

DEMONS AND DREAMS

By
Gerald Thompson

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Gerald Thompson / Finger Lakes Publishing
1854 Eastwood Dr
Lima, NY 14485
www.demonsanddreams.com
www.geraldthompson.com

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To my patient wife, Lorrie,
for putting up with me for all these years.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ...

Ephesians 6:10-18

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Caleb

Friday, Early Morning

"Caleb, WAKE UP!"

Startled and confused, I struggled to open my eyes, but they refused to budge. I tried to raise my arm to clear them, but it remained frozen. I tried the other limb, and it too lay immobile. *Don't panic, Caleb.* Confused by the paralysis, I focused on the fingers of my right hand. The joints cracked as I slowly flexed my fingers. It didn't hurt, but they also didn't want to move. The more I bent them, the looser they got. My elbow snapped as I lifted my forearm. My shoulder protested as I reached and rubbed my eyes.

A blood-curdling scream broke the silence. I froze as deep chuckles echoed around me.

With urgency, I pried open my eyes. Veins of light flickered like candles and danced across the domed ceiling high above. My neck resisted when I looked left and again, right. With every joint cracking, I strained to sit up. Once vertical, I studied my surroundings.

The dim light revealed row upon row of beds with humanoid lumps lying on them. Mysterious beings wove their way through the cots while others floated above. I shook my head and blinked before looking again. It was hard to tell. The half-light and distance made it difficult to see.

I looked toward the bed on my right. A pajama-clad woman lay there without a blanket to cover her. An aisle separated us. The bare mattress rested on a three-foot-high grubby white metal frame. It looked like something you slept on at camp. As I watched, she smiled, sighed, and rolled away from me.

I turned to see what was on the other side. I scrambled backward and fell on the floor. Every joint made a sound like twisting bubble wrap. I crept to my knees and peered over the top of the mattress. A man lay on his back, and his legs thrashed wildly. A creature perched on the man's torso and held on as the man bucked. One of its arms dug into his head, and the other reached into his chest. The man's legs stopped, and his back arched as silent screams erupted from his open mouth. Pain and anguish painted his face. I gasped, and the creature turned its head towards me. A toothy grin split the ghastly mask as flames of sadistic pleasure danced in its eyes. The scent of decay assailed my nose.

Its eyes narrowed; it growled, "Go back to sleep, huu-maan."

I jumped up and fell flat on my face as my feet slipped on the glass-like floor. Blood gushed from my nose and left a trail down my shirt as I got up and ran. I dropped to the ground and rolled under several beds. When I found myself in another aisle, I crouched and tried to hide. I repeated this process a couple more times. Out of breath, I squatted between two beds and rested. Slowly, I lifted my head and looked for pursuit. I discovered none and returned to the floor.

What was that thing? It had bright red eyes, a human-like face with a pointy chin, and a mouth full of tiny sharp teeth. Sprigs of coarse hair sprouted from its head attached to its scrawny neck. Burnt red blotches mottled the crimson skin of its hairless body. Its muscular arms and legs looked too long for its build. The naked creature's gender remained a mystery.

Using my sleeve, I wiped the dripping blood from my nose. What a mess! Blood all over my shirt. I rubbed my hands on my pants and left trails of burgundy on them. The stains annoyed and disgusted me, but I put those thoughts aside for now.

Like a periscope, I lifted my head high enough to look around. I crouched in the middle of a sea of beds. Dull light still rippled in fluctuating waves across the high domed ceiling, providing dim illumination. A distant scream, followed by baritone laughter, echoed

off the cavernous walls. I studied the ceiling far above. It must be hundreds of feet high. I couldn't see an end to this ocean of beds. Every bed I saw had a sleeper on it.

Off to my left, through the gloom, I saw a rectangular structure. To my right, I saw nothing but beds. Behind me, the aisle stretched into the twilight, and before me, a broad walkway crossed my path. Crawling on my hands and knees, I crept to the opening between the last two beds. I looked up and down the central aisle. Seeing no one else, I stooped low and ran toward the building. When I reached it, my burning legs forced me to rest. It was farther away than it looked. My heart pounded in my ears. With my back against the wall, I slowly slid down until I sat on the floor and waited to catch my breath.

Jumbled thoughts and a myriad of questions flooded my mind. I closed my eyes. *Calm down and think, Caleb.* My breath slowed; I opened my eyes and surveyed the surroundings once more. The half-light made it hard to see. Shadows continued weaving amongst and above the sleepers. Occasionally, a cry reached my ears, followed by a chorus of deep laughter. I didn't know which disturbed me more, the terrified shrieks or the sadistic mirth.

As I clambered to my feet, I stepped away from the wall and turned to examine the structure. I faced the short side of the rectangular building, perhaps fifty feet wide, standing about ten feet tall. *Why is this building here?* There was no other structure as far as I could see.

Broken ceramic tiles peppered the wall's surface, and many of them lay shattered on the floor. In the middle of the wall, an open doorway beckoned me. My foot kicked a piece of the broken tile, and it skittered across the ground. As I stepped through the opening, something materialized before me.

I fell backward and landed hard. I crab-scrambled away from the apparition. As I retreated, the monster faded from sight. What was that thing? It was similar to the other beast. Its crimson eyes bored into mine

while the blood-red lips smacked as if I were a tasty morsel. The thing stank of death. *Why didn't it attack?*

A seed of a thought germinated in my mind, and it grew into a scary realization. These creatures are demons. They only lacked the horns and a forked tail.

I'm dead, and this is Hell! I collapsed on the floor as my fear and emotions poured through my eyes. *How can this be?* I just fell asleep on the couch! A pool of tears collected beneath me, and my chest hurt.

Eventually, my brain re-engaged. *This doesn't feel like Hell.* There are no flames or physical torment, comfortable temperature, and a bunch of beds with people sleeping on them.

Perplexed, I sat and drew my handkerchief from my pocket. I wiped my eyes and blew my nose. Dried blood and mucous stained the cloth. *Would a dead person need to blow their nose?*

With renewed hope, I stood. My legs wobbled a bit and steadied after a few seconds. I still didn't know what to do next. *Am I dreaming?* I slapped myself hard. *Ow! Ok, I'm awake.* If I'm not dreaming and not dead, where am I? No answers came to my mind. While contemplating my next step, a compulsion to enter the room grew within me. It felt like someone stood behind me and pushed me toward the opening. I panicked.

A voice spoke, "Trust me." My head whipped around, looking for the source of those words.

The force behind me strengthened. I planted my feet on the smooth floor, yet I steadily moved toward the demon doorway. I tried to turn around and run, but it was like a bulldozer pushed me. I leaned back against the force behind me, and my sneakers squeaked as I tried to brace myself on the smooth floor. With my arms straight out, I waited for the inevitable. With every inch I slid, my terror grew. My outstretched hands caught the door jamb as I locked my elbows to keep from entering the room. The constant push overpowered my strength and broke my grip. I stumbled over the threshold into the chamber.

The demon reappeared. It stood my height. Our eyes locked, and a toothy grin spread across its face. Saliva dribbled from the corner of its mouth as it chuckled and took a step towards me. Warm urine ran down my legs and pooled on the floor. It laughed even louder and took another step. "Are you scared, HUU-maan?" it asked. "You're supposed to be asleeeep." It smacked its lips, and another drop of saliva escaped its mouth. It took a third, slow step relishing my terror. "I don't think they'll miss you. They'll just wonder why you died in your sleep."

A new compulsion grabbed my vocal cords, and I shouted, "Jesus is my Savior! Jesus is my Savior!" I covered my head, closed my eyes, and waited for the attack.

When nothing happened, I cracked one eye open. The demon had retreated several steps and glowered at me. I opened the other eye as I straightened up. The beast just stood there. *Why isn't it attacking?*

Pulse racing, I peered at the beast then glanced around the room. My eyes flicked back to the creature; then, I dared a second glance about me. To my left, about two feet away, stood a stainless-steel table piled with an assortment of parts and junk.

"Pick up the tube," commanded the voice in my head. I didn't question it this time.

On top of this heap rested a black plastic tube about two feet long. It could have been a vacuum cleaner attachment. As I reached for it, a glimmer of white light crawled along its surface. My right hand grasped the thick end of the tube, and I heard myself say, "The Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God."

The plastic tube became a silver sword that hummed with a pulsing white aura. I stared at the blade. It shone brightly in this dark place. The sword was light in weight but solid. A tingling sensation flowed into my hand, spread up my arm to my neck, and scripture burst upon my consciousness. I felt like I could quote the whole Bible. No, I knew I could quote the entire Bible.

I staggered under the intense feelings and power. I lifted the sword closer to my face with renewed confidence, and I ran my left hand along the flat part of the blade. It felt warm and glass smooth. Stupidly, I ran my left thumb along the top edge. Sharper than a razor, the sword slid through the skin. I jerked my hand away and examined it. Instead of blood dripping from the wound, I found a severe, inch-long burn.

A low growl reminded me that I was not alone. I lifted the sword as I turned toward the sound, and the sword vibrated as if it looked forward to striking this monster. The demon took a wrestler's position: knees bent, elbows up. Inch long claws tipped each finger. I mirrored its stance. Ribbons of light rippled up and down the blade. The demon scowled as a deep-throated growl replaced its mocking laughter. Its eyes darted back and forth between the weapon and me as I quaked under its gaze and tightened my grip on the hilt. The metal felt pliable like clay in my hand. We circled each other, and I wondered who would make the first move. The beast approached the doorway. Suddenly, it turned and dove, disappearing as it passed over the threshold. Stunned, I lowered the sword.

Puzzled, I stood there. *What just happened? Why didn't it attack?* Relief replaced fear. I didn't understand what happened. I thought I was dead. Holding the sword in front of me, I walked over and looked out the doorway to see if the demon was out amongst the beds. I didn't see it so I turned and re-entered the building.

The same dingy, white tiles covered the interior walls. *Now what?* I peered into the gloom and felt compelled to go deeper into the room. I didn't fight it this time. The sword's aura provided illumination. A long row of steel tables faded into the darkness down the center of the room. The closest one held the different vacuum cleaner parts and other junk. The other tables I saw contained nothing. Beds lined the walls, and the closest ones appeared empty. The dim light made it impossible to see what lay at the far end. I cautiously moved down the aisle.

As I crept forward, I could see one bed with a human-shaped lump on it. I jumped. A high-pitched scream bounced off the walls, and the person on the bed convulsed. I inched closer, sword ready. A small demon sat on a woman's chest with both hands embedded in her skull. The creature screamed, sounding like a little girl, "Mmmooooomyyy." It cackled. It hadn't noticed me. I looked at the sword and then the little monster. I stepped forward. The light from the sword reached the demon causing it to turn its head in my direction. I swung. As the blade struck, surprise crossed its face just before it became vapor and dissipated. Alarmed, I spun around a couple of times, looking for the demon. *Where'd it go? Did I kill it?*

A low moan rose from behind me, and I turned my attention to the occupant of the bed. The woman no longer thrashed. For better light, I held the sword near her face. Tears pooled in her eyes and overflowed onto the mattress. A sob escaped her throat. I bent down and whispered in her ear, "Wake up. The demon's dead." She didn't stir.

I put a hand on her shoulder and gently shook her as I whispered, "In the name of Jesus, awake."

Her eyelids burst open, complete with panic. They darted about until they met mine. Even in the dim light, her green eyes sparkled. She struggled to sit. Her joints cracked as mine did. I tried to help her, but she turned away, causing a rapid popping sound. I stepped back to give her room. She placed her feet on the floor, and her knees buckled. She caught the bed frame and tried again. With more confidence, she let go of the bed and faced me.

"Go," I pointed toward the exit. "See if you can find a way out. Remember, Jesus will save and protect you." *Why did I say that?*

Wordlessly, she scanned my body from toe to head. Her eyes bore into mine as if she examined my soul. I pointed to the door again. She turned and left the way I came. I continued down the row of beds until I reached the end of the room.

I found neither people nor demons. I did pass about thirty tables and discovered a doorway. I stepped through it and found myself in the original cavern. I sighed. *Now, what do I do?*

Another bed sat by the door with a man lying on it. He looked the same as the other sleepers. No, not quite the same. The other sleepers had a faint glow about them. It was hard to notice until it was absent. He still breathed, but there was no inner spark. No spirit. Spiritually dead, but not physically dead. How odd and how sad, I thought.

I turned to continue my exploration and banged into a muscular wall of blood-red flesh. My eyes traveled upward. A demon towered over me; its foul breath and saliva rained down. I jumped back in terror. The sword clattered to the floor. Its clawed hand reached for me; evil red eyes filled my vision.

"Jesus is my Savior!"

Caleb

Friday, Early Morning

"Jesus is my Savior!" I yelled, rolled off the couch, and smashed my nose on the dingy gray linoleum. Blood gushed and stained the floor, a brilliant crimson. Cursing, I jumped up and raced for the kitchen sink while blood splattered on my shirt. Several paper towels later, the bleeding stopped.

As I washed my face, I remembered that awful place and relief flooded my mind. *It's a dream!* A choked laugh escaped my throat as I dried my face, and I dropped into a kitchen chair. I reached for a napkin on the table and blew my nose again to remove the remaining blood.

What a nightmare: sight, sound, touch, smell, and fear. Never had a dream taken over my senses. It was so real. The receding adrenaline caused little spasms in my hands and arms.

Get a grip, Caleb. You're thirty years old, not five. You had a nightmare, nothing more.

I breathed a sigh of relief then laughed again. A dream, nothing but a dream. I can't wait to tell . . . Then the loneliness returned. There was no one to tell.

I had no close friends or relatives, just a few work acquaintances. A social cripple, that's what I was. I never knew what to say or how to behave when I met new people. As a teenager, I stuttered and looked at my feet, rarely lifting my head to look into their eyes. Bullies loved tormenting me. Though I no longer stuttered, I still had a hard time meeting people. Until I get to know them, I'm very uncomfortable.

Why was I like this? I blamed my father, and my father defined cruelty.

Mom wanted to name me "Caleb" after her daddy. Father protested until he looked up the name. It means "Dog" in Hebrew. Then he was all for it. Father relished telling me he had never wanted a kid; a dog is what he wanted, and that's what he got! He'd guffawed every time he said it.

Father whistled and patted his thigh whenever he wanted me to come to him. Most of the time, Father enjoyed mentally torturing me. When home, he watched TV and drank beer. I tried to hide in my room, but my old man usually wanted me nearby to fetch the next bottle. He subjected me to an endless stream of belittling insults. "Get me a beer, you mangy cur!" My only relief came when he passed out in his chair.

Sometimes his abuse became physical. I would do something that annoyed him; he would yell and punch me. He never hit me in the face. He didn't want any visible evidence of his abuse. However, he felt no such restrictions on my gut or butt.

If I made him furious, he ordered me to cut a switch off the pussy willow outback. I had to strip off the leaves and buds then give it to him on bended knee like a knight who presented the king his sword. He'd make me drop my pants, lean on the kitchen table, and "teach me a lesson about respect."

Fortunately, he only resorted to physical violence, maybe once a month. But this left me nervous the rest of the time because I never knew what might set him off. He'd accuse me of looking at him funny or mocking him, and then my backside suffered his wrath.

The only way to survive the onslaught of abuse was not to care about anything. Maybe I was depressed, I don't know. I went through the motions of life, but not the emotion. I was rarely angry, but I was also rarely happy. I take that back; the anger towards my father never showed on my face but simmered beneath.

I had no friends in high school. I interacted with people when I had to. I became a failure because I didn't care. My apathy doomed all of my college, women, and career efforts as I drifted through life.

I returned to the present, stood, and looked around my apartment. What a dream, so vivid! And why would I say, "Jesus is my Savior?" I hadn't been to church in over a decade and hadn't given Jesus much thought at all. Well, He got more thought during desperate times. My only recent exposure to Jesus had been the late-night television evangelists.

I shook my head, trying to untangle the thoughts and emotions that ran through my mind. *What day is it? Friday?* I pulled the curtain back and looked out the window. The daylight was brighter than I expected. I glanced at my watch and panicked. I had to get moving or be late for work, and I hadn't been tardy in three years. Falling asleep in one's work clothes did have its advantages. I went to the bathroom to wash up.

In the mirror stood a mess of a man. Blood covered much of the front of me. Wait a minute. There were bright red wet stains that mingled with darker dried blood. The sleeve mainly had old blood on it.

I didn't have time for this mystery. I stripped off the garment and tossed it in the bathtub to deal with it later. It took a few moments to wash my face, slap on some deodorant, and drag a toothbrush across my teeth. I grabbed a clean shirt out of the closet, slipped it on, and buttoned it as I trotted to the kitchen. Breakfast had to be coffee and a donut on the way to work. Ready to depart, I looked at my watch again. Four minutes, not bad. I think that's a new record.

Pausing, I surveyed my apartment one last time before heading out the door. I saw the red puddle on the floor. I'd forgotten to clean up the blood. I looked at my watch and back to the blood. I was going to be late, yet I needed to clean that . . .

"Aarrgg!" I ran to the kitchen sink, stripped some paper towels off the roll, and splashed cold water on half of them. I turned with dripping towels and leaped for the bloodstain. Landing on my knees, I attacked

the blood with a circular motion. On a particularly vigorous scrub, my hand clipped an object just under the edge of the couch. Surprised, I paused, reached under, and pulled something out.

I dropped the object. It banged on the tile as I staggered backward.

Caleb

Friday Morning

There, on the floor, lay the black plastic tube from my nightmare. It appeared to be a rigid, plastic vacuum cleaner tube. It shared the same characteristics, such as color, length, and weight, but I don't own a vacuum cleaner. On a rare occasion, when I felt motivated to clean, I borrowed one from work. I supposed I looked silly, walking it down the sidewalk, but I didn't care. Besides, things can't move between dreams and reality. Still, it sure looked like the one I dreamt about last night.

I picked up the tube again to look at it closer. YYEEEOOWW! A sharp pain shot through my hand, and I discovered an inch-long burn on my left thumb.

The tube rattled as it hit the floor again. My mind reeled; the bloody paper towels fell to the floor. I staggered for the door. It slammed behind me as I turned, shoved the key in the lock, and twisted it. Breathing hard, I ran down the hall and crashed through the outside door. I nearly knocked over some guy in a suit. A stream of profanity poured from his mouth as I mumbled apologies and joined the river of pedestrians as they flowed down the sidewalk.

This October day had dawned bright and brisk. I often relished these crisp, clear mornings, but not today. My thoughts and emotions churned as I hurried down the thoroughfare. The mystery of the black tube and the burn on my thumb haunted me.

I didn't have much; I owned no car, bike, or computer. I had an old TV in the corner of my room, a prepaid cell phone, and stacks of books. I spent a lot of time at the library, where I'd surf the web or read. While

I never finished college and admit apathy was one of my companions, I'm not stupid. I just didn't care what happened to me or those around me.

It took twenty minutes to walk from my dumpy, first-floor studio apartment to Foe Financial Services. I wove through the sidewalk traffic with my head down, collar up, and rooted in thought. The FFS building dominated the Stanton skyline. A monument of steel and glass to Ichabod Manheim Foe, founder and CEO of Foe Financial Services. I'm one of a dozen cleaners.

Life had been hard. I floated from job to job, not caring about the work or myself. Three years ago, I lost my job again. To get by, I ate dinner at the City Mission Soup Kitchen for almost a month. Listening to a sermon was the only price of the meal. Different preachers spoke throughout the week. I paid attention to the passionate pastors full of fire and brimstone. Others rambled, and I tuned them out. One day the City Mission Pastor spoke, but he said something that made me realize I didn't have to live like this. I don't exactly remember the words. I prayed to God for the strength to change. I wanted to make a better life for myself. I resolved to do better. A week later, I got the job at Foe Financial. I worked hard but forgot all about the "with God" part.

My previous boss fired me due to chronic tardiness. I wasn't going to let that happen again. I vowed to be on time, no matter what kind of weather I had to plow through or how I felt. My floors met or exceeded my supervisor's expectations. The hard work paid off with positive reviews and regular raises. Also, my anemic self-esteem ballooned.

Glancing up, I saw my destination in the distance. Most of the downtown buildings were five to fifteen stories high, but not Foe Financial. It soared above the rest with thirty-five floors, and many people considered it an eyesore. The local news interviewed Ichabod Foe during the groundbreaking ceremony. When asked why his building needed to be so tall, Mr. Foe said, "I'm a big man, and I deserve a big building." I

laughed when he said that. What a pompous jerk! Some people had more nonsense than sense.

My stomach rumbled; I lifted my head and looked around. I had walked right past the coffee shop. I stepped out of the main flow of pedestrian traffic and looked at my watch, trying to decide if there was time to go back. I glanced up.

I froze.

A man walked toward me and, on his left shoulder, sat a dark red shape. As he drew near, I could see the tiny body with gangly arms and legs. It was one of the demons from my dream. As the man passed by me, I saw the evil thing had its right hand stuck into the back of the man's skull. I stared at them. The imp's lips moved as if it whispered into the man's ear. As this odd couple moved out of sight, a woman approached me with a similar creature hitching a ride. Then I saw another demon, and another, then more. Dozens of monsters rode on dozens of shoulders or floated above the crowd.

The world spun. My legs became rubbery as if all the bones evaporated, and I fell back against the building. I pinched myself hard. Other than a sharp pain and a red welt on my forearm, everything remained the same.

No, no, no, no . . . How can this be? It was just a dream . . . A DREAM! Wasn't it?

Confusion filled my mind as I leaned against the wall. Breathing hard, I fought the panic and fear. Slowly, the panic subsided, but my legs still felt wobbly. I studied the passing crowd and tried to wrap my mind around what I saw. The demons ranged from the size of a baby to a full-grown man. Scattered amongst the morning crowd, I noticed different groups of people. I calmed down, focused, and analyzed what I saw.

About half the people looked as you'd expect. They had a faint spirit glow and no demon hitchhikers. One person had no aura at all. He walked, but he looked dead. How is that possible?

Several people had bright white auras. I sensed that they were the most alive of all the people. Two floating demons split to go around one of them, disgust on their faces.

The rest of the people looked like horses with diminutive jockeys. All the small creatures sat or stood on the shoulders of their "steeds." Other monsters floated a couple of feet above the heads of the tallest pedestrians. I only saw one walking amongst the people.

So far, no one, demon or human, paid any attention to me. The horrors didn't know I saw them.

I forgot about the coffee and donut and hurried to work. The entrance to my sanctuary came into view. A few more strides, and I'd be there.

An arm reached out, a hand grabbed my jacket, and yanked me off the sidewalk into a storefront doorway.

"Hey, what the . . ."

I whipped around to face my assailant and banged my nose again on someone's chest. I raised my head and searched his face. My first impression was the person was male, but the more I looked, the less I was sure. He had the bluest eyes, a Roman nose, and full red lips. Light brown hair flowed out of the hood covering his head. No blemish or wrinkle marred the smooth, lightly tanned skin. A big Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. I stepped back. I felt waves of heat, wait, not heat; power and majesty washed over me. I locked my legs because I felt a desire to kneel before him.

"Hello, Caleb." He said with a baritone voice.

"How do you kn . . . Who are you?"

The stranger furtively looked around. He stepped out from the doorway and looked up. Then he ducked back under and, with his rich voice, said, "Listen, Caleb, my time is short and my message urgent. I'm an angel, and God has sent me . . ."

"An angel? Wha . . ." fear bubbled up into my throat.

"Silence, Caleb, and listen. God gave me a message for you. You received a great gift last night. You can now see and interact with both the physical and the spiritual worlds."

"N-n-n-no." I stuttered as my legs gave way, and my butt hit the cement. I drew my knees up to my chest and hugged them.

"Hmm . . . I don't have time for . . . A more direct approach is needed," the angel muttered.

Louder, the deep voice, stated, "You might find this unpleasant, but I don't have time to mess around, and this will speed the process up."

The angel squatted down. His arm reached for my face. I thought he intended to grab it. Instead, I could feel each hot finger as they passed through my skin and into my skull.

"OOOWWW!" I cupped my head between my hands.

"Do not resist, and the pain will stop," the calm and baritone voice resonated inside my head. Images, thoughts, emotions, some mine, and some from the angel flew around inside my skull.

"Focus on my voice, Caleb. Follow it. The pain will decrease. My name is Remiel."

I stood in the eye of a mental hurricane and faced the angel. Images and our memories whirled around us. I say "our memories" because I saw many places and people I had never experienced. I felt the angel's spirit supporting me like a warm hug. My panic and fear lessened. Internally, our conversation continued.

"Good. Now listen. You can see the spiritual condition of the people around you and the demons that torment them. Satan's minions are on the move. The city is at the tipping point where it will slide into depravity or rise to greatness. What's happening here has the potential to spread like cancer throughout the world. God has chosen you to be His instrument to save the city and, in turn, the physical realm. In the days to come, there is a challenge, a task you must face. However, you must first secure the Armor of God. With the Armor of God, you will be able to battle the demons that hold this city hostage."

My mind exploded. Everything started swirling again.

"CALEB, FOCUS!"

The mental shout startled me, and I pushed the panic back down.

"There's more to God's message. Last night He gave you the Sword of the Spirit. You must gather the rest of the Armor of God before you can face the demons."

"You've gotta be kiddin', Angel! Look at me. I'm a loser."

"The name is Remiel. Perhaps that is what you believe, but God knows differently." Remiel replied. "Last night, you saw just a part of the dark side of the spirit realm. You were in a bubble, a Dream World, inserted between the physical and spiritual realities. The rules of reality are blended there. Items of dual-purpose can pass between both worlds, and the Sword of the Spirit exists in both realms. It appears as a simple plastic tube in the physical world, but it is a sword of immense power in the spirit world.

"While the citizens of Stanton sleep, the demons torment and tempt them. And when people are asleep, they exist in both places. Their spirit is in the Dream World while their body rests in the physical world. In the Dream World, since it is part of the spiritual realm, your spirit is "solid" and behaves much like your physical body." Did you hear the voice of God, and did you receive the Sword of the Spirit?"

"Yes . . . I mean . . . No. I mean . . . I don't know. There was a voice in my head, but I didn't know it was God. I only wanted out."

"Do you remember accepting Jesus as your Savior when you were seventeen?" Remiel asked, his words musical notes.

"Yes."

"Your prayer then was sincere. At that moment, the Holy Spirit took up residence in your body. To survive your father's abuse, you developed a mental shell and crawled inside. The Holy Spirit has been speaking to you since then, but you chose not to listen. Last night, God shattered that shell. When the Spirit spoke, this time, you heard."

"Maybe God spoke to me last night, but I don't know how to accomplish this task you're talkin' about."

I felt the fingers withdraw as they slid out of my skull, and I watch them recede from my face. "Depend on God and listen; you will know what to do when the time comes," Remiel said as he faded from sight. I stared at the spot where the angel had stood just a moment ago.

Demons? Angels? God? This can't be real . . . Can it? This is a nightmare. I must be crazy. I stood up, filled with fear and confusion. The tornado of thoughts and emotions spinning in my brain slowed enough to realize I was late for work.

Stepping onto the sidewalk, I bumped into some guy in a suit, mumbled an apology, and stumbled the rest of the way to work. Bursting through the door, I clocked in twenty-five minutes late.

I walked to my locker, checked the schedule, and retrieved the cart with my cleaning supplies. My body went through the motions of work while my mind obsessed over the events of the morning. *Is this real, or am I still trapped in a nightmare? Did I hear God? What am I going to do?* I kept reliving the dream, the demons, and Remiel's words.

The day passed in a blur. Four o'clock arrived; time to quit. I was no closer to a plan of action. I went to the office to get my paycheck.

"Caleb, you okay?"

"Uhm, yeah, I guess. Why?"

"You were late and have been out of it all day. That's not like you. You need help or somethin'?"

"Naw, I didn't sleep well last night. Just tired," I mumbled. He handed me the paycheck, and I clocked out.

I returned to my locker and grabbed my coat. As I got ready to leave, fear and doubt seized my spirit. I plopped down on the bench in front of my locker. *What am I supposed to do? If He is God, isn't He all-powerful? Why does He need me?* Full of self-doubt, I closed my locker, took a deep breath, and walked out.

I marched home with my head down because I didn't want to see any demons. As I stood on the corner waiting for the light to change, a loud gurgle emanated from my abdomen. The person next to me turned their head and gave me an odd look. I missed breakfast and skipped lunch. I'll stop at Krantz's Deli. Ron Krantz and his family made the best subs in Stanton.

The deli stood on the opposite corner. I crossed at the signal light and approached the antique eight-foot-tall doors. Motion by the entrance caught my attention. Besides posters of this week's specials and community events, there were three pint-sized demons stuck to the windows peering inside. *Caleb, stay calm.* I held my breath, walked up to the door, and pulled it open.

As I crossed the threshold, I stepped out of a desert and into an oasis.

Bright, spiritual warmth hit me as I entered the shop. My mood brightened, and a grin broke out on my face. I examined the scene before me. Some patrons ordered dinner and others placed groceries into small baskets. The Krantz family stood behind the counter and served their customers with good cheer and friendly banter. Ron, his wife Judy, and adult children, Ben and Sue, emitted bright white auras. I never enjoyed standing in line so much. The spiritual hope and promise that filled the store watered my wilted soul.

The line moved too quickly. I just wanted to stand there and soak it all in, but I was next. Ron called from behind the counter, "What'll it be, Caleb?" I ordered a roast beef sub, chips, and a large coffee. Ron handed off the order to Ben while he reached for the coffee pot and poured it into a foam cup.

As he handed me the coffee, I asked, "Hey, Ron, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure, Caleb. What is it?"

"Do you and your family have a strong faith in God?"

"You're right. That's a personal question, but I don't mind answering. Yes, we do. Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. We like to think of

Him working the counter with us," he replied with a smile. "Why do you ask?"

"I just wanted you to know that your faith shows. Thanks, Ron." I grabbed my tray of food and headed for a table.

While I ate my sandwich, I watched people stream in and out of the shop. Diminutive demons bobbed outside the doors of the deli. A man came in with a little imp on his shoulder and got in line. The creature appeared agitated. It whipped its head back and forth, eyes wide with panic. I leaned forward. Blisters boiled upon its skin, and little plumes of smoke escaped when they popped. Suddenly, the creature released its charge and made a beeline for the door. It passed through the glass, did a U-turn, plastered its face against the front window, and watched its human. After the demon had left him, the man's face broke into a huge smile. Outside was cold and dreary, while the inside was bright with physical and spiritual warmth. I lingered longer than usual, basking in the pleasant ambiance.

Another man grabbed his order and headed for the front door. As it opened, one of the little imps pounced on him like a cat on a mouse. The man's shoulders sagged as the demon inserted its hand into his skull. Sad . . . BUT not my problem.

My anger and fear reignited. *Why me?* Several people hovered looking for seats, so I decided to leave. I paused, hand on the door, and braced myself for the chill and the demons. The door swung open on well-oiled hinges; I rushed past the demons and turned down the street toward home. I locked my eyes on the pavement in a vain attempt to block out the monsters and the spiritual darkness surrounding me. A few minutes later, I reached my door, unlocked it, and entered the apartment. I closed and leaned against the door breathing a sigh of relief.

I looked around. Dishes stacked high in the sink, a table full of papers, clothes draped over chairs, and a plastic tube lying in the middle of the floor. *Sword of the Spirit. That's a good one! It's a plastic vacuum cleaner attachment!* I picked it up and gave it the once over, and it

remained a plastic tube. "It sure doesn't look or feel like a sword," I said aloud. *I must be nuts!* I set the plastic cylinder down on my dinner table.

Three days of dishes filled the sink. I grabbed a scrubber, squirted some dish detergent, and tackled them. The dried-on food required extra elbow grease. I kept turning my head toward the plastic tube. *If this is the Sword of the Spirit, then why doesn't it look like a sword?* I thought back to the dream when the voice spoke in my mind.

I put down the scrubber and the pan and walked over to the table. Picking up the end of the tube, I said, "The Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." In a blink of an eye, the plastic cylinder became the double-edged, shining sword. As it transformed, warmth and scripture flowed into my hand and up my arm to my brain.

I collapsed onto a kitchen chair and stared at the sword. Several moments had passed.

It was about two and a half feet long. "Aren't you a little short to be a mighty sword?" In an instant, the sword grew another foot. The sudden growth spurt caused me to grip the hilt harder, and as I squeezed, it molded to my grip. The guard expanded and extended to cover my right hand. I resisted the temptation of running a finger along the blade. I didn't need to learn that lesson twice. It only weighed a pound or two. That razor-sharp edge had no nicks or imperfections.

I saw words. Faint text embedded into the blade moved. The letters traveled up and down the length of the weapon. I held the sword flat across both hands and lifted it to my face. Small inscriptions peppered the surface. The text wasn't on the surface. It was part of the material of the blade! The words weren't in any language I recognized. While I examined them, they slowly shifted and changed. Some of the text faded, and new letters came to the forefront. Warm, adaptable, and full of ever-changing words. It seemed like the sword was alive.

Speaking to the weapon, I said, "According to Remiel, I'm to seek the full Armor of God." *What is the Armor of God?* I don't know about

spiritual things and hadn't been to church in years. I didn't own a Bible. Wait, churches have Bibles. *Where's the nearest church?*

Then I remembered. The City Mission Soup Kitchen was two streets over. I had met the pastor during my last bout of unemployment. It was that pastor who spoke and helped me to be serious about my job. He tried to get me to accept Jesus as my Savior. I told him I got Jesus as a teen, but he kept saying being saved and turning my life over to Him wasn't the same thing.

But what was his name? I think it was Bill . . . No . . . Bob . . . Pastor Bob, something. I can't wait, and I needed to visit him tonight.

Bob

Friday Night

Mary, one of our long-time volunteers, cupped both her hands around mine.

"Thanks for singing and teaching tonight, Pastor Bennett. I know you spoke to their hearts."

"Thank you, Sister," I replied. *Not likely.* I mentally snorted.

Surrounded by a small troop of volunteers, I stepped back to let them out. "Good-byes" drifted back down the hall. A half-dozen folks from one of the local churches filed out of City Mission's front door.

I turned my attention to a pair of men and a woman waiting nearby.

"Brother Tim, Brother John, please go to the dormitory and get the clients settled in for the night.

"Sister Fran, it's eight o'clock. Please lock the doors to the dining room. I'm going to pray for a while in the sanctuary. I'll also secure those doors."

"Okay, Pastor Bob," replied the ever-cheerful Fran as she headed for the front door.

Nothing gets her down. Why am I stuck?

Deep in thought, I slowly walked to the sanctuary. Despair coursed through my veins. Any dreams and aspirations had withered long ago. *Oh, Lord! How long has it been? A year? More? I've lost track.* It's been a long time since I felt any purpose or joy.

Daily, I begged God for release. Release from this job. Release from the despair. Even release from this life. I ached to be done and to be

with God. So far, He ignored all those prayers. God's voice used to whisper in my mind, but it had been quiet for a long time.

I hid my inner turmoil well. You'd see a smile on my face every Sunday service or evening at the Mission.

I said things like, "Hello Sister Claire, Brother Steve, how are you this fine day?" Or "Brother Tom, that was some heavenly singing this glorious morning."

My public façade didn't reflect how I felt inside. On those days when the despair slipped out, I said I was "tired" or "slept poorly."

I should've been proud of what I've accomplished with the City Mission. I've been the Senior Pastor of Stanton Community Church and overseer of the City Mission Soup Kitchen for the last ten years. Early in my ministry, hundreds of people came and accepted Jesus as their Savior. I poured myself into the Mission. It resulted in baskets full of spiritual fruit.

Lately nothing . . . Nobody saved . . . Nobody is spiritually growing—just a bunch of ungrateful moochers wanting free food. I've delivered hundreds of sermons to the homeless and needy. And now, I resented the very people I initially desired to serve.

When I first took the job, missionary zeal filled me. People said I was a fountain of energy, drive, and ambition. God and I planned to bring revival to Stanton. I was God's messenger. I pictured myself in the pulpit. One hand clutched the Bible and the other raised in worship to God. My cape blew in the breeze. I stood ready to battle the forces of evil in the world.

But it did not transpire as I envisioned. Initially, many accepted Christ as their Savior. As time passed, I prayed less as discouragement and doubt grew. I became two people. There was the mask I wore in public on Sunday and when ministering to the homeless. And the wreck of a man I became in private. *Why do I even try? I have failed. FIRE ME! God, why do you remain silent?*

I entered the sanctuary. It was a large room, with four sections of pews. A wide center aisle split the room, and we often had over fifteen hundred people on a Sunday morning. Our church consisted of and ministered to many ethnic groups and nationalities. I stood in the center and gazed upon the giant cross suspended in midair behind the podium. A realistic, life-size depiction of Christ hung from it. I fell to my knees and lay prostrate before the altar. Tears dropped on the carpet.

"Why have you forsaken me, God? I only desire to do your will. Each day, I reach out to teach people about Your Son. Each day I have little effect. I'm a failure, Lord."

I don't know how long I prayed. At times, I babbled, unable to form the words or sobbing.

Emotionally spent, I laid as a crumpled heap before the cross. I heard a footfall behind me.

Oh no. I forgot to lock the door. I rose to my feet, wiped the moisture from my cheeks. I turned. In the dim light, a silhouette of a man stalked down the center aisle. He held something in his right hand.

"C-can I help you?"

The stranger walked up to me and stared at the space above my head. He looked a bit rough, and his craggy face had seen its share of pain. Wait . . . I've seen his face before.

"Hey . . ." I ducked as the man stabbed the air above my head with what looked like a black tube.

Caleb

Friday Night

The City Mission Soup Kitchen did more than prepare meals for the less fortunate. It also housed a church, a community thrift shop, and a dormitory for the city's homeless. The sign on the wall said, "Doors lock at 8:00 p.m." I pushed the light button on my cheap digital watch. 8:15.

I tugged on the dining hall's door handles, locked. I moved down the block to the church's doors, and the first door didn't budge. I moved to the next, and the hinges squeaked as the door opened. The nightlights guided me through the foyer. My footsteps seemed loud on the slate floor, and incense hung lightly in the air. I skulked into the sanctuary, feeling like an intruder.

"Failure . . ." came from somewhere in the front. In the soft light, a figure lay prostrate on the floor. Behind the altar, a single spotlight illuminated a crucified Jesus hanging from a wooden cross. I hesitated. Garbled words rose from the body before me. He's praying, and it felt wrong to interrupt.

I lifted my head to look at the cross again, and I noticed something hovering in the air. Silhouetted against the spotlight floated a small demon. The air between the man and imp shimmered like heat off the sunbaked pavement. I crept down the center aisle. As I drew closer to the wretched creature, I saw its pointy white teeth in the dark. A smile stretched from ear to ear. Its red eyes focused on its victim below. Once in a while, it twisted its hand like a puppeteer pulling the strings of a marionette.

With a thought, I transformed the tube into the Sword of the Spirit. Even though I expected the change, it still startled me. Its warmth and the way it molded to my hand felt like something alive. Scripture expanded and filled my mind. A slight vibration made its way up my arm as if the sword anticipated the coming battle. I walked forward, emboldened.

As I neared the altar, my steps faltered. I can't do this. I'm no warrior. Why bother? Nobody cares! A mental pit yawned before me, and I stopped in the middle of the aisle. Despair and hopelessness pressed down on my skin. I wanted to turn and run away.

Then I looked up at the demon. One arm pointed at the man below while the other towards me. Contempt and wicked glee covered the creature's face. It was having fun. Shimmering waves filled the air between me and the little monster.

Jesus, be my shield. With new resolve, I willed my feet to move. Stiff-legged but determined, I approached the altar. Hearing me, the man rose and spun to face me. It was Pastor Bob.

The demon floated about seven or eight feet above the floor. I swung the sword at it. It bobbed and danced just out of reach while it taunted me.

It stuck out its tongue. "Nyah, nyah human, you can't reach me," I stabbed at it. "Hey! You can see me!" Its raspy voice said as it bobbed above us. Foul taunts flowed from its mouth. I jabbed at it again. No good, the little beast fluttered just out of reach. I lowered the sword and glared at the demon as my mind sought a solution. I heard Pastor Bob's voice in the background peppering me with questions that I ignored. When I suggested it was too short, the sword elongated. Would different words give me a different weapon?

Pastor Bob was in the middle of one of his many questions when I barked at him, "Pastor, do you know any Scripture that talks about a spear?"

In a deep voice, Bob sputtered, "I demand to know . . ."

"In a minute, Pastor! Do you know any Scripture with a spear in it?"

"I-I c-can't think of any." He paused. "Wait. In Joel, it says, 'Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears.'"¹

Pointing the sword at the demon, I repeated the scripture. As the word "spears" left my throat, a surge of energy rushed down my arm. The sword elongated and pierced the demon, and it disappeared in a puff of wispy smoke, just like in my dream. The sword had become a seven-foot-long lance. It still had a white aura and chrome-like shine. And even though it had grown three times its current length, it weighed the same.

Now I had a different problem. The sword was seven feet long. How do I return it to its original size? "Sword of the Spirit." My arm grew warm again, and it returned to its previous size and shape. Smiling, I turned to Pastor Bob.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Am I okay? Brother, you're the one swinging a plastic tube around. Who're you, and what're you doing here?"

"Pastor, I needed to see you. A lot of weird stuff has happened today. I'm desperate for help." The words rushed out of my mouth. He stared at me like I was nuts. We stood eye to eye, so he must have been about five feet ten inches tall. Although he had more girth around his waist and facial skin smoother and darker than mine, we had similar builds.

"Sorry, Pastor, let's start over. I'm Caleb Kincade, and I live nearby." I sat on a pew. Bob hesitated, then he too sat down, facing me.

"I've been to the Mission before for meals, so I know who you are. I have a story that you will not believe. And I might be crazy, but I need your help."

He looked at me. When he didn't respond, I began my narrative. I went into detail about the dream and told him what happened to me that day: the demons, Remiel's message, Krantz's deli. Bob's eyes focused on mine as he listened without interruption. I finished my story and

¹ Joel 3:10 NIV

waited. Bob turned toward the altar, leaned back in the pew, and stared at the ceiling. *Say something!* The suspense was killing me! A few moments later, he leaned forward, turned, and asked, "Please tell me again why you needed scripture about a spear?"

"A small demon hovered above your head. As I got closer, despair and hopelessness flooded my mind. It paralyzed me. Then I realized the little monster had filled my mind with those thoughts. I knew I had to kill it, so I attacked. But the sword was too short. The sword can change shape. Once I repeated the verse from Joel, it transformed into a spear and pierced the demon. When the imp disappeared, the despair in my mind stopped."

Bob stood. "Brother, you know, all I can see is a plastic tube, and that tube never changed shape or color. Everything you said sounds pretty questionable."

I looked down at the sword in my hand. "You see a plastic tube and not a bright and shiny sword?"

"I only see a black plastic tube."

"But you're feelin' better, aren't you?"

"I feel like an enormous burden has lifted from my shoulders. How could you know that?" He smiled and sat back down.

"People with demons are covered with a shadow. A white aura surrounds those who believe Jesus is their Savior. The brighter the glow, the stronger their faith. Your aura was dim when I first saw you, but it has steadily brightened with the monster gone. The demon hitchhikers had either their hand in the person's heart or head or both. Also, none of those people had the aura of Christ. This monster circled above your head. I think they can influence God's people but can't touch them."

Pastor Bob countered, "When you first spoke, I thought you were a psycho with a plastic tube. I can't deny feeling better. I can feel my faith reviving like the hope of a new day. Part of me still thinks you're a nut, but for now, I'll accept your story." A weary smile crossed his face.

"I came here for another reason. Remiel, the angel, said I needed to find the whole Armor of God. What is the Armor of God? I have the Sword of the Spirit. What am I looking for, and how do I find it? Can you help me?"

"Yes, at least with some of that," Bob stood and walked up to the altar. Standing behind the podium, Bob opened the enormous Bible resting there. I heard a click, and a small light illuminated the book. He turned the oversized pages to the back of the Bible.

"Ephesians 6, verses 10-18 describes the Armor of God."

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."²

"Wow, please read that to me again?"

"I'll write it for you, Brother."

² Ephesians 6:10-18 ESV

The Pastor pulled a notepad and a pen from below the altar and wrote on it. When he finished, he handed me the paper.

Belt of Truth

Breastplate of Righteousness

Feet fitted with the Gospel of Peace

Shield of Faith

Helmet of Salvation

Sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God

"God gave you the sword. Brother, do you have any ideas about finding the rest?"

"No. A voice woke me in the Dream World, I wandered to the sword's location, and the same voice said to pick up the tube. I don't know how or where to find the rest."

"Ephesians talked about praying in the Spirit. Brother, at some point in your life, did you asked for forgiveness of your sins and for Jesus to be your Savior?" questioned Pastor Bob.

"Yeah, when I was a teenager. While my prayer had been sincere, my commitment . . . let's just say my faith has been weak."

"Then the Holy Spirit already resides in you," he muttered as he turned and moved away from me.

Pastor Bob returned to the Bible and flipped forward a few pages. "Romans 8:26-27 states: 'In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.'"³

"You must pray to God to find the rest of the armor," Bob concluded as he stepped down from the altar. He moved to the second row of pews and flipped down the kneeler. He knelt and motioned me to join him. "Kneel, close your eyes, and in your heart, talk to God. Tell Him you need His help."

³ Romans 8:26-27 NIV

Feeling awkward, I knelt next to Bob, his hand reassuringly resting on my shoulder. I said nothing audible, but my mind screamed, "God! I'm so lost. I know You placed this task before me. I don't know why. I'm scared. I've never done anything like this. I don't think I can do it. But . . . but . . . I'm willing. What do I do? Where to go? Please, God, I'm desperate and need you." Then spiritually, I collapsed before God and physically over the back of the pew in front of me. My eyes remained closed; tears dropped into the fabric below. My mind went blank. Time and my ability to think came to a stop.

An odd fluttering sensation built in my chest and a soft moan escaped my lips. I wiped the tears from my face and straightened up. I looked at my chest then at Bob with alarm. "Pastor, this will sound strange, but I feel like something is whirling around in my chest. It's like God has reached inside of me and flicked a game spinner." The whirling sensation slowed, stopped, and I felt a pull. I stood, and the Pastor followed.

"I know the direction. Will you come with me?"

Bob's brown eyes bored into mine. I returned his gaze and imagined the battle that waged in his mind. "Lord, I'm tired, and this guy might be insane." The seconds dragged by.

The decision, or perhaps resolve, flickered across his face.

"Brother, let me grab my jacket from my office. I also have to let the staff know that I'm leaving. I'll meet you at the front entrance in 3 or 4 minutes."

Bob trotted out the side door while I spun around and walked toward the foyer. The pull-on my chest remained steady and urgent. I paced back and forth. Every time I turned, the needle reversed direction like a compass always pointing north. *What's taking so long?* Bob returned, and I bolted through the door. The sharp October air slapped me in the face. The rain let up a couple of hours ago. Every surface had a film of water on it, and the number of light sources seemed magnified due to the many reflections. I stopped on the sidewalk, foot-tapping, and

waited for Bob to lock the door. As soon as Bob's feet touched the cement, I turned and headed down the street. I barely noticed the puddles I marched through. Bob's loud footfalls followed me.

My internal compass pushed against my rib cage. It pointed towards a building on my left, but I knew that was not our destination. Since I could not go through the building, I walked down the street in the general direction that my inner needle pointed me. We walked briskly with my internal compass shifted more and more to the left.

The streets of downtown Stanton, New York, are like most urban areas. Islands of streetlight surrounded by darkness. Ambient illumination from other sources such as neon store signs, windows, and headlights from the passing cars gave us enough light to see where we were going. The streets were surprisingly empty. Stanton has about two hundred thousand residents, yet we saw only a couple of other souls as we marched down the sidewalk. Those people were too far away to tell if they were humans or demons.

I stubbed my toe hard on the raised edge of the sidewalk and swore. "Sorry, Pastor," I muttered.

"No problem, Brother, God will forgive you. I have used crude language in similar situations."

We hiked three blocks. My chest hurt as if the point of the spinner poked through ribs under my left arm. I stopped at the corner and turned left and, in my haste, almost tripped over a garbage can. I had to do a fancy little jig to dodge the obstacle. The pull shifted to the front of my chest. Pastor Bob asked a bunch of questions as we walked. I didn't pay much attention to what he said and grunted answers. He eventually stopped asking and kept pace with me.

We walked several more blocks. Following the needle commanded my full attention. It gradually swung to the left again as we approached an alley. We passed the alley opening, and the compass needle reversed to my back. I stopped, turned around, walked back a couple of steps, and stood at the entrance. The spinner centered in my chest again and

pulled me into the opening. I looked at Bob. "This is it." The dark passage loomed before us. We cautiously entered, and the internal pull lessened with each step.

A bright light lit up the ground before us. Bob had grabbed a flashlight along with his jacket. Surprised, I looked at him. "Brother, I never go out after dark without a flashlight." He handed it to me, and we continued our journey. About thirty feet in, my feet stopped again as the needle swung to my right. In a nook between two buildings lay a refrigerator box on its side. A "door" of darkly stained material covered the carton's end, and flickering light seeped out the seams. A fit of coughing and a low moan escaped from the box.

"H-hello?" I whispered.

A weak, hoarse voice responded, "Yesss."

Dropping to my knees, I lifted the door-flap and crawled in halfway. The stench of an unwashed body and sickness assaulted my nose. Bob squeezed in next to me. A single candle provided light and heat. On the other side of the candle lay a dark heap of rags with a bright white aura. The pile moved, and I was able to discern an old face in the soft glow of the candlelight.

"I'm Caleb, and this is Bob. What I have to say might sound odd, but God led us here."

"Yes . . . I know," the old man responded weakly. "My name . . . Albert. Die . . . soon." A fit of coughing racked his frail body.

"Didn't want . . . die alone. God said . . . never alone." More hacking coughs. Albert wiped the drool from his mouth with his sleeve. I gagged when his bad breath surrounded me like a poison gas cloud.

"He said . . . not to . . . fear. But must . . . tell the story . . . give a gift."

Albert's labored breathing hurt my ears. His face twisted with pain, and I had to turn my head for a moment. Tears swelled in my eyes. I had never been with someone in the last moments of their life. I felt helpless in the face of Albert's suffering. Both of my parents died

several years ago. I didn't see them die, although I wish I had been able to watch my father die. I hoped he suffered. But this is not the time nor place for such musings.

Albert continued, his voice low and gravely. "Year ago . . . the clinic said . . . lung cancer. Get treatment . . . or die. I'm old." Albert curled up into a ball with his hacking cough. It sounded like he might lose a lung. He dabbed his mouth. In the candlelight, I saw spots of dark crimson mixed with the mucous.

When the painful fit passed, he continued. "No money . . . No treatment . . . at City Mission met Jesus." Albert's back arched. The pain etched on his face. As it lessened, and he continued.

"Free hat . . . named it 'Helmet . . . of Salvation.'" Albert's laugh degenerated into another bout of gut-wrenching coughs.

"Heaven soon . . . Must give you . . . my hat."

He reached up, pulled the dirty knit cap off his head. As he touched the hat, a glimmer of light passed over it, and he handed it to me. I took the knit cap from him as his hand fell limply to the ground. Albert died.

I stared at the hat in my hand and caught movement out of the corner of my eye. I glanced at his body, and another figure knelt next to it. I blinked. The person was semi-transparent. I could see him and what was behind him.

"Albert?"

A new, younger-looking Albert had a big smile on his face. The apparition turned his head toward me. "Yes, Caleb, it is," the spirit replied.

"A-are y-you, Okay? Are you in pain?"

The apparition laughed. "I'm pain-free and alive like never before."

Albert's spirit peered at the cardboard wall to my left with a faraway look on his face. He faced me and spoke again. "Thank you, Caleb, for being here, but it's time for me to go. We'll meet again someday." He stood, his torso going through the top of the box, and walked through the carton to my left. I backed out to watch him go, and all I saw was his back as he passed through the wall of the building across the alley.

Dumbfounded, I knelt there, staring at the bricks. I turned my attention to the knit cap dangling from my hand. *Is this the Helmet of Salvation?* And as my thought finished, the knit hat transformed just like the sword. It became a bronze helmet surrounded by a white aura. The Helmet of Salvation looked like something a Roman Officer might wear. I put it on my head. Warmth flowed down my neck, and it molded to my head as the sword conformed to my hand. Nose and cheek guards expanded and protectively covered much of my face without obstructing my view. A new, thorough understanding of what salvation and the actual cost of it meant. My eyes moistened as I pondered this information. Several minutes passed before I took the helmet off, and with a thought, it became a simple hat once again.

I re-entered the box, closed Albert's eyes, blew out the candle, and backed out.

Wait! Where's Bob? I had forgotten about Bob.

I swung the flashlight up and down the alley and about fifteen feet away, huddled in the dark crouched Pastor Bob. I walked over to him. Bob squatted with his back against the brick building, and his forehead rested on his knees. His body shook as he gulped air. He was crying.

"Bob, what's the matter?" I asked, putting my hand on his shoulder. More sobs. I waited.

Several minutes passed. My attempts to comfort Bob felt weak and insufficient. Bob lifted his head and looked at me. In the glow of the flashlight, moisture glistened on his cheeks. Bob said, "Brother, he was saved at City Mission. During one of my sermons. MY SERMON! I had no idea. Hopelessness and despair made me blind. I thought the work made no difference because I was focused on ME. I didn't notice Albert. I wish I had known him. Lord, please forgive me." He buried his face in his hands again.

A few more minutes passed. I gently said, "Bob, there's nothing more to do here. Let's call 911."

A few more snuffles, and he said, "Yeah, you're right." He reached into his jacket pocket for his cell phone and made the call. Bob spoke into the phone. He gave his name, current address, and a few details.

"They said to wait on the street for an officer."

We exited the alley and waited on the main street for the police to arrive. Within a few minutes, a patrol car pulled up in front of us. The door opened, and a big, burly man got out.

"Are you Pastor Bob Bennett?"

"Yes, Sir," Bob replied.

"I'm Officer Hayes. You found the body of the homeless man?" He flipped through his notes, "Albert. What can you tell me?" A cargo van with "Coroner" in large reflective lettering pulled up next to the cop car. The driver and another got out and walked over to us.

The driver said, "Good evening. Please direct us to the body."

I pointed to the alley. "I'll show you."

The other coroner opened the back doors of the van and pulled a gurney out. He wheeled it in our direction. Resting on the stretcher sat a couple of portable, battery-powered spotlights. I turned, led them down the drive, and pointed to the cardboard box. One of them set up a portable work light that illuminated Albert's carton and more. The driver unsheathed a utility knife and sliced the box open, exposing Albert's body to the night air. Soon they gently lifted him out and set him onto the gurney. He looked even smaller and frailer.

"What happened here?" the driver asked.

"We were out walking and heard a cry from the alley. We decided to investigate."

"You know that was pretty stupid. You could've been mugged," the medic said.

"I know, but at the time, it seemed like a good idea. The man lived long enough to tell us his name was Albert. He had cancer and thought he was going to die. And before we could call you, he passed away."

"OK, thanks. We'll take it from here." I returned to Bob and the police officer.

Officer Hayes continued, ". . . and you don't know his last name?"

"No, but he said he'd been to the City Mission Soup Kitchen a year ago. I manage the Mission, but I didn't recognize him."

"Why were you out walking so late? It's pretty cold. Not exactly the best walking weather, plus you know it's dangerous to walk around this area at night." Officer Hayes said, his eyes bored into Bob's searching for the truth.

"I was counseling Caleb . . .," Bob pointed in my direction.

Turning from Bob, he asked me, "What is your full name, please?"

"Caleb Kincade."

He returned to Bob, "Please continue."

"Caleb became agitated and said he needed to go for a walk. As you said, it's dangerous to walk around here at night. I decided to go with him figuring two would be safer than one."

The cop turned to me and asked, "Why were you so agitated, Mr. Kincade?"

Bob interrupted, "I'm sorry, but that is a private matter between client and counselor."

Officer Hayes must have been satisfied with that answer. He jotted a few more notes down. "And Albert never said what his last name was?"

The back doors of the coroner's van thudded closed. Both men hopped into the cab, the engine roared, and they pulled away. No lights or sirens, though. They didn't need to hurry.

"Like I already said, he didn't tell us his last name, only that he had been to the City Mission for dinners about a year ago. We make anybody wanting a meal register. Sometimes they give us their real name, and sometimes they don't. I can look over the sign-in sheets in the morning. May we leave now? It's late."

"You can go. Someone will stop by in the morning to see if you found Albert's last name."

"Thank you, Officer," I said, and we headed back to the church.

As we turned the corner, I looked around to make sure no one was watching. I stooped over and slid some garbage aside and picked up the Helmet of Salvation. I had hidden it while we waited for the police to arrive. I put it on my head again, and with a thought, transformed it and enjoyed the warm sensation that flowed down my neck.

"Is that the Helmet of Salvation?" Bob asked.

"Yes. As soon as I touched it and thought "Helmet of Salvation," it transformed into the helmet you see now."

"Caleb, remember, all I see is a dirty hat on your head."

"That's amazing. To me, it looks like a bronze helmet fit for a Roman officer."

"I also think we need to wash it as soon as possible. It stinks," commented Bob as we walked.

When we arrived at the church, Bob said, "It's late. You shouldn't be walking home alone tonight. I could find you a bed in the dormitory with the rest of the clients. However, there's a couch in the room behind the sanctuary. It's quieter and more private. Why don't you stay there for the night and in the morning we'll decide our next step? My apartment is behind the kitchen. I'm up early; just find me when you're ready."

Bob escorted me to the room with the sofa. He excused himself to go and get some sheets and a blanket. When he returned, he tossed them to me and said, "I'll be right back." I started to make my "bed." When he returned the second time, he brought two five-gallon buckets; one half-full of hot soapy water and the other with clean water.

"What's that for?"

"The Helmet of Salvation," he said. "I was serious about washing it. Can't you smell it?"

"Yeah, it reeks, but do ya think the water will hurt it?"

"Brother Caleb, it's the Helmet of Salvation, imbued with power from God to defend against evil. I'm pretty sure a little soap and water won't hurt it," Bob chuckled. With those final words, he relieved me of the hat, tossed it into the soapy bucket, and dunked it up and down. Then Bob repeated the process in the clean water. When he started ringing it out, I winced, expecting it to fall apart. Bob hung it over the edge of one of the shelves to dry.

Bob said, "I'm exhausted. Brother find me in the morning. I'm usually in my office."

"Okay . . . and Bob, thanks for believing me even though you can't see what I see."

Bob quietly responded, "No, it's I who should thank you. You rid me of the demon of despair and helped rekindle the faith I thought lost." Handing me a blanket, he said, "Good night, Brother," and left the room.

Caleb

Saturday Morning

I woke up with a start. *Where am I? What time is it?* I rolled over, looking for my clock, and found myself in a strange room. After a moment, I remembered. I was in the backroom of Stanton Community Church. Then the flow of memories went from a trickle to a flood; Pastor Bob, vaporizing the demon, Albert dying, and the Helmet of Salvation. *Was it real?* It must be, here I am. I glanced at my watch, 8:05.

While my body ached from sleeping on the sofa, I felt mentally alert and ready to face the day. "I need to find Bob," I muttered to myself.

I opened the door and entered the sanctuary. The orderly rows of pews glowed with gold, red, aqua, and purple as sunlight streamed through the stained-glass windows. I just stood in awe of the beauty.

"Brother Caleb, isn't it glorious?" Pastor Bob remarked with a broad smile as he strode down the center aisle.

He continued, "When the founders built the church a century ago, it stood alone. The sun shone through the windows much of the day. It was a kaleidoscope of colors. Now, the surrounding buildings are taller, shading us much of the day. Because of a break between two buildings, the sun only comes through the windows for about thirty minutes. This time of the morning has always been my favorite place to pray and study God's word. But I stopped when the despair crept in." A tear threatened to roll down Bob's cheek. We stood for a moment marveling at the beauty while he regained his composure.

"So, what's the plan?" Bob inquired.

"I don't know. Last night, I knew what to do. Today, I don't know."

"May I make a suggestion, Brother?" Bob asked. "I've called the police to claim Albert's body if nobody else does. I want to give him a proper burial. The police said they were stopping by to ask more questions. Stay here, pray, and seek God's counsel. Come to the dining room when you're finished. It's through that door and at the end of the hall. We'll talk to the police when they arrive. How does that sound?"

"It's not much of a plan, but at least it's a plan," I said as Bob strode back up the center aisle. He stopped halfway and turned around. "I need a favor."

"Name it."

"Would you be willing to help serve lunch today? Two volunteers have called sick. I could use your hands."

"I'd be glad to," I replied, then I had a realization, "Uhm, Bob . . . I-I don't know how to pray. I mean, I did it last night, but I'm not sure I did it right."

Bob gave me a kind smile. "Brother Caleb, close your eyes and just talk to God inside your head or out loud." With that, he turned and left the sanctuary.

I sat in one of the pews bathed in a shaft of glorious color and warmth. I bowed my head and closed my eyes. "Dear Lord, during the last day, You have done a miracle in my life. My faith in Jesus and You have grown so much. I care about doing Your will. I don't understand why You chose me, and I don't know what to do. And even though I'm clueless, I'm willing to serve You. Please, Lord, what's the next step? I need Your guidance and wisdom."

Sitting . . . waiting . . . listening . . . my mind wandered. I wonder what we're having for lunch . . . I smell like dirty socks . . . I need a shower . . . FOCUS. "Please, Lord, I need to hear from you." More waiting, mental wandering, and nothing. No spinners, tugs, pulls, or urges manifested themselves inside or outside of my body. My stomach growled.

By now, the shafts of colored light had faded as the surrounding buildings shadowed the church. I guess I'll wait.

Bob

Saturday Morning

Banging greeted me as I approached the front doors of the Mission. The old lock turned, and the hinges moaned as I opened the doors. A uniformed Policeman stood a few feet from me.

"I'm Officer Mendez. I'm looking for Pastor Bob Bennett."

"I'm Bob Bennett."

"I understand you found the body of the homeless man . . . ," he glanced at his notepad, "Albert, last night?"

"Yes, Sir"

"Did you have a chance to find his last name?"

"I think so. Everything is computerized and entered into a spreadsheet. It helps us keep track of how often and how long people use our services. I found three Alberts and was able to eliminate two. I believe his last name was Paxton, Albert Paxton. He hadn't been here for several months."

"Can you tell me anything else?"

"I can tell you what we served and how many meals the cooks prepared, but nothing about Albert. We only insist on a name, and even then, sometimes they lie."

Officer Mendez continued. "My Sergeant said you wanted to claim the body and give him a proper burial. Why would you do that for a homeless man?"

"I didn't know the man, but before he died, he told us that he had accepted Jesus as his Savior during one of his visits here. I feel an obligation and responsibility for him. If nobody else claims him, I will."

The Officer gave me a sharp look. His eyes bore into mine, trying to determine if I spoke the truth or not. I stood there and tried to look innocent. I squashed the urge to blab everything.

Caroline

Saturday Morning

"Mommy! You promised!" my precocious six-year-old Anna demanded. "You sai' we'd leave right, af'er brea'fast." as she stamped her tiny feet.

I sat on the chair in the kitchen. Anna stood between my knees, her blond hair hanging in those moist blue eyes while her little chin quivered. "Sweetie, yesterday it seemed like a good idea, but today it just seems silly." I noticed Anna had my hair and eyes, but she had her father's nose, jawline, and temperament.

"It's impor' ant, Mommy. I ha'f to give it to da man ta' day!"

I wiped the tear from her cheek with my thumb. *Why did I agree to this?* I met her watery eyes again. The ice in my heart melted.

"Okay."

Caroline, what've you gotten yourself into?

When I arrived home last night, Anna bounced into my arms and announced she had a "gift" to give to a man at a soup kitchen on Saturday.

"Great, we'll take it right after breakfast tomorrow." I boldly stated. That was Friday. That was yesterday.

Yesterday I felt like a butterfly that emerged from the cocoon of darkness. I don't understand what happened, but I'm happy that it did.

Thursday night started like most nights for over a year. I'd fall asleep, and next, I heard Anna scream my name. It tore my soul as she desperately called out to me. I'd follow that cry until she stood before me. Behind her stood an ominous silhouette. I never saw any details.

Long, clawed fingers wrapped around each of her biceps and picked her up. The monster turned and strode into the darkness. I ran after them, but it felt like I moved through waist-deep molasses. As her screams faded, I'd struggle to follow, trip, and collapsed on the ground. I'd wake, sobbing into my pillow and drenched in sweat.

Like most dreams, the sharpness of the memory faded as the light of the day brightened.

But when I woke on Friday, something was different. I remembered the nightmare, but I felt different. It felt like the sun rose above my soul's horizon and burned away the mental fog and darkness. I felt alive, light as a balloon. Yesterday, I danced my way through the workday and raced home to be with Anna. Yesterday, I would have agreed to anything.

Today, reality and guilt assaulted me. Watching Anna eat her breakfast, I realized how I had neglected my sweet daughter, the only bit of color in my black and white life. I kept her fed and clothed, that is, if you count junk food and dirty clothes as care. I hadn't realized how dark my mind had been until the fog inexplicably lifted.

Tears threatened to spill from my eyes, and I grabbed a tissue from the box on the table. I loved her so much; nothing else mattered.

Other than Anna's babysitter, Grace, I had no real friends. Every day I struggled to get out of bed, feed Anna, and go to work.

"I need to take a shower and get dressed. When I'm ready, we'll go."

Sighing, I returned to the bedroom for some clothes, crossed the hall, and entered the bathroom. I turned on the shower. Steam filled the air as I undressed. Sliding the curtain aside, I stepped into the tub and relished the warmth that flowed over me.

Without Anna, my life had no meaning, and without Jack, I wouldn't have had Anna. That jerk. I loved him so much. He said he loved me. I didn't care that he was twenty-eight, and I was only eighteen when we met. He seemed so worldly and sophisticated. It was ten months before I figured out he had a wife and kid. I didn't care. I was in love. Why

didn't he leave his wife as he promised? Oh, yeah, the time was never "right." Six years! I gave him six years of my life. The best six years that I'd never get back!

Tears mingled with the water running down my body.

And then I saw him and his wife at a coffee shop. He saw me, and his eyes got big for a moment. Then he turned away, and I became invisible. I realized this guy would never leave his wife. Just a gullible and pleasant distraction; that's all I was.

Love. I had it and wanted to give it to someone. Since I couldn't have all of Jack, I'd have a piece of him - a tiny bit. I threw my birth control pills away that day. We rendezvoused several more times. I should have won an Oscar for my performance. I don't know how long I could've kept up the false front. My disgust grew with every touch. Fortunately, I got pregnant in two months.

I watched the remaining water swirl down the drain as I twisted the faucets closed, kind of like my life. I grabbed a towel and dried off.

I relished the look on his face when I told him where to go. He couldn't believe his free ride was leaving. He yelled and called me names. I knew I had enough.

The blow dryer roared in the small bathroom. In the mirror, I noticed the dark roots of my hair.

And where did those nasty thoughts come from? "Failure," "lousy mother," "not good enough," whispered through my mind. And the nightmares, almost every night, those horrible dreams. Someone stole Anna, or someone chased or tortured me. You know, if it wasn't for Anna and Grace, I . . . would . . . would've. . .

The blow dryer clattered into the sink, and my hands caught the edge as my legs turned to rubber. Understanding and fear stared back at me from the mirror. I had walked the line between life and death for a long time.

Closing the toilet seat cover, I sat down and buried my face in my hands. Fresh tears squeezed between my fingers.

The pounding on the door startled me.

"Mommy, what's taking so long?"

I stood and reached for a tissue box on the back of the toilet to wipe my eyes and nose. "J-j-just a minute, S-sweetie, I'm getting dressed."

On went, the tee shirt and jeans followed by the comb made several trips through my hair, and the toothbrush raced around my mouth.

For the last three days, I had ridden an emotional roller coaster. Thursday: down, depressed. Friday: up, exhilarated. This morning: the ride ended, and I got off confused.

Yesterday, the euphoria lasted all day long, but I couldn't wait to finish work. I wanted to be with Anna so desperately that I rushed home in record time. I pounded on Grace's door, turned the knob, and raced into the room. I dropped to my knees and scooped Anna up into my arms. After rounds of hugs and kisses, Anna reached for a plastic bag lying on the floor behind her.

'Close your eyes, Mommy; I wanna show you sometin.'"

Amused, I did as requested. After a bit of rustling, I heard an excited, "Open your eyes!"

Again, I obeyed and draped between her two tiny hands hung a finger-thick, five-foot-long, dirty yellow rope.

"A yellow rope . . . that's interesting . . . Uhm, where'd you get it?"

"From the angel in the park."

Alarmed, "You mean a man gave it to you in the park?"

"No, Mommy, an angel! Me, 'n Grace, was sittin' on the bench feedin' bread to da pigeons. The angel walked up and put it on da bench. He said he was 'n angel 'n I had to help God bring da rope to da man at da soup ki'chen. And when I saw da man, I would know him."

Concerned, I looked up at Grace again.

"Did Grace see this "angel?"

Grace gave a little shrug. "We sat there feeding the pigeons as she said, and the next thing I knew, she had that rope in her hands with a story about the angel. She must have found it on the bench. I didn't see

it when we sat down, but it must have been there. No one approached us."

Ookkaayy! Relieved, I stifled a chuckle. My good mood didn't care where she got the rope. If Anna wanted to give it to a man at the soup kitchen, I'd be willing to help her. I would have agreed to deliver a donkey to the President at that point.

That was Friday. Now Saturday morning had arrived, and I felt pretty foolish. I only knew of one soup kitchen, the City Mission Soup Kitchen. It's a twenty or thirty-minute walk, and I couldn't afford a cab today. Thankfully, I lived within walking distance of work; it had been a miracle that I found an apartment so cheap and close. Not having a car had its advantages, but it limited my options on when and where I could go.

I took one last look in the mirror. I wiped my eyes and attacked my hair with a brush. I put a smile on my face then I exited the bathroom.

With a defeated sigh, "Alright, Sweetie, let's go." Anna squealed with delight as I picked her up and plunked her down on a chair. I put her shoes on. Anna picked up the plastic bag with the yellow rope.

Earlier, the weatherman said it would start bright and sunny, then turn colder and rain as the front passed. I peeked out the window. As predicted, the sunny day had turned cloudy with light rain.

"Anna, please get our jackets. It's raining; we'll need to dress warmly."

She brought my coat. I put mine on then knelt to help Anna with the zipper on hers. She didn't care about the weather; a big smile adorned her face as she waited for the adventure to begin. In a few minutes, we had our coats on and hooded.

Anna waited as I closed and locked the door to our second-floor apartment. We walked down the stairs, opened the door, and rain pelted our faces. I pushed Anna back inside.

"Sweetie, are you sure we need to go now?"

"Yes, Mommy. We haf to go noowww."

"Okay, wait here." I ran back up the stairs, unlocked the door, and grabbed the umbrella from the closet. My feet clomped loudly on the stairs as I returned to Anna in less than a minute. Laying it on the ground, I crouched in front of her. I found the drawstrings and tightened Anna's hood. "Boop," I said as I playfully bopped the tip of her nose with my finger. After I had zipped her coat up to her chin, I did the same for mine. Lastly, I bent over and picked up and opened the umbrella. As I pushed the button on the handle, the umbrella whooshed open.

"Here we go," I said. Holding the umbrella as a shield, we left the warm building and walked briskly down the sidewalk. With every step, conditions worsened. Pieces of paper and other debris fluttered by while we leaned into the wind and pushed on. This is stupid. I examined Anna's face for defeat and found determination, so we trudged on. She clutched the bag with the rope. But this is important to Anna. We'll go find this "man," and hopefully, he won't laugh in her face. Steeling myself against the cold wind, we marched on.

Caleb

Saturday Morning

I gave up praying—time to find Bob. I also need to put the Armor of God in something. Assuming it had six pieces, then I needed something. I returned to the back room, where I had slept, and discovered a box of black plastic garbage bags. I grabbed one and put the Sword of the Spirit and the dry Helmet of Salvation in it. Then I headed for the dining room. I heard voices down the corridor and followed them. I found Bob by the front door of the dining hall speaking with a police officer. That cop could be a linebacker.

Bob introduced us. "Officer Mendez, this is Caleb Kincade. He was with me last night when we found Albert."

"Good morning," I said and extended my hand to the policeman. His giant paw engulfed mine. I expected him to crush my hand, but he had a surprisingly gentle grip.

All business, Officer Mendez continued, "The coroner took a quick look at him this morning. He said he had been sick for some time, and there were some suspicious lumps that he thought might be tumors. He also indicated there was no foul play. I'm just here to get your statements to wrap things up," said Officer Mendez. He continued reading from his notes. "You were out walking, heard some noise from an alley, investigated, found Albert Paxton, he told you he had been to City Mission before, and you are willing to bury him if nobody claims him. Does that sum it up?"

"Yes, sir," Bob said.

He pulled a business card from his shirt pocket, wrote a number on the back, and handed it to Bob. "Call the number on the front if you think of anything else. In about a week, call the number on the back and ask about the body's status. They'll be able to help you from there."

Bob said, "Thank you, Officer."

"Thank you, gentlemen. We'll contact you if we have further questions," said Officer Mendez. He turned and headed back to his black and white patrol car.

We stood on the sidewalk and watched the patrol car leave. The glorious sun now hid behind a bank of clouds. Airborne dust and trash flew by as wet spots appeared on the sidewalk. We ducked back into the building.

I said, "I'm glad that's done."

"I agree. Did God tell you the next step?" Bob replied.

"No."

Bob said, "Then we wait. Let's go to my office."

We turned and headed down the hall to Bob's office, and I wondered. I wondered how he crammed so much stuff into a small space and why he didn't dump half of it. And I wondered where I would sit. Bob had stacked years of magazines, books, and papers on every flat surface. He took a pile off of one chair and placed it on top of the collection in the other chair. I sat down.

"Is the Armor of God in the bag?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"Take it out, Brother, and let's have a look," Bob directed.

I pulled the plastic tube and the knit hat from the bag. I set the cap on the desk, and I held the tube in my right hand. Then I thought, "Sword of the Spirit," and the sword transformed. Well, at least for me, it changed.

"Ok, it's done."

"Hmm, I only see a plastic tube. What do you see?" Bob asked.

With both hands, I held the Sword of the Spirit up before my eyes. "I see a two and a half foot long shiny silver sword surrounded by a white aura. It is warm to the touch. It molds to my hand when I squeeze the hilt, and it became a spear to stab the demon last night. It has words inside, not on the surface, of the blade. It's like I can see into the metal, and floating in there is text. The words are written in a language I don't recognize, and they're always moving and shifting positions. Some fade, others get more pronounced and then fade again."

Bob opened the Bible on his desk and said, "Ephesians 6 says ' . . . Sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.' The Word of God is Scripture. Some think it is just the four Gospels; many believe it is the entire Bible. Most scholars agree you need to be knowledgeable in God's Word so you can speak its truth into other people's lives. The Word of God is the only answer to evil in this world. Evil cannot tolerate the presence of the truth. Evil will either flee or try to smother the Word of God."

Bob turned some more pages in his Bible. "Hebrews 4:12 says:

'For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.'⁴

Bob closed the Bible. "You understand that I can't see what you see. Assuming your description is accurate, it doesn't surprise me that the sword can change shape, and it feels alive. If it is the embodiment of God's Word, then it is alive."

Bob leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. Talking to the ceiling, Bob continued, "The languages on the sword are probably Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, which are the original languages the Scriptures were written in."

He tipped his chair forward and looked intently at me. "Describe again what happened after you struck the demon."

⁴ Hebrews 4:12 NIV

"There was a brief sizzle sound, and the demon turned to a wisp of smoke or vapor."

"Fascinating. I need to think on that," Bob said. "What do you see when you look at the Helmet of Salvation?"

I reached for the knit hat, and, with a thought, it transformed into the Helmet of Salvation. "It is a brown metal; I think it's bronze. A metal flap covers the nose, and wings on each side wrap forward to cover half of the cheeks. There are words in the metal, much like the sword, but they don't move around. It is warm like the sword and molds to my head."

Bob looked at the ceiling again. *That must be how he does his thinking.*

The Pastor spoke, "In battle, the head is one of the most vulnerable places on the Roman Soldier. The helmet protected this vital area. It could keep the soldier from harm and allow him to continue fighting. Salvation is the deliverance from sin and evil. Jesus is our salvation, our deliverer from sin and evil. In the spirit realm, the helmet must either protect you directly from the blows of demons, or perhaps it guards your mind against their influence. Either way, it will help you with those spiritual battles."

Bob sighed. "I wish I could see what you see."

We sat there. Both lost in thought for a minute. "Without guidance from God, what do we do next?" I asked, subdued.

"We wait. You go help with the preparations for lunch. I'm giving the message today, and I need to put some final touches on it," Bob said, rubbing his hands together. You could see the excitement on his face.

"Ok, see ya later," I said and headed down the hall to the kitchen. I re-introduced myself to Fran, and she put me right to work. The Mission offered a sermon and a meal most days of the week. Depending on the day, they had a hearty dinner or soup and sandwiches. Fran parked me in front of a stack of large soup cans and showed me how to open them and into which kettle to dump them. Then Fran handed me several

pounds of cold cuts and instructed me in the fine art of Soup Kitchen Sandwich making. Fran redefined multitasking: she seemed to be everywhere. As we worked, Fran chatted amiably about the Mission.

She explained, "The City Mission Soup Kitchen began during the Great Depression in the 1930s. It is one of the oldest ministries to the poor in the state. Monday through Friday, at 6:30 PM, Bob or another volunteer begins the worship service by singing songs from the old hymnals. At about 7:00, they served dinner. Clients don't have to listen to the teaching. They wait in an area by the door, but those that listen get in line first. The customers took the leftovers "home."

"Saturdays are different. There's lunch, no dinner. Doors open at 11:00, worship at 11:30, then lunch at noon. Normally, there're enough volunteers, but not today for some reason," she observed.

"Following the message, the speaker blesses the food, and they line up to get their meal," Fran concluded.

About 11:00 a.m., a stream of people flowed into the teaching/dining area and found seats around the various size tables. The room was a jumble of round, square, and rectangular tables surrounded by an assortment of folding and stackable plastic chairs. A platform with a podium stood in the front with an old upright piano next to it.

The crowd mainly consisted of men, but there were a few women and children. It was getting crowded. The weather had turned nasty outside. Bob entered the room about 11:30, welcomed everyone, and invited them to pick up a hymnal. As I stood behind the counter, I listened to the people sing the old hymns. Fran disappeared from the kitchen and reappeared behind the old upright piano, where she banged away on the keys. The tunes tickled my memory. I recognized "Amazing Grace." One or two others sounded familiar. I must have heard them in my youth.

With the hymns finished, Bob began to speak. His animated teaching held their attention. After a while, the people started to shift and fidget. You could tell his sermon ran into overtime, but Pastor Bob was

on fire. He gave the gospel message with great zeal. Then Pastor Bob asked if anyone there would like to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior, four hands shot up. Two men and one woman with a child raised their hands. Bob asked them to join him upfront. The people shuffled forward, but the woman and child remained sitting. Bob gave thanks for the food. The chair legs scraped the floor as the clients stood and formed a line, and that was my cue to begin dishing out the meal.

Caroline

Saturday Morning

“Are we almost there?” Anna’s question dripped with anticipation.

Amazing. Even though Anna was cold and wet, excitement still bubbled from Anna. On the other hand, doubt and anxiety had their hold on me. “I think so, Sweetie.” The rain came down heavier. Up ahead, the City Mission Soup Kitchen sign peeked between the raindrops.

“There it is, let's hurry.” We moved our feet faster, and we soon arrived at the door. I stopped. *This is stupid. Even if the guy is here, he's going to think we're loony.* “Anna, are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes, Mommy. The angel said so.” She pulled my hand with her whole body toward the door.

A smiling older woman sat at a table by the door. “Welcome. You made it just in time. Have you been here before?” she asked.

“No.”

“Please sign in and go find a seat. There is usually some in the front because nobody likes sitting that close to the pastor.” She gave me a wink and continued. “And there’s a short service that has just started. The Pastor will say a blessing over the food, and you will then be able to eat,” she added.

“Oh, we’re not here to eat,” I said.

“Mommy, I’m starving,” Anna stated. The woman gave me a polite smile.

“Names?”

“Caroline and Anna Sullivan,” I said and quickly signed the paper. Feeling awkward, I grabbed Anna's hand and headed down the hall to

the dining room. My senses came under attack as we entered the room. We walked into a wall of heat and humidity. The smell of cooked food and unwashed people made my nose crinkle as the odors collided.

I looked over the heads of the guests, searching for two open seats. I spotted a winding path to a couple of free chairs in the front. We waded through the crowd toward the empty seats. Most of the patrons were male, with a few women and children were sprinkled here and there. “Excuse me . . . pardon me . . . sorry about your foot.” My face warmed with embarrassment as several heads turned in our direction. The gruff singing sounded surprisingly beautiful, not a tabernacle choir, but still pleasant to the ear.

Anna and I arrived at the seats. Old and well-worn hymnals lay scattered on the table. Just as we sat, the Pastor asked us to stand. We stood by our chairs and picked up a hymnal. A neighbor with a scruffy black beard and a missing tooth smiled and pointed to the song number. The pages rustled as I searched for the hymn. “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” read the title. We had just finished verse two. I opened my mouth to sing, and the words died in my throat. I stopped and listened.

Tears pooled in the corners of my eyes and ran down my cheeks. From deep within, memories welled to the surface.

Verse 3.

And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,

I found myself trapped in one of my frequent nightmares. Someone had taken Anna, and I chased the kidnapper through a dark forest following Anna’s terrified screams. I yelled her name until my voice gave out. Her screams mixed with evil laughter faded in the distance. I tried to run fast, but it was like I was running through wet cement. With each step, it became harder and harder to pick up my feet. Exhaustion overwhelmed me. I tripped on a root and fell to the ground; my heart

pounded, and my breath ragged. I couldn't get up. Anna's cries faded until I no longer heard them.

we will not fear, for God hath willed
his truth to triumph through us.

I screamed and sobbed as I beat the ground. I looked in the direction of the last cry, and the forest faded into a white mist. A voice whispered in my ear, "Awake, the demon is gone."

"What? What demon?"

Several moments passed, then the voice whispered again, "In the name of Jesus, awake." It felt like someone threw me a life preserver and pulled me to safety. The fog in my mind cleared, and I opened my eyes. My confused mind moved slowly, like molasses. *Where am I?* I sat up and looked around. A room lined with dirty white ceramic tiles filled my vision, and three sizeable stainless steel tables sat in the middle of the chamber. The place reminded me of a hospital, a very grimy hospital. I sat on some kind of bed.

The Prince of Darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo, his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.

A man stepped into my line of sight. He held a sword surrounded by a pale white light, and I saw kindness and warmth in his brown eyes. His brown hair framed his rugged face. Everything seemed so surreal.

The man said, "Go, see if you can find a way out. Remember, Jesus will save and protect you."

That seemed like an odd thing to say. I had rejected Jesus a long time ago. Why would He save me now?

Verse 4.

That word above all earthly powers,
no thanks to them, abideth;

I did as the man said. With some trouble, I stood up and left through the door he indicated. Exiting the room, I met a sea of hospital beds similar to mine. Scared, I slowly walked down the central aisle and looked around. What I saw didn't make sense. Screams pierced the gloom, and foul shapes walked and floated among the bodies. Stopping to survey my surroundings, I examined the nearest bed. Panic exploded in my mind, and my joints locked. A man lay on his back. A small, gangly, limbed creature sat between his head and heart. One burnt red arm dug in his forehead, and the other clutched his heart. The man screamed. My screams mingled with his as I ran away. The beds stretched on and on in both directions while I searched for an exit.

the Spirit and the gifts are ours,
thru him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;

Out of breath, I stopped and wildly looked around. I turned and checked the aisle behind me and down both side aisles. "Am I going the right way?" I wondered aloud. I must come to a wall or something soon and turned to continue in the direction I was going. Inches from my face hovered a creature, the same kind of monster I just encountered. I jumped back. The thing floated in the air—about the size of a small monkey with large red eyes on its human-looking face. Sharp claws tipped its fingers and toes. Dark red and hairless, the creature opened its mouth, and a puff of foul breath escaped.

It rasped, "What are you doing awake? Back to your cot, human!"

the body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever.⁵

The terrible creature reached for me. I screamed, grabbed the small but muscular arm, and flung it. It wailed as it sailed out of sight. The ghoulish thing's cries faded as I watched it fly. I knew I had to leave before it came back with others. I ran down the aisle, hoping that I ran in the right direction. Many minutes passed, and I saw the row of beds end at a white wall. I looked left, then right, for some sign of an exit.

I twisted around and scanned the sea of beds for any monsters chasing me. I heard their cries in the distance, but the dim light made it impossible to see much. Their shouts grew louder.

I spun back around to face the wall again. This time I saw a thin blue outline of a doorway. Where did it come from? It wasn't there a moment ago. Above the arched door glowed blue words which read, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

I found no handle or knob to turn. With desperation, I placed my hand in the center of the door and pushed. It felt warm and smoother than glass, but nothing happened. I tried again and pushed with all my strength. Still, it didn't budge. A cry of anguish escaped my throat.

The monster's shouts sounded even closer now. My heart thudded rapidly in my chest, and sweat stung my eyes.

Wait! What did that man say? "Jesus will save and protect you." How can that be? I don't believe in Jesus.

Behind me, I heard a shout. "There's the human!"

Terror in my heart and panic in my mind, I did the only I could. I screamed, "Jesus save and protect me." I pushed against the center of the door, it swung outward, and I stumbled through it.

⁵ A Mighty Fortress is Our God, Verses 3 & 4 by Martin Luther Public Domain

And . . . I woke in my bed with my nightgown soaked with sweat, and my lungs labored to catch my breath. What a dream! But I was awake and feeling great for the first time in a long time. But like most dreams, it faded quickly, the details forgotten until now.

Dazed, I came back to the present. The song had ended, and the Pastor spoke now. The words seemed to glow and hang in the air. Heaven. Hell. Sacrifice. Redemption. Forgiveness. Jesus. The Cross. Lord and Savior. Then the Pastor asked the question. “If you were to die tonight, do you know if your spirit is going to heaven?”

“No,” I whispered with a sob.

The Pastor continued, “You need someone to accept your sin and replace it with His holiness. Jesus can do that for you. He can be your Savior. Are you ready to believe and accept Jesus to be your Savior? If you’re ready, raise your hand.”

I didn’t fully understand what was happening to me. But I knew I no longer wanted to live as I had been. I needed help, and I needed God. I raised my hand.

“If you raised your hand, please come see me after I give thanks for the food.”

The Pastor prayed, and I sat weak and emotionally drained. The pastor said, “Amen,” and every chair scraped the floor as people rose to get their meal, except mine.

I sat there and cried.

“Mommy, what’s wrong?” Anna sounded small and frightened. Through tears, I watched the Pastor speak with two other men. They bowed their heads and prayed. When they finished, he gave them each a small book.

I rejected Jesus years ago. Am I going to accept Him as my Lord and Savior based on some dream?

The Pastor held another book with “New Testament” stamped on the front. He came over and sat down next to me as tears refilled my eyes.

“I’m Pastor Bob. Would you like to receive Jesus as your Savior?” he kindly asked.

I nodded, unable to speak; the tears continued to escape my eyes.

“Pray with me, Sister. Repeat what I say,” Pastor Bob said. He bowed his head and closed his eyes.

“Lord God, I have sinned against you. I repent, turning from those sins and seek your forgiveness . . .” the Pastor began.

I repeated, “Lord God, I have sinned against you. I repent, turning from those sins and seek your forgiveness . . .”

Then a soft voice beside me echoed the same line. Startled, I looked down at the top of Anna’s bowed head. I took her hand in mine and closed my eyes again. As Bob prayed, Anna and I repeated each line.

“You are the mighty creator of Heaven and earth . . .”

“You sent your son, Jesus, to die on the cross . . .”

“You accepted His blood as payment for my sins . . .”

“So I may be forgiven and be adopted into the family of God. . .”

“Jesus, I ask you to be my Savior and to take charge of my life . . .”

“Help me to live a life pleasing and obedient to You for all eternity. . .”

“In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

We lifted our heads. Relief and emotion crashed over me like an ocean wave. Again, tears welled up in my eyes and ran down my cheeks, but this time, they were tears of joy and thankfulness.

Pastor Bob handed me the Bible. “Bless you, child,” He said to me.

“And bless you too, little one,” he said to Anna. “What’re your names?”

“I’m Caroline Sullivan, and this is my daughter, Anna,” I replied with a big smile as I wiped my cheeks dry.

“I’d like to talk with you sometime next week, Sister. Just to see how you’re doing and if you have any questions. I suggest you read the Gospel of John, but I think you need to have some lunch for now. The

line is almost finished. Just go over to the end, pick up a tray and let the server know what you want.”

I took his hands in mine. “Thank you, Pastor.” I turned to follow Anna, who had skipped over to the line. I followed and picked up two trays and handed one to Anna.

“Mommy, what’s to eat?”

I looked down at the food choices. “I see salad, carrots, sandwiches and a sign that says ‘Chicken Noodle Soup.’”

Anna reached for some carrots and moved down to the sandwiches. I picked up a bowl of salad and added some ranch dressing. Suddenly Anna squealed and pointed, “Mommy, there he is. There’s da man I’m suppos’ to give the rope to.”

I looked where she pointed. Behind the counter stood a man serving sandwiches. A shock of auburn hair covered his head. He seemed to be about five feet, eight inches. He smiled at Anna and turned his head in my direction. Our eyes locked. His were brown and gentle, just like in my dream. Wait! Not possible! They were the same eyes that I saw in my dream. “You!” I squealed. The room spun, and all went dark.

The Nightmare Was Real

On November 13, 2009, I experienced the nightmare in Chapter One. I had never encountered a realistic dream with sight, sound, color, and touch. Yelling, “Jesus is my Savior,” is how I exited the dream. I shot out of bed drenched in sweat, and my heart pounded hard. My first thought was, “I don’t want to forget this dream,” because I knew dreams fade with the light of day. At 2:00 a.m., I was handwriting notes on a piece of paper. I recorded the dream in as much detail as I could remember.

As I laid back down, I had two thoughts. The first was to thank Jesus for being my Savior.

The second was this could make an interesting story. If there was going to be a story, how might it go? And the plotline unfolded in my mind. You see, God inspired me to write this story.

The significant events in the first chapter happened in my dream in the order presented in this story. I did chop off a short section at the beginning that did not affect the overall dream. I added details to make reading smoother and other information to describe elements better. But the main events happened in the order presented.

The other thing that makes this nightmare so unique and likely from God is that I have Aphantasia. Aphantasia is a big word that means I don’t form pictures in my mind very well.

My dreams are usually grayscale without a lot of detail. To have a dream in full color and involve my other senses happens rarely. To date, I remember four dreams in color with details. Two held spiritual significance, and the nightmare in Chapter One from 2009 has been the most

recent. I believe this was a dream from God to push me into an experience that I would never have chosen.

I have never aspired to be a writer. I read many books, mostly mystery, science fiction, and fantasy. My strengths and aspirations in high school and my career have tended toward the sciences and technology.

At about 6:00 a.m., I woke up and went to my computer to record the dream. When I reached the end of the nightmare, I kept writing, and what you have read is the result.

I try not to think of this as my story. This story is God's story, and He inspired me to tell it. As I wrote the book, I felt a solid connection to God. I suspect God placed this story in my heart to help me more than to help others. But I hope others will read the story at some point and receive encouragement and blessing from God.

Dear Reader, Thank you for taking the time to read this book. I never expected to write a book, but I did. I pray God blesses you as you read this story and that you may be inspired to do something unexpected.

Gerald Thompson

