stuck in that lifestyle."

"I hear you. Can you get my agent's phone number? I need to explain this one to her in person."

"It's your funeral."

"Zeke, let it drop, please."

"OK." He reached over to the fridge and pulled a business card from behind a magnet and handed it to Brian. "Your wish is my command."

Brian stared at it and swallowed hard. *This is going to be the most difficult thing I've ever done.*

He dialed the number on the card. "Hello, Angela, this is Brian Anderson."

"Brian, good to hear you. I trust you're calling to accept the offer?"

"Ahh, not exactly. In fact, kind of the opposite."

"Are you serious? They're not going to cough up more money you know. They're going out on a limb for you."

Brian ran a hand through his hair. "I appreciate that, but I just have to refuse no matter what the amount. I will be rewriting this with a different ending."

"What do you mean? How will it end?"

"The woman is going to lead the man to find God instead of him leading her away from God."

"Oooh. That is quite a radical change. I'm sure the publisher will be less than thrilled at that turn of events. You can pretty much forget your offer."

Brian nodded. "That's what I thought."

"But there is one possibility here."

"What's that?"

"The publisher recently bought out a Christian publishing company. That side of the house might be interested in publishing it. You probably wouldn't get any advance from them though."

"That's fine. I'd be interested in pursuing that opportunity."

"Alright. Get me a new manuscript as soon as possible, and we'll go from there."

"Will do, Angela. Sorry to do this to you."

"Not exactly the best news I've gotten, but I'll get over it. Thanks for calling."

"Talk to you soon, I hope. Bye."

"Ciao."

Brian explained the situation to Zeke. "OK, I gotta get my nose back to the grindstone. Write, hospital, serve lunch at the shelter, write, serve dinner at the shelter, and write some more before going to bed. That's my schedule for the foreseeable future."

"Until Miss Angel gets discharged from the hospital."

"Good point, Zeke. Hopefully, God is going to heal her today."

Nelson entered the kitchen. "What's going on, guys?"

Brian explained.

Nelson smiled, "I believe I neglected to mention that I have some experience in editing books. I might be able to give you some constructive criticism."

Zeke put his hands on Nelson's shoulder. "Just in the nick of time, boy. I've felt in over my head trying to get this guy's script ready for the big time. He needs some more professional advice."

"I'll be glad to do whatever I can."

Brian put his arm around Nelson's shoulder. "You get yourself some breakfast and then report to my bedroom. I also have some big news to share with you on another front."

"I'll hurry up and eat."

"Don't get indigestion. Whenever you're ready, we'll put the pedal to the metal."

\* \* \*

A half hour later, Nelson knocked at his door. Brian had already started reworking his manuscript.

Brian related to Nelson all the details of his time on the beach.

"That's awesome, man. That means we're brothers in the Lord."

Brian nodded. "That's true and weird too. All my life I wanted a brother. Now suddenly I have millions of them."

"Not all of them will treat you like one, though."

"Seriously? How do you know?"

"Becky told me."

"I should have known. Becky seems to be providing you with a lot of inspiration."

Nelson grinned. "She's pretty cute you know."

"Pretty and cute back to back. How cute is pretty cute? Don't answer. That's a rhetorical question. I just want to make sure that such vague terms don't make it into my writing. So, for now your assignment is to get the laptop from Zeke and have him share my current version of the manuscript with you. Get back to me with suggestions on how I can improve the script. I've got an hour to write some new stuff before I leave for the hospital. I expect some feedback from you by this evening. I'm tearing the guts out of this story, and while I'm inside the patient I want to do all the operating I

can, so I don't want you giving me advice after I've already sewn up the patient."

"You got it. I've got nothing else to do but read your story today."

"Take off then."

Brian picked up where he left off and made good progress until it was time to get ready. He took pains to get presentable since he expected that Sleeping Beauty would awaken when the kiss of his hands and prayer touched her.

The car was quiet on the way to the hospital. It was driving Brian crazy. "You know what I need to get?"

Zeke shook his head.

"I've got to get some Christian music to listen to when I'm in the car alone or riding with a Sphinx."

Zeke shrugged.

"What's up with you anyway, dude. You're acting like I did when my team lost the little league championship."

"I'm just low-key," Zeke said.

"I suspect you're keyless."

"You mean clueless?"

Brian nodded. "That too."

"I'm starting to feel a little left out."

"Left out of what? What do you mean?"

"Life. You and I used to have a special bond. We were both skeptics. Now you and Nelson too are on the God Squad and Rosie has always been there. I'm the only person in the house that's not a believer."

"So believe!"

"Yeah, right. I'm not some pliable little puppet that people can pull the strings on and manipulate."

Brian chuckled. "That's true. You're too big to be little."

"Smart aleck. I see your Christianity hasn't totally removed the ornery side of you."

"Ornery? You're the one who's ornery. I was just pointing out an innocent fact and trying to inject a little humor here."

"Very little humor, I might add. Maybe it's time for me to move on. You have Nelson to edit for you and Rosie to cook and clean for you. My bodyguard duties are basically over. You don't need me any more."

"Is that your problem? Are you feeling like we don't want you? Are you thinking we might leave you behind?"

"Don't go playing the role of a shrink with me, Brian. I might not be a genius, but I can tell when people start playing head games. I refuse to play this one."

"Fine. Whatever! I just got the idea that I'll leave you alone with Mr. Brannen to talk about this while I go minister to Angel. Maybe God is giving me words like He gives to Soaring Eagle and the Brannens."

Zeke rolled his eyes and went back into quiet mode.

As the two men walked through the corridors of the hospital, Brian checked his watch. It had just displayed 10:30. They would only be a couple of minutes late. Mr. Brannen was looking at his own watch when Brian led Zeke through the doorway.

"Ah, gentlemen. I was wondering if perhaps you weren't going to show."

"Sorry, Mr. Brannen. Heavy traffic and hit all the lights wrong too."

"No problem."

"Will I be able to go in to see her?"

"Yes. I've been with her all morning. Still unconscious, but otherwise doing alright. Let's go in."

"Mr. Brannen, I have what maybe seem like a strange request. I'd like to go in alone and pray over her for a healing. I've never prayed for someone before, so I'm a little embarrassed and self-conscious. I don't know quite how to do this, so I'm relying on God to help me."

The elderly man looked at Zeke.

"Oh, yeah, and I'd like to have you talk to Zeke about fathers."

A smile came over the grieving father's face. "There's a topic that's near and dear to my heart. OK, I think that will work. She's in room 222. Come right this way young man." He turned and shuffled toward a couple of chairs in a remote corner of the room.

Zeke looked at Brian who pointed toward the old man. Zeke reluctantly followed, shaking his head as he went. Brian almost laughed as he imagined Zeke muttering silent oaths. Brian went the opposite way in the direction of the patients' rooms. He had no trouble finding Angel's and quietly pushed the door open. As he approached the bed, he barely recognized the woman lying there as the Angel whose flowing hair and rose-colored cheeks had made his heart go pitter-patter. Her head was swollen, her hair which was not covered up by a bandage was matted, and her color was ashen. Brian had to deal with his reaction. In his vision, he had placed his hands over her glorious perfect form and brought her

back to the world of consciousness. His first impulse after seeing her condition was to tuck tail and run back to the waiting room.

He forced himself to stay. *My attraction for her as a woman has to be secondary to my desire to see her whole. This is not about me, but about her and God's will for her life. God, I don't know what exactly to do here. I'd really appreciate it, if you showed up and took over this operation.*

Brian started talking to her gently. He told her about his conversion on the beach. The story of Nelson moving in with them and being attracted to Becky followed. When Brian ran out of news to share, he knew it was time to get down to the business.

He couldn't put his hands on her head because of the injury. In surveying her body to figure out the best place to touch, he felt ashamed for the lust he had felt before his conversion. The realization that this woman was not only a child of her father but also a child of God made him more conscious than ever how precious she was. The safest place seemed to be her shoulders. After taking a deep breath, Brian very gingerly placed his fingers on the targeted spots. "Father in Heaven, in the name of Jesus I speak healing over this woman. Angel is your daughter, and I realize you love her a lot. She is now my sister, and I also love her. Lord, the world has need of loving women like this who bring your love to the Earth. I pray you touch her now and cause the swelling in her head to totally be gone and that she awakes from this ordeal with no ill effects." Tear drops flowed down his cheeks, and he began to weep audibly. There was no response from Angel. *How long do I need to do this God? Do I continue until I have no strength to go on?*

Despite hearing no answer, Brian decided to not give up. He continued to pray with his eyes closed. He did not hear someone enter the room. His plaintive cry continued as the possibility of failure loomed in front of him. He felt the touch of human skin over his hands. He opened his eyes and turned to see Soaring Eagle standing over him. Brian felt his hands grow warm. He continued to cry out in the name of Jesus for a miracle. The warmth filled his body and made his experience on the beach pale in comparison. He felt like pure energy was flowing through his being. He squeezed his eyes so tightly shut that he caused himself pain, but he didn't let up. The prayer became even more fervent.

"Brian? Is that you?"

The female voice coaxed his eyelids to relax their grip, and Brian looked up. His heart soared, pumping yet another emotional chemical into his system. "It's me, Angel."

"Where am I?"

"Tacoma General."

"What happened?"

"A Rainbow Warrior hit you over the head with his club."

"I hope the club is OK."

Brian smiled. It was just like Angel to worry about someone or something else. "The police have it in custody as evidence if they ever catch those guys who did this. Now I don't want you to worry your pretty little head over this worldly stuff. You need to recover your strength, so no more talking right now, OK?"

"OK."

"I'm going to leave you here with Soaring Eagle while I go get your father. We'll be right back."

He looked back once and saw Angel smiling. It was hard to restrain his legs from breaking into a lope or maybe even a full sprint. Hospital personnel would no doubt frown upon a trackster in the hallway. The full impact of what had just happened sank in as he got closer to the room where Mr. Brannen waited. When Brian came into the room, the first thing he saw was Zeke hugging the older man.

They didn't see him approach, and when his footsteps took him within hearing distance, he realized that Zeke was crying. *This has been quite a day, and it's not even noon yet.* Brian stood patiently for a minute watching the two men embrace. He looked back and noticed that people were staring. *Great, I know what this probably looks like*

Zeke opened his eyes and saw Brian. Almost immediately he disengaged himself from the elderly man's embrace.

"Mr. Brannen, I think you'd better come with me," Brian said.

"Me too?" Zeke asked.

"You too. Let's go."

The men hurried as fast as Mr. Brannen's legs would permit him to travel. When they entered the room, Angel's eyes were closed and she appeared as if she was still in a coma. Soaring Eagle stood nearby with his arms crossed.

They approached the bed. Mr. Brannen turned to Brian. "Why did you rush me down here? What's the matter?"

"Hello, daddy."

Mr. Brannen's head turned like it was on a swivel. Brian thought he might have to restrain the old man from killing his daughter with the same bear hug he had given Zeke. He contented himself with stroking her arm and taking her hand. "How is my princess?"

"I'm hungry, daddy."

Mr. Brannen laughed. "That certainly can't be bad news. I'll call for a nurse and see if they can serve you a late breakfast."

Brian put a hand on his shoulder. "I think we should leave you guys alone for now. I'll stop at the nurse's station and ask them for some food. They probably will want someone to examine Angel as well, now that she's awake."

"Thank you so much, Brian, for everything."

"My pleasure, Mr. Brannen, totally my pleasure."

While Brian was talking to her father, Zeke stepped in and said hello to the daughter. Brian almost had to pull him away. Soaring Eagle left the room with them. Brian completed his promised mission at the nurse's station, and the three men retreated to the waiting room.

Zeke absolutely beamed. "I can't believe you did it, old buddy!"

Brian shrugged. "I really didn't do anything except pray and lay my hands on her. God is the only one with the power to heal. And I think Soaring Eagle even had to give me some assistance in carrying out my part."

Zeke turned to look at the Native American. "Is that true?"

"God asked me to lay my hands on Brian's. If Brian's hands had not been there, I could have done nothing."

"So it was a tag team effort. The two of you combined did the trick."

"Magicians do tricks," replied the stoic Indian. "God performs miracles."

Zeke shrugged. "I can tell when I'm being teamed up on. You win. God did it. You guys were just spectators."

"Wrong," replied Soaring Eagle. "God works through people. It was necessary that we provide the conduit for God's healing energy to flow through us. God provides the miracle. Humans provide the physical touch. God has chosen to make it so that man can be a part of His miracles."

"Speaking of God and signs and wonders, what is the story on you and Mr. Brannen hugging so intensely?" Brian asked.

"I think the old man wanted to pour out love on me and make me feel the love my father never gave me. I got a glimpse of the father heart of God that he was telling me about."

"What's that all about, anyway?"

Zeke sat down. The other men took their cue. Brian checked the time to see how much longer he had before he had to head to the shelter.

"Mr. Brannen explained it like this. God created all of us. However we can only become his children by accepting him as our Father. And the only way we can get to the father is through his son Jesus Christ."

"I could have explained that to you, but you probably wouldn't have listened," Brian said.

"I'm not done yet. Some of us see God as an ogre or a bossy tyrant, someone who spies on us to catch us in the act of doing something wrong so He can punish us. Ed explained that God wants all of his kids to climb into his lap and play. He wants us to love him back the way he loves us."

"So we don't have to obey God's commandments?" Brian asked.

"You and I must think alike. I asked the same question. Mr. Brannen said that a natural father has rules to govern a household. Some of the rules are to protect the family from the child. Most are to protect the child from himself. The key here is that the child learns that the father loves him and then he obeys from desire to please the beloved instead of obeying out of duty or to avoid punishment. Do you see the difference?"

Brian looked around the room. "I believe I do. So did you make a decision?"

"Mr. Brannen is a very persuasive guy. He has both a father's love and the Father's love that he preaches. It was hard to not cave in to his plea."

"Hard, but you managed to do it?"

"So far. I'm still thinking about it. No sense rushing into things."

Brian shook his head. "Nelson has testified to you. I've testified to you. Angel has testified to you. And now Mr. Brannen has joined the crowd. And still you resist?"

"You forget that you were resisting until last night."

"True, but I didn't have the benefit of all those testimonies. I bet Soaring Eagle testified to you as well." Brian looked up to see Soaring Eagle nodding. "What more do you need, dude?"

"I don't know. Having my father show up maybe and testify to me."

"Is that before or after you wring his neck?"

"Brian, you still see me as the stereotypical violent black male, don't you?"

"I've seen your eyes when you talked about your father. They scared me, to put it bluntly."

"Hey, I'm cool. I'd give him a chance to explain if he did show up. The only people right now I won't give time to weasel out of it is

the Rainbow Warriors. I rephrased an old elephant joke. What are the rainbow colored things between big Zeke's toes?"

Brian shook his head.

"Slow warriors."

Soaring Eagle spoke softly. "Don't look now gentlemen, but I think a representative of that group is spying on us."

"Where?" Zeke asked.

"I said to not look. We don't want him to know we've spotted him."

Brian felt he would bust if he had to sit there any longer without looking around for the suspected warrior. "Come on. It's time to head to the rescue mission anyway. We'll see if he follows us."

They exited the room. Brian glanced over his shoulder shortly after they cleared the doorway to see if anyone else left the room. "Hey, Eagle, I hope you don't mind me calling you by one name but your full name takes too long. Is that guy behind us the one you figured was a Rainbow spy?"

Soaring Eagle took a glance back. "That is the one."

"I have an idea that you're the magnet. You were the only one at Wendy's that looked like yourself. Zeke I want you to split off from us when we get to the main lobby. I'm pretty sure he'll keep following Eagle and me. Then you can get back in line as the caboose. Make sense?"

"Pretty good street smarts for a rookie."

"If we're out to lunch, and he doesn't follow, then catch up to us."

"Gotcha."

Zeke ducked into a little vending machine island as the other two continued walking. He watched their tail go past and fell in behind him. His gait brought him closer to the man as they neared Brian's vehicle. The guy reached into his pocket and pulled something out. Zeke accelerated his pace and pulled up right behind the guy as he heard him say "I found the Indian and I'm trailing them to their car. They're in the parking lot now. As soon as they get in, I'll have a license number for you."

Zeke had heard enough. He stepped around to the man's left and brought his hand down on the guy's lower arm like a hatchet going into wood. The telephone dropped as the arm went limp from the impact. As the man screamed in pain, Zeke stomped the phone into pieces on the sidewalk.

"What the —"

Zeke put his hand around the throat of the wannabe spy. "Did you want to say something?"

Brian and Soaring Eagle ran back to where Zeke held the young man, quivering in fear. "Zeke, what are you doing? That wasn't part of the plan."

"He was going to get your license number and then you would have been toast. We all would have been."

"What are we gonna do with him? We're really not equipped to take prisoners."

Soaring Eagle reached over and grasped the man. He slumped and the Indian caught him before he hit the ground. "Carry this guy to our car, please, Zeke."

They got into the car. "You know, if anybody saw us kidnap this guy, we're screwed," Brian said.

Zeke was still trying to get his breath after carrying the load to the car as fast as he could move with the weight. "Maybe. You know how scared people are these days about getting involved. The bad guys take advantage of that every day. Maybe we can get lucky today."

"Mind telling us what you did to that guy, Eagle. Looked like the old Vulcan death grip made famous by Mr. Spock."

"Old Indian secret. If I tell someone, the elders of the tribe would disown me."

"So what are we going to do with him? He's not moving into my house," Brian said.

Soaring Eagle raised a hand. "I'll take care of him. If you let me take your car, I'll drop you guys off at the mission, and I'll ditch the spy."

"You're not going to take him out, are you?" Brian asked.

"Not permanently. I'm just going to let him spend a little time on the reservation in thoughtful solitude. He might decide he doesn't want to be a bad guy after all when we finally let him go."

"Can you drive a car?" Zeke asked.

"I'd prefer to ride my horse, but he's in the shop. Just because I'm too poor to afford a car doesn't mean I don't know how to drive."

"Do you have a valid license?" Brian asked.

Soaring Eagle nodded.

"OK. Then stash the spy and be careful driving. I don't know how I'd explain it to my insurance company if you had an accident."

"What if they have more than one spy here?" Zeke asked.

"We're SOL in that case," Brian said. "In any case, they already have Soaring Eagle in their sights. I think he's going to have to move in with us too."

"Is he going to sleep on the roof?" Zeke asked.

Brian grinned. "There's room in the garage next to Nelson. Unless you or Eagle has a better plan."

Zeke shook his head. "But I am suggesting that you not go back to the shelter either after tonight."

"I promised to fill in for Angel until she was able to come back."

"Would you rather keep your promises or keep your life?"

Brian's mouth dropped open. "Do you think it's that serious?"

"Do you want to find out the painful way?"

Brian shook his head. "In that case, I don't want Angel going back there either. How can this happen? Less than twenty-four hours after I give my life to God, and I'm involved in a freaking war."

"We have another option here," Soaring Eagle said. "We battle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and spiritual wickedness in high places."

Zeke and Brian looked at each other.

"What are you suggesting?" Brian asked.

"The Bible says not to overcome evil with evil but with good. We need to attack these guys spiritually. In the flesh we'll always be running and hiding from them. We need to smash their center of power through prayer. It's not by might or by power but by My Spirit saith the Lord."

"Then you guys will have to fight alone since I'm not one of you," Zeke said.

Brian thought for a minute. "OK. I think Eagle is right. I'm new at this God stuff, but if I'm going to trust in Him, I need to let him overcome the evil. But in the meantime we must be prudent as well. We all have to stay away from the shelter because they'll likely be watching it."

"What about Miss Angel?"

"I'm going to call her father. He needs to know what's going on here too."

"Maybe he and Angel need to move in with us."

Brian stared at Zeke. "Are you trying to be funny?"

"Not really, but I guess trying to shoehorn two more people into that house would be pretty funny."

"I'd love to have Angel nearby where I knew she was safe. I am going to insist that she move in with her father for a season. I don't want her staying alone. Let's go home and start praying. And then I have to get back to work on my book. Eagle, give me directions and we'll drop your new friend here off at his new living quarters."

After the foursome had been reduced to a threesome, Brian navigated the car back to his home. Zeke and Eagle kept an eye

out to make sure no one was following them. It appeared they were safe. Brian parked the car, and the men got out.

When they walked into the house, Nelson greeted them. "Zeke, you were right. Rosie does make the best bread I ever ate. You should sell it."

"I told you. Wait. We should sell it! We need to have some income to take care of expenses."

Brian pondered the possibility for a minute. "How will you market it? We are in hiding you know. Besides, how many loaves a day can she bake in just a conventional oven?"

Rosie walked in just in time to hear the last question. "Eighteen loaves an hour, if somebody is helping me."

"How much does it cost to make one loaf?" Zeke asked.

"About a buck."

Brian wiped his brow. "So if we sold them for two dollars a loaf, we'd be cheaper than the designer breads in the grocery store and still would make potentially eighteen dollars an hour. That still doesn't answer the question of how we'd market it."

Gemma walked in. She walked over to Zeke and hugged his legs. "I missed you, Zeke."

"I missed you too, honey."

He looked back at Brian and then down at Gemma. "How about door-to-door salesmen? Have you ever been hit up by a kid selling something? Hard to say no. Once they taste the bread, we've got them hooked."

Brian looked up at the ceiling. "I'm not sold on it, but I'll give it a chance. I'll fork out some money for supplies. You do an experiment and see if it works out. But this baby is in your hands."

"Perfect. I needed something to be in charge of. Now why don't you guys do your prayer session while I run to the store to get the stuff?"

Brian handed him two twenties. "That's all we can afford. This is your starter kit. From now on you buy your supplies from money you take in. And please, try to keep a low profile while you're doing all this. And remember that we don't have a business license to do this. This has to be like a Kool-Aid stand business. And I want the forty back when you can afford it."

Zeke nodded and took off. The rest of the residents of the house gathered together in the living room. Soaring Eagle and Rosie led them in prayer.

Brian's knees hurt when they finally finished. He had even taken a turn himself pleading to his Heavenly Father to have the police descend upon their enemies and haul them off to jail. "My

stomach hurts almost as bad as my knees. Eagle, come off to the kitchen with me and let's find out how good Rosie's bread really is."

When Brian finally got back to the refuge of his bedroom, he found he was so agitated that he could barely sit down at his computer. "Oops, I forgot to call Mr. Brannen." He grabbed his phone and punched in the number Ed had given him.

"Hi, Mr. Brannen. Brian Anderson here. Is Angel still doing OK?"

"She's doing wonderfully. She ate that late breakfast and wanted lunch too. He can't find anything wrong with her. The doctor is amazed. I guess he doesn't know the power of our God."

"I guess not. When can she go home?"

"He wants to keep her until this afternoon for observation and then if nothing changes for the worse, she'll be allowed to go home."

Brian scratched his nose. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"You want her to stay in the hospital."

"No, I want her to move in with you temporarily. We think the guys who beat her are maybe shadowing her. We ran into one of their guys at the hospital."

"Oh, dear. Maybe I should hire some body guards."

"Not a bad idea. I think I know where you can get some cheap. There are guys down at the rescue mission that would lay their life on the line for your daughter. She can probably give you some names."

"Excellent plan. Are you guys going to be OK?"

"We just prayed for a legion of angels to surround this place. I don't know how many are in a legion but just one of them seemed to do the trick at Wendy's. The hardest part for me will be not getting to see Angel. Would you tell her hi for me?"

"Certainly. I'd let you tell her yourself right now, but she's sleeping. Anything else you want to say?"

Brian hesitated for a minute. "No, I better stop at hello. Oh, one more thing. Do you have an Internet hookup?"

"Sure do. Why?"

"I want to send Angel a copy of my book. She wanted to read it earlier, but I couldn't let her read that version. Now I have no qualms about her reading what I am going to write."

Mr. Brannen relayed his email address to Brian, and they hung up.

"OK, now I really have motivation for writing a masterpiece. Angel is going to read my words. God, I need your help here. Show me what to write, please. Send your Holy Ghost writer to inspire

me to type the words that will touch people's hearts. Words that will communicate with their spirits so that those who have never felt what I experienced last night will get that chance and more importantly that they might share a home with you in Heaven. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen."

The agitation had lifted. He sat at the computer and his fingers flew. He had to stop periodically to find a section that needed to be rewritten. By supper time he had made a big dent in the work he had in front of him. After supper, Nelson shared with him some critiques. Brian noticed that he had addressed some of those issues while typing in the afternoon. He began to get excited about the prospects for this new and improved manuscript. The prospect of winning one heart with it was more important than having it published at the moment.

Brian worked on his book until he heard singing in the living room. He went out to investigate. Rosie, the kids, Nelson, and Soaring Eagle were singing songs. Brian realized immediately that they were songs of warfare. It appeared his little band of guerilla fighters was attacking those places of spiritual darkness again. He sat down and listened, wishing he knew the words so he could join in.

From time to time there was a break in singing while someone prayed. Brian took advantage of one pause to get his own prayer in. "Father in Heaven, this has truly been a crazy day. I thank you so much for what you've done for Angel. I pray that you continue to protect her from future attacks. Please send angels to protect Angel. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen."

At one break, Rosie said, "It's time for three kids I know to go to bed."

"Do I have to?" Nelson whined, causing everyone to laugh.

The three children kissed their mother and hugged everyone else in the room before shuffling off to bed. When they were gone, Soaring Eagle stood up.

"I have words of prophecy that I wanted to share, but didn't want to frighten the children. They are hard words."

Brian looked around the room. Everyone's face showed concern. They were already at war. What else could be more serious?

Soaring Eagle sighed and then began his discourse. "You all know that America, along with the rest of the world, is suffering from an economic slowdown. Few people are aware that we really have a meltdown not just a recession. God has been impressing upon me that we must look to Him for our daily bread and for our

security. Mankind has trusted in mammon, and now money is about to prove to be sinking sand. Many will lose their jobs and their homes. Many will take their lives out of desperation. I bring this message not to frighten people but to give them hope and to fill them with wisdom. We have only seen the tip of the iceberg at this point. Corporations which have been household names for many years will come tumbling down. Life as we know it today in the US will cease to exist. New sporting stadiums shall stand empty. Shopping malls will be put on the endangered species list. Entire countries shall collapse. Crime will be rampant as those who have not will take from those that do. No one will be safe without the covering of the Lord God and his angels. Look not to the world for your salvation or your security but trust in the long arm of the Lord."

"I thought the economy was getting better," Brian said. "I heard on the news that the number of new jobless claims was down."

Nelson cleared his throat. "I hate to point to the leak in your reasoning, Brian, but that is the number of people who are filing for unemployment for the first time. The number almost has to go down at some point in time. Over half a million more people filed last month. That statistic just shows the air is escaping from the economic balloon at a slower pace, but that's not something to cheer about. The holes haven't been patched yet and there's no source of new hot air."

Brian scratched his head. "I wondered about that. I've been too busy to analyze it to really understand the implications. Are you talking about a pending depression here? And how do you know so much about this?"

Nelson's face reddened. "I have to confess I took a break from reading your manuscript to surf the Internet today. I caught up on some news and stuff. I also saw a video on Sid Roth's website where a pastor told of a dream he had about an earthquake and an economic storm that would hit the US in the summer of 2009."

"That's not far away," Rosie said. "Scary stuff."

"But Sid said that though it is frightening, it is also a time when Christians will seek and find more of God's power because they can't rely on their checkbook or their government to bail them out. He thinks it will be a glorious time."

"Does the guy offer any advice on how to survive the storm?" Zeke asked.

"A little. I found it ironic that he came on the show to talk about this situation and just gave a little teaser for the answers. To get the full story, you have to buy some CD's."

Brian shrugged. "That's how business works. You have to charge for your services to make money."

Soaring Eagle sighed. "I find it discouraging that people who claim to hear from the creator sell God's words to the people that need them. To me that means they are either bad stewards or false prophets."

Rosie stood up. "Hold on. It depends on how much they charge. They have to at least recover their expenses. It costs money to ship and to buy the CD's and copy them. You can't expect to get them totally free."

Rosie shook her head. "Good point. I wonder if they encourage people to copy the CD's and give them to others. That doesn't cost them anything. I should have checked on that aspect. I agree with Soaring Eagle that God words should not profit the prophet exorbitantly, but we mustn't muzzle the oxen who work the field."

Brian sighed audibly. "You guys are getting too deep into the theology for a rookie like me. I want to know what we can do as common people to survive and help others to do the same."

Zeke crossed his arms. "I think you had a great idea for it in your book when all the people started a commune that was self-reliant."

"Doesn't the word communism come from commune?" Rosie asked. "Isn't communism a bad thing?"

"Indeed it does," Nelson said. "And that word comes from common."

"You're kidding! I was just reading about that in the Bible this morning." Rosie grabbed her scriptures which were on a coffee table next to her. She opened it up and read, "Acts 4:32-35. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common."

"And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all."

"Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold,

"And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made onto every man according as he had need."

Brian's mouth dropped open. "That's in the Bible?"

Rosie held the book up. "The book of Acts is the story of God's apostles and disciples."

"That blows me away. I thought Christians always were outspoken about their faith in capitalism and democracy."

Rosie nodded. "I've never heard anyone preach against capitalism."

"That passage seems to describe communism perfectly. People who expressed any appreciation of communism in our society have been looked down on. So what is the difference here?"

"There is a very basic difference in the communal living of the apostles and communism," Soaring Eagle said. "The apostles were held together by a bond of love of Christ and their resolve to sacrifice their own personal desires and egos for the kingdom of God. Men tried to mimic this by forcing this system upon all the citizens of a country. Their concept was the same but the leaders of this communal living system used their power to live outside the realm of the rest of the people. They took advantage of the people and the people themselves never probably gave up striving to get something more for themselves. Their system was doomed to failure because the hearts of the people were not in it, and they further damaged their cause by eliminating God as part of the equation."

"That is absolutely fascinating. I might have to make some more adjustments in my novel to capture this new revelation. Holy cow. This opens up a potential can of worms."

"You still haven't answered my question, Brian," Zeke said. "What about starting our own commune to prepare for the economic disaster? If we raise our own food and sew our own clothes and build our own housing, couldn't we make it even while others struggle to survive?"

Brian shrugged. "I'm pretty sure you'd never be totally self-reliant. You'd need power, medicines, special foods you couldn't raise perhaps, and other stuff. You mentioned sewing your own clothes. Where does the cloth come from? Yeast for making bread? That's a pretty complicated little scenario there. You'd have to find a wealth of talent among the residents in order to prosper. Doctors, dentists, mechanics. You might even need a lawyer to help battle the outside world. And those people would have to be content to just have enough to get by. I don't see people in a commune living high off the hog, pardon the cliché. It might be a very rewarding experience, but not easy to pull off. And then of course there's the matter of finances. To live off the land, you have to own some land. We don't have any land, and everybody living here is broke."

Zeke hung his head. "I can't argue with that. Guess it's just another dead end. Castles in the sky type of thinking. Just once I'd like to have a happy ending in life."

Soaring Eagle smiled broadly. "I'm afraid, my big friend, that the only happy endings are in death. We have to die before we really win the prize."

"Rosie, could I borrow your car? I want to go down to Owen's Beach."

"Sorry, Zeke. All out of gas."

"Crap."

Brian walked over and put his hand on Zeke's shoulder. "I'll tell you what, big guy, I'm kind of pining to relive my experience of last night. I'll take you down there. If you want to talk to me, I'll be there or you can get by yourself and chat with God alone like I did."

"Don't you need to work on your book?"

"Yeah, but this is more important. You need to get this resolved one way or another. Otherwise you're going to be pulled in two directions, and I don't know how long before you break in half."

Zeke blew out a deep breath. "I hear you, and I accept your offer. Let's boogie."

On the way to the park, Brian said, "I hope you know there's nothing special about Owen's Beach. I mean, it's not a place where God likes to hang out so your chances of finding Him are better there than somewhere else. It just happens to be the place where I found Him."

"I know. I just wanted to get away from all the people for a little while. I'm used to spending a lot of time alone. I haven't had the chance to do that lately."

Brian nodded. "We do need some time alone once in a while. By the way, I forgot to tell you that I ran into an old enemy at the shelter the other day."

"Enemy?"

"The guy from the bank who wouldn't help me save my house."

Zeke's brow bunched in knots. "What was a banker type doing in the shelter? Massaging his guilty conscience by feeding the people he maybe helped put in the streets?"

Brian shook his head. "Not even close. He was there as a dinner guest. Bankers have been hit pretty hard by the recession. He got hit with the ultimate whammy when his wife kicked him out of the house at the same time. Maybe the firing triggered her reaction. All I know is that his head was in a different position than the last time I saw him. I think maybe that old cliché about pride going before the fall applies."

"That guy thought he was on top of the world one day and in the pits the next. It's not easy to cope when you go from a hero to zero. I found that out by experience. He's going to need some help."

They arrived at the Beach, and the men began their walk down the sand. One man stood by the shore ahead of them. As they were about to pass, against the light of the sunset, Brian saw the man raise a gun to his forehead. "Dude!" he yelled.

"Don't try to stop me. There's no sense going on any further."

Brian took a step toward the man. *His voice sounds familiar. I just heard that voice the other day and had the same feeling.*

"Simon Peterson, is that you?"

"How do you know me?"

"You wanted to foreclose on my house."

"Oh, one of those. In that case, would you like to shoot me so I don't have to?"

Brian took two more steps toward the shore. "No, I don't want to shoot you, and I don't want you to yourself either. Listen, I know about your wife and the bills and your job. That doesn't matter. Believe me. I lost all that stuff too, or soon will. And it's not the end of the world. Don't do this, Simon. You don't get any chance at do-overs if you end your life."

"Do-overs. I don't get a chance to start over again if I stay alive either."

"Not true. I know 'cause I just got a clean slate last night."

The gun dropped a little lower.

"How?"

"Put the gun down, and I'll tell you. In fact it happened just down the beach here about this time last night."

The gun dropped down to near the man's waist. "And you have something to live for now?"

"You better believe it. I guess you have to listen to the story or you won't get a chance to believe it."

"Fine. I'll listen. I'm not getting rid of the gun though. If you're full of BS, I'll just use it later when you go home."

"OK. Put the gun in your pocket, and I'll be over there in a minute. Zeke, why don't you go on ahead and do your thing alone? If you need me, come on back."

Brian could read the concern in Zeke's face. "Are you sure you're going to be alright?"

"No, but I don't think he'll hurt me. God really has a warped sense of humor. He brings me down to the beach to save one of the one guys in the world whom I'm really having trouble loving."

"Doesn't sound like humor to me. Sounds like an opportunity."

Brian nodded. "Maybe so. Anyway, take off before he changes his mind and mingles his brain cells with the grains of sand."

Zeke started his hike, and Brian approached the ex-banker. A quiet conversation ensued between the two men. Fifteen minutes later, Brian was startled by a whoop from the direction Zeke had gone. The celebration continued for a couple of minutes and then faded away.

"What was that?" Simon asked.

"I think my friend just found God just like you should."

"Do I have to yell like that if I do?"

Brian laughed. "Not mandatory, but believe me, you'll feel like it when the burden gets lifted from your shoulders and you know you've gotten your second chance."

Another fifteen minutes went by before Zeke's flashlight gave away the fact that he was approaching.

"What happened out there, Zeke? Did you stub your toe on a log?"

Zeke laughed. "Those were shouts of joy, not pain. I done did it." He engulfed Brian in a bear hug. "We're really brothers now."

"Do I have to do that too?" Simon asked.

"Quit sweating it, Simon. You don't have to do any of this stuff. You do have to repent of your sins though," Brian said.

Zeke pulled Brian to the side. "What's the story here?"

"He's a basket case, but he doesn't want the master to reweave him. At least not yet. I was thinking we should let him stay with us for a while."

"Seriously?"

"He needs us."

"But we don't need him."

"Zeke, that's not important."

"I know. I was just checking you out to see where your heart was. I have a plan on how we can make room."

"Spill it."

"Now that I'm truly a believer and not just faking an interest, there is no reason why Rosie and I can't be married. We can maybe use the profits from her bread making to buy a license. Then I can move into her room and one or maybe even two guys can move into my room."

"Do you think Rosie will go for that?"

"We'll find out tonight. I'll pop the question when we get home."

"Are you confident enough to let Simon come home with us?"

Zeke nodded. "Let's do it this way. If she refuses to marry me, I'll move into the garage."

"Done deal. I'll see what Simon says."

Zeke laughed.

"What's so funny?" Brian asked.

"Didn't you ever play that game Simon Says?"

"Oh. I get it. Yeah, when I was about six."

"Zeke says go see what Simon says."

"Ay, ay, captain."

Zeke and Brian explained the plan to Simon.

"Are you sure I'm welcome?" Simon asked.

"It's my house, Simon. I'm the welcoming committee. Are you in or not?"

"I guess I can try it for one night and see."

"Do you have a car?"

"For a couple more days. Then the repossession company comes to take it away. All my stuff is in the trunk and back seat."

"You can follow us home then. Let's get going."

After the men had been home a few minutes, Brian heard Zeke give out another war whoop. He smiled. "Looks like Zeke won't have to sleep in the garage."

## Chapter 16

The next day, Brian assigned Simon the task of assisting Rosie with her plans for a bread business and then got back to working on his book. He wanted to email it to Angel as soon as possible. While taking a break, he decided there were now so many people in the house that they had to eat in shifts or send some people to the shelter to eat. Brian took advantage of Simon's car by having the ex-banker drive to the mission with Rosie and her kids. That was five fewer mouths to feed for the day. While the rest of the gang lunched on beans and bread, the topic of church and a pastor for Zeke's wedding came up.

"I don't think it's safe for us to go out for church," Brian said. "I vote that we hold church right here at home."

"Who's going to be the pastor?" Zeke asked.

"If we started a commune, I'd like to be a pastor," Nelson said.

Brian smiled. "We basically have a commune already. It just isn't close to being self-reliant yet. I would accept your offer to be our pastor, but you've only been a Christian for a few days. I think Soaring Eagle needs to be our fearless leader, at least for now. But he's not licensed to marry people. We'll have to get a real pastor to do that."

Brian's cell phone rang. He recognized the incoming number. "Hello, Pete. What's goin' on?"

"Do you have a place to go to church? If not, I wanted to invite you to my service."

"As a matter of fact, we were just discussing that now. We're going to hold church at my home."

"Oh. Who is we, if I might ask?"

"Long story, Pete. There are ten of us here."

"Ten? How about I come over to your house for church then? Do you have room for eleven? I have something I need to talk to you about. We could take care of that after church."

"We have room."

"What time are you meeting?"

"About 10:30 AM."

"Perfect. I'll see you there. Bye."

"Take care, Pete."

Brian had barely hung his phone up when it chirped again. It was Ed Brannen.

"Ed. I'm glad you called."

"I have some news for you."

"Shoot."

"You might want to sit down, Brian."

His heart sunk. *Something's wrong with Angel.* "I'm sitting."

"We had some visitors."

"Visitors? You mean unwelcome visitors?"

"Exactly. The men you suggested hang out over here picked up on their activity. They convinced the men to come into the house and talk to the nice policemen who came over to share coffee with us."

Brian laughed. "I love it. Then what happened?"

"One of the guys turned out to be a stool pigeon type. He told the police where the suspects were hiding out. A nice officer just called now to tell us the results of their raid. They have the suspects that Nelson identified in custody. And when they caught those guys they caught the rest of them red handed with stolen property and drugs as well. Apparently the whole Tacoma organization was arrested."

"Well not quite."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. That is awesome news. That's fantastic news. Anything else you can tell me to brighten my day?"

"I told Angel you would be sharing your book with her. She said she can't wait."

"I didn't think you could do it, but you just added more sunshine. Thanks, Ed."

"No problem, Brian. Maybe you can call Angel tomorrow."

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"Angel would too. Oops, have another call coming in. Gotta run. God bless."

"Have a great one, Ed."

"What's going on with Miss Angel?" Zeke asked.

Brian told them all of the news that Mr. Brannen had shared with him.

Zeke held out a big paw to take a big five hand slap from Brian. "That means we don't have to hide anymore. We can go to the real church."

Brian frowned. "I was looking forward to having it here. And my lawyer friend is already coming for the service. Let's try a home church for a week. If people don't like it, we can go to the brick and mortar church next week."

"OK. We'll save gas money that way, and won't feel guilty about not putting anything in the collection plate."

"Good point. So right now, everything is going our way. The only thing pressing right now is the house payment."

Zeke nodded. "Maybe I can get a job somewhere to help out. With all the mouths to feed we're burning up your money a little faster than we hoped."

"Yeah. That's true. Oh, no! Speaking of gas money, we have one more trip to make."

"Where?"

"The dude we dropped off for a little R & R at the reservation."

"Oh, I almost forgot about that guy. You think it's safe to let him go?"

Brian chewed on a finger. "We have to risk it. I have a feeling with the rest of his friends in jail that he's going to head out for parts unknown to avoid joining them."

"Probably. When do you want to do it?"

"Better go this afternoon."

"I might have to help Rosie with the bread," Zeke said.

"I got that covered. Simon is on duty, and I can help in a pinch. Soaring Eagle and you can take out the rainbow trash."

"Can I go along?" Nelson asked from behind the two men.

Brian wheeled around. "How long you been standing there, Nelson?"

"Long enough to hear what you were talking about. I'd like to deliver a little altar call to the guy before you release him into the wilderness."

Brian shrugged. "Works for me. Be prepared to go when Zeke and Soaring Eagle are ready to leave or get left behind. I'll stay here and work on my book while Zeke plays chauffeur. Here are my car keys." Brian handed over the key ring to Zeke and retreated to his computer. In a couple of minutes his fingers raced across the keyboard.

\* \* \*

A couple of hours later, Soaring Eagle directed Zeke to the little shack where they had deposited their captive.

"I hope our guest was comfortable," Zeke said.

"As long as the rats didn't nibble his toes, he should be just fine. My blood-brother from the Puyallup tribe promised to give him food and water and let him exercise from time to time."

When Zeke and Soaring Eagle entered the cabin, the obscenities started flying. When Nelson stepped in, the noise stopped as the mouth of the prisoner dropped open.

"Jack, are you alright?"

"No thanks to your friends here. Let me go right now, or so help me I'll have the FBI and CIA and the ACLU all over your butts."

"That's why we're here, Jack. You might not want to go home though after we set you free."

"Why?"

"The Rainbow Warriors have all been arrested. Some for the assault on the woman and the rest for other charges."

More four letter words littered the air. "This is all your fault, Nelson! If you hadn't been a traitor, we'd be on top of the world right now."

Nelson turned to Zeke and Soaring Eagle. "Do you suppose you could leave us alone to talk in private for a few minutes?"

"You're not going to untie him?" Zeke asked.

"I'll leave that up to you, after I give him a chance to listen."

Zeke nodded and the two men left the cabin. They leaned against Brian's vehicle, and Zeke started telling Soaring Eagle about his experience finding his Father in Heaven.

"Nelson, now's your chance to make up for the past. Help me escape, and we'll get out of here together. It can be you and me just like old times again."

"Jack, it can never be like old times again. I'm a different man. I have given my life to Jesus Christ and the old man is dead. I know you don't understand that, but I'm going to try to explain it to you. I don't want to see your life ruined and be aware throughout eternity that I failed to try to help you be rescued."

"Bull! Your life is the one ruined. The cause is going forth. We shall overcome. The homophobes are going down. Do you hear? Down! Are you saying you're one of them now?"

"First of all, almost none of the people you label as homophobes are afraid of homosexuality. Not any more than they are afraid of gambling or drugs or any other nasty habit that drags a person down into the gutter. And get this straight, these people for the most part, do not hate you or other homosexuals. The Bible which is their compass tells them if they do not love their enemies, they are no better than them. Hatred is not allowed."

"Bull!"

Nelson rolled his eyes. "Fine. Believe what you want to, but you're wrong. I've seen way more hatred coming from the gay community than I ever saw from the Christians. You're so freaking

blind you can't see the difference between the people who hold up signs and protest something they find detestable to their God and people who get their jollies by literally bashing gay guys. You've gone through that. How can you lump those two groups together?"

"It wasn't hard. Anybody who stands in the way of our sexual freedom is an enemy and they hate us."

"How can I get through to you?"

"You can't. Don't waste your breath."

Nelson hung his head.

"If you're praying, it ain't gonna work."

"You know where you're totally out in left field? You don't have freedom at all. You're a slave to your sexual appetites. What a pathetic life. You're going to spend your entire existence fighting so you can act like an animal without people telling you it's wrong."

"Are you saying we're animals?"

Nelson shook his head. "I'm saying that anybody whose purpose in life is engaging in sexual activity is an animal. There are plenty of heterosexuals who fit in that category. That behavior is also wrong. But what you want is for your behavior to be accepted and respected."

"You're damn right, and we'll win the fight long before I die."

"Don't bet on it. And even if the homosexual community triumphs, then you'll fight for respect within that brave new world. Or maybe you'll fight for superiority so that heterosexual behavior is considered wrong. Bottom line is that you'll always be struggling to gain people's respect. The only true freedom comes by giving your life to the God who gave you that life in the first place."

"No, Nelson. You're the blind one. You've become a slave to this god of yours."

"Yes, I have. The apostle Paul said we're either a slave to righteousness or to sin. I'm choosing righteousness, and the chance for you to do the same is right here, right now."

"No thanks. If you're going to let me go, do it now. I thought I had been going through hell the last twenty-four hours, but now I see the real pain didn't start until you got here and opened your big trap."

Nelson bit his lip and closed his eyes. After a few seconds, he slowly moved toward the door. Just before he opened it, he turned toward his friend again. "Jack, I love you more now than I ever did when we were . . . partners. Someday, somewhere, when you feel the whole world is crashing in on you, remember that Jesus is the only answer to this insanity we call life."

Jack stared straight up at the ceiling and remained silent. Nelson opened the door and beckoned to his friends. They untied the ropes that bound Jack to a beam supporting the ceiling.

"See you around," Zeke said. "Well, maybe not."

"Hold on, where are you guys going?"

"Home. We're not homeless, you know."

"What about me?"

"Find your own home."

Jack screamed an obscenity. "I don't even know where the hell I am."

"I think you just answered your own question."

"Real funny. Not! Don't quit your day job, moron. I have no clue where you've taken me. How am I going to get back?"

"You just called me a moron, and you expect me to care about your little problem?"

"This isn't a Christian thing to do!" Jack said.

"Jack, why are you calling on Christians for mercy? Remember, they hate you. You tried to convince me of that just a minute ago," Nelson said.

"Maybe I'm wrong. Really it's only the Christians that cling to the Bible that cause the problems. Those that say that homosexuals are sinners because they read it in that black book."

"Well, it's that black book that tells us to love our enemies and to do good to them that persecute us, so if we're going to throw out the book because of the parts about men being with men, then I guess we have to throw out the love parts too."

Jack looked around him. "We're in the middle of a freaking forest or something."

"Are you afraid of lions and tigers and bears?" Zeke asked. "Let's go."

The three men climbed into the car and started backing up. Jack watched with his face alternating between a mask of anger and horror.

Two seconds later the car moved forward again. "Jump in, Jack, before we change our mind," Nelson said.

Jack didn't hesitate.

When they reached the Tacoma Dome, the car stopped again, and Jack was invited to leave.

Before the door shut, Nelson yelled out, "God loves you, Jack."

Jack flipped him off as the car pulled away. Nelson wept the rest of the way home.

## Chapter 17

When the liberators returned home, they found Rosie rejoicing over the sale of twelve loaves of bread. Simon looked almost as proud as the cook. He had helped the kids with door to door sales.

When Brian came to the supper table, he told them he was almost finished with his revisions. Everyone was in an upbeat mood.

"I have an idea," Brian said. "Maybe there is a commune out there somewhere that's looking for people like us to join them. We won't have to start our own, but can melt right into an existing pot."

"How will we find it?" Nelson asked.

"Where do we find everything else we need these days?"

"Internet?"

"Bingo!"

Nelson smiled. "I'll do it right after supper. Hopefully I can find a Christian one."

The motley crew feasted on fresh bread with a thin layer of peanut butter and grape jelly. A couple of adventurous eaters put slices of cucumber on their sandwich instead of jelly, grossing out some of the rest of them. They all left the table knowing that in the days ahead, they might think that peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were a special treat. With the price of gas so high, it cost almost as much to drive the car to the shelter as it did to eat their humble meal at home.

Brian went back to his computer. At 9:45 PM he finished the last of his changes. He dumped the document onto his thumb drive. Before delivering his trophy to Nelson for re-proofing, he emailed the document to the email address that Ed had given him. The story was now in Angel's grasp, and Brian could start holding his breath. Would she approve? He found Nelson sitting in the kitchen nursing a glass of water.

"No coffee tonight?" Brian asked.

"I know we're running low on money. I've decided not to drink coffee any more. It's kind of a bad habit anyway, that I feel I need to break. The only habits I want are the ones that lead me closer to God."

"You're right. The way things are going we may all have to quit coffee cold turkey and quit turkey cold coffee because we won't be able to afford turkey either. So, did you find a commune?"

"I found one way down in Arkansas. It's named Shiloh. I sent an email to them asking about their community and what they're looking for in the way of residents."

"Cool. That's a long ways from Washington."

Nelson nodded. "I'm sure there's something closer. I'll keep looking. In the meantime, I've signed up for a kind of job."

"Kind of job?"

"Yeah, it doesn't pay very much, but it could be interesting."

"What is it?"

"It's called Examiner.com. It's like a blogging community. I will write stories for as the Seattle Christian Examiner. I'll make a penny for every visitor to one of my pages."

"A whole penny, huh? Try not to spend it all in one place."

Nelson chuckled. "I'll try to write some controversial stuff. That might generate some interest and get people arguing on my posts."

"Well, good for you. I wish you the best of luck. Here's my semi-final version of the book. Do your magic with it, and then I'll finalize for the version we send to my agent."

"I'll work on it most of the night."

"Don't kill yourself, kid." Brian went back to his room. He checked his email one last time. There was a response from Ed. Brian opened it without hesitating.

"Dear Brian, I got the copy of your book. I'll start reading it as soon as I hit the send button on this email. Thank you so much for all you've done. In God's love. Angel."

Brian felt his heart doing flips. He thought he was exhausted when he had staggered back to his room. His mind played what if games as he lay in bed. "God, I hope you don't mind me making a selfish request. Actually it's not totally selfish, because I'm thinking of my friends as well. I was just hoping that you might help me find favor with the publisher so that they will want this story and will pay enough money up front to keep the house until the big money rolls in. I know, it sounds pathetic when I look around the world and see the suffering going on. Tell you what, Lord. I take back my request. I ask that you supply the food needed to prevent those kids in Africa from starving to death. I pray that someday I'll have the financial resources to assist in providing for the widows and the orphans of the world. I'm so sorry that in my younger days when I had the money I squandered it on stupid pleasures. Please teach me to be a good steward of that which you bring my way. In the name of Jesus. Amen."

Brian dropped off to sleep with visions of long blonde hair flowing onto his arm from beautiful head leaning against his

shoulder. He slept past his normal hour. There was nothing compelling him to get out of bed today. No job awaited his arrival. He was waiting on Nelson and Angel to finish his book. When he finally did drag his weary bones out of bed, he decided to help Rosie and crew with the bread sales. He had toast with jelly for brunch, finishing up most of the bread that was left over from the day before.

Rosie decided not to bake as much at one time. "We'll go out selling in the morning, and if we sell out, we'll bake some more. Otherwise we'll try to sell the rest of it in the afternoon."

Brian nodded. "Good plan, Rosie. We're going to get sick of eating bread, as good as it is, if we have to force feed everyone to avoid wasting it."

Simon took one of Rosie's kids and went one direction. Brian and Gemma went another direction and Zeke and Gemma's other sibling went a third direction. They each had four loaves to sell. Brian let Gemma do all the talking. Their four loaves were gone in a short time. They returned to the house and told Rosie to start baking again. An hour later they went out again and sold six more loaves. When they returned the second time, they found the rest of the sales team had sold their four loaves and returned. They were eating lunch and waiting for another batch to come out of the oven. Rosie had another twelve loaves ready to go before two P.M. Brian was just about to leave the house again, when the phone rang.

"Brian here."

"Hi, Brian, this is Angela. I hate to be the bearer of bad news. I ran your new manuscript past the publisher, and they don't even want to bother reading it. With the bad economy, they are cutting down the number of titles they are going to publish. They have everything they need for the coming year. And to tell you the truth, the Christian fiction market is not exactly lucrative. A few people make a living at it. The rest are part timers."

Brian sighed. "OK. Thanks for the lowdown, Angela. Does that mean that you are not interested in representing me anymore?"

"Unfortunately, I don't really have any clout in the Christian world. I have a relationship with this publisher from the past so that was my only shot for you with your current manuscript. So unless you decide to sell the original . . . ."

Brian closed his eyes. Instead of counting sheep, he was counting dollar bills jumping up in the air and landing in a lit fireplace. He looked around the room at the expectant faces of the people who currently relied on him to keep them off the streets. He

felt a wavering in his resolve to publish a Christian book. A beep on his phone signaled that he had another caller. "Just one second, Angela. I need a minute to think."

"No problem. I'll hang on."

He transferred to the other call. It was Ed's number. "Hi, Ed."

"Wrong. It's Angel."

"Oh, hi, how are you?"

"Excited. I just finished your book and called to tell you I love it. I absolutely love it."

"OK. Hang on just one minute. I have a party on the other line whom I need to say goodbye to."

"Fine. I'll be here."

He hit the button again. "Angela, I thought it over, and I'm sticking to my decision. It will go out as a Christian book or not at all."

"OK, Brian. I admire your intestinal fortitude. Best of luck."

"Thank you, Angela, and if God blesses me with a best seller, I'll try not to rub it in should our paths cross again."

Angela laughed. "To tell you the truth, I'd love for you to be able to rub it in. I wish you all the success in the world."

"God bless, Angela."

"Bye, Brian."

Brian got Angel back on the line again. "Thank you so much!"

"For what?"

"For stopping me from maybe making a grave mistake."

"Really?"

Brian looked up at the ceiling. *Thank you, Lord.* "Some day I'll tell you all about it."

"I'd like that, but not as much as I liked the book. I almost felt like I was in the story."

Brian coughed. "Wow, I was hoping to make it something that people could relate to."

"You succeeded. When will you get it published?"

"I don't know, Angel. Maybe never."

"That would be a shame. It's such a testimony on the power of love and of God's plan for humans."

"I'll keep working on it. In the meantime, we're going to have church over here on Sunday morning at 10:30. You probably prefer going to the fancy service with a real worship team and a real pastor, but you and your dad are more than welcome to come over."

"I'd like that, Brian. I'll talk to dad about it and see what he thinks."

"Awesome."

"Well, I'm going to take a nap now. I was up quite a bit of the night reading your story."

"For heaven's sake, kiddo, you go get your rest. You need to take care of yourself!"

"Will do, Doctor Anderson. Talk to you later."

*I hope so.* "Bye, sweet woman of God."

Brian hung up and looked around the room. Everyone was staring at him. "What?"

"Spill it, dude," Zeke said. "Don't leave out any juicy details."

"It's really simple. The publisher hates the book, and Angel loves it."

"Angel or Angela?"

"Angel. Angela is bailing on me."

Zeke brought a fist down on his open hand, causing some of the people in the room to jump. "We start all over again."

"Not all over. The book is done. You just need to find a publisher."

"So you give me the toughest job."

"I thought you were the only one who could handle it."

Zeke sat up straighter. "Yeah. I probably am the only one who can handle it. Nelson, I want to use the computer this afternoon. I want you to go out selling bread. "

"No problem, Zeke. I need a break from that screen anyway."

"Did you find anything new on communes?"

"I found one that will accept Rosie and Zeke and the kids. Another one might take some of us men, but probably not all of us."

"So we'd have to break up the gang?" Brian said.

"Looks that way."

"Why can't real life work the way fiction does? In my book the writer sells his novel for a million dollars, and he buys the land for their commune with that. In real life, I get kicked in the teeth instead."

"The Bible says you have not because you ask not," Rosie said. "Did you pray for help?"

Brian looked around. "Well, no, I've only been a Christian for a couple of days. I don't think to do that stuff automatically."

"Typical man. When all else fails, then read the instructions or in this case call upon the Lord. Let's hit our knees people and raise our voices to the Lord."

After a rousing prayer, they all stood up. "Now let's hit the streets and sell some bread," Rosie said.

Brian and Gemma sold their four loaves in a bit longer time. Brian returned to the house feeling pretty good. He and Gemma had sold fourteen loaves. At a buck a loaf, they'd made fourteen dollars. Then he remembered that he made three times that much in one hour when he was working. The people that bought a loaf today probably wouldn't be ready to buy another tomorrow. They'd have to walk further away from home.

The other teams came home without any bread left over. They'd sold thirty loaves between them for the day. If they did that every day, they'd only make \$900 for the month.

Brian decided they'd celebrate by going down to the mission that night. He manned a spot on the serving line and went without food himself. The rest of the crew filled their empty stomachs. They were all in a good mood after eating. They gathered in the living room to talk.

"Did you find a publisher yet, Zeke?" Nelson asked.

"Not that easy. I did a lot of research. There are people out there that have tried for twenty years to get their book published. Almost no publishers will take queries directly. I checked on all of the Christian publishers. It's a brutal world out there."

"I told you that when we first met, Zeke."

"Yes, you did."

"That's why I ended up at the shelter in the first place. I had to obtain a key to get my little toe into the door. It looks like the door is going to slam and rip that poor little toe off and send him crying wee wee wee all the way home."

"Hey, you're talking about the little piggy going to market story," Gemma said.

Brian laughed. "Yes, I am, honey."

"Speaking of market," Zeke said, "there is another way we could work this book thing."

"I'm all ears."

"You can publish the book yourself."

"I know that, Zeke. It's called vanity publishing."

"I disagree. The world is changing out there and technology is making it possible for writers to control more of their destiny. You can publish, print, and sell your books for a lot more profit than you get if the publisher and bookstore and distributor all have their hand in the pot."

Nelson jumped up. "He's right. With a good website and some aggressive marketing using the newest technology, you could make a dent."

"How much will it cost to pull this off?" Brian asked.

Zeke grinned "I found a blog where a guy explained how you can get your book into Amazon and Barnes and Noble and other stores for about two hundred dollars. You have to pay someone to format the book and create the cover unless you can do that yourself."

"So I go from getting 25,000 dollars to spending 200 bucks or more. Not exactly a thrilling prospect. I don't have a website, and I can't afford to have somebody develop one."

"I have a little experience with that," Nelson said. "My friend, Becky, is a programmer. She got laid off recently."

Brian's eyebrows shot up. "Really? Did you invite her to church yet?"

"No. Should I?"

"What are you waiting for? You know where the phone is. If we're going to put together a dream team, let's get what we need."

"Are you really thinking of publishing yourself?" Simon asked?

Brian nodded. "It just dawned on me that this could be a commune type business. The books would have to be packaged and shipped. Let's get a calculator out here and find out how many books I'd need to sell in a day to succeed?"

After prodding and poking at all the numbers, Brian and Simon determined that fifty books a day would be enough to make a decent living for one person. A hundred a day would make it a profitable small business. If things mushroomed and great expectations were exceeded, they could create a thriving business. Brian would have to write more books though so the success could continue over a sustained amount of time.

"I could be the marketing director," Simon said.

"The kids and I could wrap the books in packages," Rosie said.

Brian held up a hand. "This all sounds really good in theory, but life doesn't usually go the way you map it out. You all keep forgetting that we're soon going to lose this house. I don't think the book thing is going to stop that. It will take a while to get the book on the streets and then longer to get noticed to the point we are selling any. And that's during a good economy. We've already talked about how we might be experiencing a depression. General Motors is declaring bankruptcy. Citibank is in trouble. I'm afraid we can't count on any of our ideas working out."

"Well, if you don't try, it won't work out either," Rosie said.

"True. I'll look around the house and see what I can sell for two hundred smackeroos. Let's give it a shot."

Zeke slapped him on the back and almost knocked the wind out of him. "There's another way for a happy ending too. If you sell some, a big publisher might take notice and offer you a contract."

"But if we're selling lots of books, why would we accept?"

"Depends on the size of their contract, I guess. Don't turn something down that you haven't even gotten yet."

Brian threw up his hands. "OK. I'll quit throwing wrenches in the gears, and we'll assume a positive mental attitude on this opportunity."

"It's about time," Rosie said, causing everyone to laugh.

Brian looked at Soaring Eagle who hadn't said a word during any of their conversation. "What does the prophetic Eagle think?"

"God says that as you have honored him, He will honor you."

"Does that mean I'll make it as a writer?"

"I heard His words. I'll let you interpret them as you wish."

Brian rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "I think we've worried about this long enough. Let's watch a movie."

The kids cheered. Brian let them pick the movie. They all needed a little bit of fun in their lives.

## Chapter 18

The next morning the bread brigade was preparing to depart for their daily sales activity when a knock sounded at the door. Brian opened it and found a man with Bill's Towing written on his shirt and cap. He looked out in the driveway and saw a tow truck. "Let me guess; you're looking for Simon Peterson?"

"Yep."

"One moment."

Brian went and got Simon. After an exchange of keys and conversation, the driver hooked up Simon's car and hauled it away. Simon stood there watching even after it was out of sight.

Brian rested a hand on Zeke's shoulder. "How about you go out and console Simon? His chin is about to hit the ground again. Tell him about the father's heart message you want to share with the world."

Zeke did as requested. The two men were still talking when Brian and Nelson left the house with their sales kid accompanying them. When Brian and Gemma returned to the house after disposing of their four loaves, they found the two men still sitting on the grass and talking.

Rosie's son who was supposed to accompany Simon on the bread route was sitting in the living room when Brian came in. "Brian, can you tell Simon that we need to get going. He's been talking forever."

"Son, I think the conversation Simon is having is much more important than making four dollars selling bread."

A few minutes later when Nelson returned, Zeke and Simon entered the house right behind them. Before departing for a second pass through the neighborhood, Brian gathered his troops together. "This bread thing is going pretty good. However, we're spending too much time walking and beating on doors. I think we need to give out our phone number and address and have people call to order bread. That way we know in advance how many to bake and we don't wear out our shoes wandering all over this side of town."

"We can make up sheets of paper and post them down at the grocery store and stuff. That way we might get some new customers," Rosie said.

"Good idea. So for now, let's make some little notices and give them out to everybody who buys bread or says they might be interested in the future."

While everyone was scrambling to make up their low-rent advertisement, Brian got Zeke off to the side. "So any luck with Simon?"

Zeke shook his head. "He's just as hard headed as you and I were until we took the plunge. We just have to keep working on him and setting an example for him."

When Brian returned home the next time, he found Becky sitting on the step. "Hello, young lady. I understand that you create websites?"

"Sure do. Nelson told me a little about what you're doing. You wrote a book and want to sell it?"

"Yep."

"Did you already publish it?"

"Not yet."

"Did you create a cover for it?"

Brian's eyes glazed over. "You can tell this is my first book. I totally spaced over the fact that if I publish the book myself, I have to create the cover for it."

"Or buy one from an artist."

"Can't afford that."

"You're in luck. I have a friend who publishes and he has some software to create covers. I'm sure he'd let me use it to create something spiffy for you."

"That would be totally awesome. You're a God-send."

Becky blushed. "Thanks. I've been praying that God would use me."

"Oh, here comes Nelson now. I'm sure you'll want to talk to him. We'll talk about the book cover later. How about tomorrow after church?"

"Perfect."

Brian watched Becky stride out to meet Nelson. She gave him a big hug. He tried to drum up a vision of his first conversation with Nervous Nelly. The transformation in the young man was remarkable. *I wonder if I've changed that much?*

That evening, the blended family took pains to clean the house for the church service to be held in the morning. Brian started wondering what he would wear. Last time he went to church he was disguised as Bob. *Holy cow! That was only a week ago. I can't believe how much life has changed in just six days. Angel is actually coming to my house! Heart be still.*

\* \* \*

The next day everyone scrambled around to get ready for church. The shower schedule was hectic. Brian opened his bathroom for the guys in the garage. He talked to Soaring Eagle just before the Native American took his shower. "Do you have a great sermon for us today?"

"Brian, I think we not only need to hear the sermon today but live it. The Lord is putting it on my heart that people need to learn how to partake of His providence in the challenging days ahead."

"Sounds good. Do you need any help from me?"

"We need to prepare a lunch of chicken and rice for the whole group."

Brian's eyes widened. "You mean all the guests as well?"

"Yes. Everyone."

"I'm afraid we don't have that much. I checked the freezer last night. We have one package of chicken breasts left. That won't go very far."

"Good. That is exactly what we want. And one pan of rice and chicken is the menu. You'll see when we serve it how the sermon applies."

"OK. I'll ask Rosie to whip up some chicken and rice." *But it ain't gonna feed everybody. I'll just fast today.*

When he explained the plan to Rosie, she looked at him like he was crazy. "That'll be enough to feed Zeke. What will the rest of us eat?"

Brian shrugged, "You have some bread left over, right. We'll have peanut butter sandwiches again if we have to. Soaring Eagle said to trust him on this."

"In that case, I won't worry about it. By the way, I left a CD on the table in the living room for the worship today."

"Super. Thank you. I'll go check it out now."

Brian went out into the front yard with the kids before the service was due to begin. He surveyed his lawn as the kids played a game in the grass. It was hard to picture him packing up his things, moving out, and leaving this beautiful place behind. If the economic predictions that he'd been hearing lately came true, he would have plenty of company.

Becky was the first to arrive. Pete followed shortly after. It was almost 10:30 when Angel and Ed showed up.

Brian met the Brannens at the driveway. "I just about gave up on you guys. It's time to start."

Ed helped Angel out of the car. Brian kicked himself for not thinking of it himself. "Sorry, Brian. I got a little bewildered."

"That's a male euphemism for lost," Angel said.

Brian laughed and escorted them into the house. Nelson handed them sheets of paper with the words to the songs on them. Nelson had the honor of welcoming everyone and introducing the worship music.

After a half hour of singing, or attempted singing in Brian and Zeke's case, Nelson said a prayer and introduced Soaring Eagle as their featured speaker.

The stoic Native American stood before them with that look which held a mixture of peace and authority which had impressed Brian down at the shelter. The fear it used to bring Brian had been replaced by confidence and security.

"The Lord laid it on my heart to speak about miracles today. We are entering a time in which the trials of the saints will be hard and long lasting. It will be necessary to lean upon our God for everything. Life will not go on as usual. We will be stretched to our very limits, but those who keep their eyes upon Jesus and trust in His provision will survive the ordeal. The problem is that not all Christians even believe in the miracles that they will need to stay alive and combat the enemy. This little flock has mostly been around signs and wonders before you even gave your life to the Lord. You don't know enough about the Christian world to understand that when you mingle with some other believers, they will tell you that the devil is the source of the things you have seen and maybe done. You need to be prepared to contend for your faith. There is a spiritual realm. Men do interface with that unseen world. Some do it through communing with their creator. Others try to sneak in the back door and deal with the counterfeit signs and wonders that the enemy uses to ensnare people and carry them away as captives. These people use occultist methods to contact the dead or to perform spells or tell the future. These people draw humans toward them like a candle attracts the moth.

"These people have no clue usually that they are dabbling with the devil. The call of power and success is strong. Unfortunately, God's plan to counter the devil's tactics with His own supernatural displays of power is thwarted by some of the people who claim they love Him and obey Him. I don't ever want to worship the gifts that God gives us to cope in the spiritual realm. We must choose to give adoration to the author of the gifts. However, I don't want to minimize those miracles that He gives us. People are being healed and raised from the dead on a regular basis. God is increasing the

amount of power that He is pouring out to keep pace with the acceleration of the devil's power. It's time that power is unleashed against crime, sin, and despair. We need God to pour out His anointing on us so that we might yield a large harvest in these last days."

Soaring Eagle went on to tell some of the specific miracles that he had been involved with during his lifetime. The list was impressive. He read the passage where Jesus fed the multitudes with two fish and five loaves of bread.

"One of the things we will be facing in the coming bad times is a shortage of food. It is time that we learn how to gather manna from Heaven. We must be in prayer for our daily bread. And we must pray that God stretch our supplies so that they will tide us over during these troubled times. Today, the Lord showed me we will have an example of the miraculous as we feed everyone in this room with one pan of chicken and rice. Not only will we all be fed, but you will be able to eat as much as you want, and we will still have leftovers."

Brian looked at Zeke. The big man's eyebrows went all the way up to his hairline. Brian had to suppress a laugh. Soaring Eagle was putting it on the line. When he finished the sermon, the speaker went to the kitchen to pray over the food Rosie would cook. Brian got Angel's attention. She walked over to him.

"Any chance we could go for a walk outside, Brian? I've been cooped up for a week now."

He almost swallowed the gum he had stuck in his mouth after the service. "Sure, if you think you're up to it."

"I'm fine. You did a good job of healing."

"Not me. God did it all. I just put my hands on you and talked a bit."

She smiled. "Good answer. I appreciate your faithfulness in doing that. Dad says you had quite a conversion experience in order to be ready to undertake a healing session like that."

He guided her out the front door. "It was pretty special. I had a lot of motivation though."

"I got some disturbing news yesterday."

A frown painted itself on Brian's face. "What's the matter?"

"I got fired."

"What? How could you get fired? You were on medical leave."

"A few weeks ago I counseled a teenager not to have an abortion. The head of the nursing department thinks I was out of line. So they gave me my walking papers."

"That's not fair. Are you going to fight it?"

"Brian, I don't want to fight it. I think God is preparing me for something else."

"Like what?"

"Maybe living in a commune. Those people need nurses too."

"Did my book give you that idea?"

She nodded. "I hadn't really thought much about them until then. It makes sense for people to band together to survive in tough times. I poked around looking to see what's available. And I checked on land that could be used for such an establishment. I actually found a piece of land with buildings on it that is for sale. The property was seized as a result of a drug arrest down in southern Washington. The whole parcel is available for a little under a million dollars."

"Unfortunately, I didn't get the million dollar contract that the hero in my book got. I won't be able to start a commune."

"Did you want to?"

Brian bit his lip. "In a way. I wouldn't want to do it though unless I was married."

"Me either."

Brian's heart started beating a little faster. "But you just said that you were ready to try a commune, but you're not married. Do you have a little announcement to make?" *And break my heart*

"Not really an announcement yet. God did finally reveal the man I am supposed to marry."

"You're kidding?"

Angel shook her head. "No, it was very clear that the one God had waiting for me has been revealed. I'm just waiting for him to pop the question now."

"He'll be an idiot if he doesn't take advantage of that opportunity."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Did you tell him?"

Angel brushed some hair from her eyes. "I told him God had revealed the man. However, I haven't informed him that he is the one. Do you think I should?"

Brian felt his heart slipping down into his socks. "What if he doesn't want you for his wife? What will you do then? Wait for God to show you plan B?"

"I don't know. I never considered the fact that he might ruin the plan."

They walked in silence for a minute. Brian stopped walking and put his hand on her shoulder. "This may be as welcome as a swarm of bees in a nudist colony, but I gotta say this. If this guy

doesn't have the brains to marry the sweetest woman in the whole world, he isn't worthy of you. And if you are prepared for a plan B, I'll be willing to put the same effort into praying that I could be the lucky guy as I did in trying to heal you. No, actually lots more."

Angel pulled away and began walking again. Brian didn't know whether to catch up or go back home. *I probably just ruined our friendship.*

"Are you coming?" she asked.

*At least she's not flaming mad at me.* "Sure." He caught up.

"You sound awfully convinced that you think I'd make a good wife. You don't even really know me."

"I know you well enough to know that God is going to dictate your path. Bad things can't be caused by a person doing that."

"So how about you, Brian. What is in your future?"

"I don't know. I've only been walking with Jesus for a few days now. Every day brings something new. It really looks like exciting things are happening in the world. It looks like I get to be part of the last days, the final showdown between God and Satan. Soaring Eagle makes it clear we need to listen for God's voice and obey. That's my immediate plan."

"Very noble and wise of you. I believe I'll accept."

"Accept what?"

"Your proposal."

Brian's gum slid down his throat into his stomach. It caused him to gag on the way down.

"Are you alright?" Angel asked.

"Fine. Just inhaled my gum. It must be time for me to get the wax cleaned out of my ears again. I thought you said something about accepting my proposal."

"Nurses clean out ear wax you know. I could have a look at it for you. In this case though, you heard correctly."

"What proposal are you talking about, Angel?"

"Are you taking it back?"

"Taking what back? What kind of proposal are you talking about any, just to make sure we're on the same page?"

"Marriage proposal. You said that if God's first choice didn't jump at the chance, you were willing to be Plan B."

"Yes, I did. But you have to give the other guy a chance. Don't you?"

Angel smiled sweetly. "I did, but you just couldn't seem to get the hint that you were the guy all along."

Brian felt the blood rush out of his face. He legs threatened to crumple beneath him.

"Are you OK, Brian?"

"I've never heard better news in my life but . . . ."

"But what?"

"This is terrible."

Angel's smile converted into a frown. "Brian, you just said you want to marry me, in so many words. How can it be terrible that I want the same thing, and more importantly, God wants it?"

"Sorry. That part is absolutely wonderful. I've never felt so much joy and so much anguish all at the same time. You can't marry me. I'll be a homeless dude in a couple of months. I can't support you."

"Don't you have some faith that God will make a way where there is no other way?"

"I've been a Christian for a few days. I don't know enough about God yet to really feel comfortable about anything."

"Let's go back. It must be about time to see God in action. There is no hurry for you to make a decision. I'm here, and I'll wait here for you to feel comfortable with marrying me. Does that make sense?"

Brian nodded. "Thanks for giving me some space. You really are a sweetheart."

"I'm going to give you fifty years to quit talking like that, should the Lord tarry."

"I'll see your fifty and raise you ten more."

Angel laughed. "You sound like Lucky."

"I'm much luckier than Lucky. Can I have the pleasure of holding your hand on the way home?"

She held out her dainty fingers. He laced his through hers, and they began the slow journey back to the house.

"I hope you'll be giving up your crusade against same sex marriage now," Brian said.

Angel stopped walking. "Is that a required condition that I meet for you making the decision for marriage?"

Brian contemplated losing Angel. If something happened to her, he couldn't handle it. "I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

"That's very nice, but if I don't stand up for God's principles, something bad has already happened to me."

"Can't you stand up for some other principles instead, like love maybe?"

"Sorry. I have to stand up for all of His principles. That's the way He made me. If you love me, you'll understand that."

"Well, I do love you, but I still don't comprehend this situation. You're risking your life you know."

"I know. And it's going to get worse. In some countries people are arrested for stating that they think homosexuality is a sin. The United States is headed that direction with hate crimes legislation that will pave the way for prosecution as well as persecution of Christians who try to teach Biblical truth."

"Wait a second. This is the United States of America, the home of the free and the land of the brave. We will always have the freedom to think and speak."

Angel nodded. "You'll be free to think, but maybe not to tell others what you think. This is part of the end of times, you know. It's very exciting to be poised for the return of Christ, but also it's very scary knowing we might have to go through a lot of grief before that happens."

Brian looked up at the clear azure sky overhead. "This is crazy. Americans will never let their basic freedoms be taken away."

"I know it's hard to accept, but it certainly fits into the scriptural description of the tribulation. Christians will be killed for refusing to take the mark of the beast. I guess you didn't read the fine print before signing the contract, huh?"

"I didn't know there was fine print." He let out a big sigh. "If they arrest you, they'll have to arrest me, too."

"Does that mean it's cool with you if I continue my demonstrations?"

"Cool is not the word I'd use. Maybe we can compromise and you can blog concerning the topic on the Internet so you don't risk your beautiful neck."

Brian looked up and saw they were home. He walked Angel to the threshold and then released her hand before opening the door for her. He couldn't help but picture himself carrying her across this threshold. *Will I even have a threshold? Looks like it will require a miracle to pull this off. But, looks like I've already received one or maybe two miracles.*

When they entered, they found that Rosie's lunch was already being served. All around the room people were digging in. They went to the kitchen and checked the pot. It was still half full. Brian loaded half a plate for Angel and a full plate for himself. He turned around to see Zeke digging in for seconds. Brian examined the pot again after Zeke loaded his plate to the top. It was still half full.

The couple found a place to eat in the back yard. They were just about done cleaning their plates when everybody tramped out of the back door and formed a circle around them.

Brian looked up in amazement. "What's going on?"

Zeke got up on the bench of the picnic table, and then had to catch his balance to keep from falling off. "Brian Anderson, you're about to lose your house, maybe your car, and the place in which you nurtured a bunch of hurting people back to health. Do you remember the end of *It's a Wonderful Life* when all those people dumped money into a pot to rescue George Bailey from losing everything?"

"Of course. It sends chills down my spine every time I watch it."

"Awesome. But sadly, in your case, none of us has any money to bail you out. Perhaps the president of the United States will do that. I want to testify to you folks today that when I met this man, he was afraid of his shadow's shadow. Now I see him as a brave man ready to start a brave new world. And, Brian, we want to tell you as your friends that we love you, and that you are our hero. We'd sing For He's a Jolly Good Fellow but your neighbors would probably start shooting at us and besides, that trite old song won't even do you justice. Just bask in the sunshine of our love and maybe it will warm you in the cold days and nights that might lie ahead."

Brian stood up. "You guys didn't have to do this. I have enjoyed being a part of the restoration process of human souls. I think it's given me a vision for what I want to do the rest of my life."

Pete got up on the bench next to Zeke. "I came over today to give Brian some private news, but it appears that you are all his family so he won't mind me sharing this with all of you. You see Brian's parents did not leave him an inheritance. They didn't want the prodigal son trashing the estate before he had the wisdom to be a good steward of it. They set up a trust fund that would be inherited by the new man that Brian would become if he ever died to himself and took on the life that Christ gives. I am the administrator of that trust fund and I declare today that the inheritance qualifications have been met. The funds will be released sometime this week."

Everyone cheered.

"Pete, you old fox. I always wondered why you kept calling me and asking what was new. You were sure I'd tell you if I ever got born again, weren't you."

"Absolutely. If it wasn't worth sharing, then you really wouldn't have been born again."

"Please tell me that I will inherit enough to make my house payments for a few months."

Pete frowned. "Oh, let me see." He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and stared at it. "Maybe, depending on which house you're making payments on. The grand total is one million eighty-nine thousand and fifty dollars."

Everyone's mouths fell open, including Brian's.

"A million dollars. Where did my dad get a million dollars?"

"Half of it came from the life insurance policy. The rest was the result of investments he made when he was young."

"You told me that he gave everything to the church."

Pete grinned "Everything else is more accurate."

Brian walked over to the picnic table. "Would you two gentlemen get down from my soapbox, please? I've got something important to say."

They got off, and Brian got on. He beckoned to Angel. When she arrived, he helped her up on the bench beside him. "First of all, Soaring Eagle, you're a heck of a preacher, but when Angel and I get married, we're going to have a real pastor and a real church, if you don't mind."

The small group exploded in jubilation. When Brian finally got them settled down so he could speak again, he held up one finger. "However, I will let you pray over the food at the reception so we can feed thousands on a small budget. I won't be here tomorrow to help with bread sales. I'm going to take a trip down to the southern part of the state to look at a piece of property for a commune. Would anyone like to go along? Angel and I have room in the back seat for a couple of inspectors. And those that stay behind have the assignment of making a list of people from the rescue shelter who we think would be good candidates to join us. Humans try to recycle everything under the sun. I think it's time we started helping God recycle people."

Even the kids volunteered to go. Simon was the only one who didn't raise his hand.

"Pete, why do you have your hand up? Are you serious?"

"I figure I have a stake in this plan. I'm not planning on pulling up roots and moving to a commune. I'm afraid my wife might object strenuously to that arrangement, but I would like to offer you my legal services free of charge as a gift to your ministry."

Most of the people applauded.

"Don't you want to go, Simon?" Brian asked.

"Why would I go? You're not going to want me to join your commune anyway. You guys have been wonderful, but I'm afraid this is where you kick me back to the street where I belong."

"You don't have to join us, if you don't want, Simon, but we'll need someone to take care of our finances. We'll have a bakery and some book selling and free lance writing. Somebody's got to do that accounting and stuff. Maybe we'll need to make investments as well."

"Are you planning on having the residents stick around forever?" Simon asked.

Brian shrugged. "Maybe some of them. Our goal will be to provide a refuge and a place where we can get the message across that homeless people have worth. We'll heal people up so that they can return to the world if they so choose and make room for others that need a shelter for a season. Perhaps Doc would like a chance to practice medicine again, unofficially. Lucky might finally win a big hand."

"That's a good plan. However, I'm not one of you, a Christian I mean."

"No problem, Simon. We need to have someone around we can introduce to the Father's love," Zeke said.

Simon blinked and then began bawling like a newborn baby. Everyone stared for a few minutes until Zeke stepped up and engulfed the smaller man in his big black arms.

Soaring Eagle started to sing. "Let the fire fall, let the wind blow, let the glory come down." Everyone else chimed in. Brian helped Angel down from the picnic table. They wrapped their hands together and raised them skyward as the glory continued to come down. Brian's eyes left the face of the one he loved as he closed them to try to behold the face of the One who had given her to him.





