

Demons and Angels

Book 2 of the Demons Series

Gerald Thompson

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“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Colossians 1: 15-16
(ESV)

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History Lesson: Caleb Kincade, January 2044

God died on June 1, 2042.

In 2042, American society teetered on the edge of anarchy. Unemployment had reached an all-time high of forty-six percent. International creditors stopped buying US bonds, preventing the US government from taking on more debt and forcing the government to implement true financial reform. They eliminated social support programs like food stamps and health insurance.

The government had a massive job layoff. Unemployment, already high from failed fiscal changes and too many taxes, skyrocketed to new levels—programs designed to help the unemployed and poor shut down. For the first time, millions of Americans went to bed hungry. Many without jobs had already burned through their savings accounts and maxed out their credit cards. They had no money to buy food, and many got kicked out of their homes. The lucky ones still had relatives with houses. The less fortunate wandered the streets.

The hollow pit in the average person's belly made for a fitful sleep. And when these people dreamed, "I" festered in their minds. *I don't deserve this. Why should I suffer? I deserve better.*

Two events in the early spring of 2042 caused the destruction of churches worldwide and killed or forced God's people into hiding.

The first incident involved Cornell Professor of Paranormal Studies, Doctor Erica Johnson.

In January 2042, Dr. Johnson and RF (Radio Frequency) Engineering professor Lars Schmidt modified a full-spectrum video camera. They added a new sensor developed by Professor Schmidt. Schmidt believed the sensor captured and visually recorded quantum vibrations, but they were unsure if it would work. No one had succeeded yet. Dr. Johnson connected it to a computer with the software she wrote. Preliminary tests were inconclusive, and the scientists felt disappointed. They left the equipment in the lab while they considered their next steps.

Later that same day, the students in Dr. Johnson's paranormal psychology lab had an assignment. The assignment asked them to attempt an out-of-body experience. One student, Susan, stepped forward to try it. When she awoke from her trance, she announced she had succeeded. She wanted to try again, and her lab partner, Jack, offered to record the session. Then he spied the Professor's video camera and turned it on. Jack saw Susan lying on the cot on the computer monitor and pushed the "record" button. At first, nothing happened, but then he noticed something odd. A transparent, undulating, multicolored energy field separated from Susan and floated above her. It moved around the room and changed shape like an amoeba.

Jack's attention shifted between Susan lying on the couch and the monitor. He quietly motioned to the others, and they rushed to the computer. Wide-eyed, they watched the undulating form as it lowered and merged with Susan's body and disappeared. Then she woke from the trance.

One of the other students ran to find Dr. Johnson and Professor Schmidt. When they joined the students, Susan repeated what she had done earlier. She entered a trance, and the scientists witnessed what Jack had seen earlier.

Then, all the students attempted out-of-body experiences to ensure it was not a fluke. Those that succeeded showed similar undulating rainbow shapes but differed in intensity, color ranges, and size. Over the next few weeks, Dr. Johnson and her class debated what they saw on the monitor. They concluded they were observing the person's soul. Dr. Johnson presented the device and video to the university's administration and select members of the local medical community. They debated the evidence. They were not so quick to believe they witnessed a person's soul.

Dr. Johnson designed an experiment to verify if the modified video camera detected the out-of-body soul. She and her class would use the device to record the moment of death. If the soul persisted after the body died, it would answer the question: Is there life after death?

In early February, they approached a local hospice facility and asked terminally ill patients for permission to record their deaths. Five of the patients agreed to be a part of the experiment.

As the first patient neared death, Dr. Johnson set up the newly named "Soul Recorder" to record the moment. They witnessed the undulating bands of color develop and leave the body. The shifting shape rose about five feet from the body and dissipated. It took about sixty seconds from when it left the body to when it disappeared. It didn't float out of the building or zoom off in another direction. It looked like it had dissolved.

They repeated the process with the other four patients with the same results.

Sadly, Dr. Johnson concluded that life after death did not exist since the spiritual energy dissipated so quickly. If the spirit didn't persist, life after death could not either. Heaven and Hell were wishful thinking.

Weeks passed as Dr. Johnson and her students analyzed the data they collected. The results sadden most of them. They believed they had solved

the mystery of life after death and concluded life was pointless, along with morals. Why bother being good if no reward or punishment awaits them after death?

Jack sat on a bar stool nursing a drink when a friend from the Los Angeles Times sat beside him. Jack gave intoxicated details of the experiments that had transpired over the last two months. His reporter friend covertly recorded the conversation and wrote a detailed article about the Soul Recorder the next day, which he submitted to his editor.

The second event involved three celebrities who “died” on Saturday, March 29, the day before Palm Sunday.

The celebrities “died” in unrelated incidents: a traffic accident, a drug overdose, and an attempted suicide, all before dawn on Saturday. Individually, they meant nothing. After ten to fifteen minutes, emergency medical personnel revived each one. They transported them to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. A brain can survive without oxygen, typically between four and six minutes. After ten minutes, they all should have suffered brain damage, but none exhibited any loss of mental faculties. Once stable, the hospital admitted all three for observation.

The Los Angeles Times newspaper received an anonymous tip about the three celebrities' death and returned to life. It had been a slow news day, so the paper sent rookie reporter Cindy Barlow to check it out.

Cindy arrived by 9:00 a.m. Cindy raised a stink at reception when they denied her celebrity access. The hospital administration feared bad press.

After a heated discussion with Miss Barlow, they permitted her to interview the celebrities if they consented. Each star said ‘Yes’ to the interview.

They each had different stories, but all gave the same answer when asked if they experienced life after death. They said: “Nothing waits for you after death. Neither Heaven nor Hell existed.”

The reporter submitted her article before the deadline for the Palm Sunday Edition.

The chief editor knew news gold when he saw it. He intentionally placed both articles side-by-side on March 30, 2042, in the Palm Sunday print and electronic editions.

When the faithful and others read the Palm Sunday article, great cries of anger and anguish floated to the heavens. Those with unshakable faith cried, “That isn’t true! Heaven and Hell do exist. You need the salvation Jesus offers!”

Atheists smugly responded, “See, we told you so. Your faith is worthless.”

For decades, the church’s moderating influence on society had waned, and the population of believers in a single God dwindled. Those who professed faith in a single God, like Christians, Jews, and Muslims, often suffered discrimination in the workplace, in social clubs, in home buying, and more. In many states, it became illegal to proclaim faith in God publicly.

The nation had a crisis of faith. The atheists smugly rubbed these findings in the faces of believers everywhere. Devout people of God refused to believe the Soul Recorder worked, and those with weak faith abandoned the church. Within a week, most of the unbelieving population came to a grim conclusion. All the churches of a single God lied. There is no after-life.

Like gasoline fumes, fear, selfishness, and anger permeated society. The celebrities’ report of nothing existing after death and Dr. Johnson’s

conclusion became the spark people needed to blame others for their woes. The spark ignited the vapor, and society exploded; however, not with the random destruction of a typical explosion. Instead, like multiple cruise missiles, they rocketed toward only one type of target— any building where they taught or displayed there is only one God.

On Easter Sunday, April 6, 2042, the first salvo of missiles launched, detonated, and mortally wounded God on Earth.

The rockets flew to Manhattan. Angry crowds had gathered Easter morning at places of worship within the borough: churches, synagogues, and mosques.

“There is no Heaven! There is no Hell! The church lied!” screamed the mobs, demanding their pound of flesh. As the angry crowds built, believers gathered to defend their places of worship. The faithful threw together whatever they could find to create make-shift barriers. With their backs to their houses of worship, they faced enraged mobs.

The largest crowd gathered at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City, where Bishop Kirkland stood in front of his beloved church, wrapped in his robes of office. The bishop spoke of calm and peace when a crane belching black smoke rolled to a stop before the church.

It raised its mighty arm to full height, and a wrecking ball hung from the end of the wrist-thick cable. The engine roared, and with a giant swing, the ball sailed towards the front doors of St. Patrick’s and Bishop Kirkland. He died with the first blow to his beloved church.

The Purge of God from this world began.

The crowd went wild. Rocks struck the faithful. Gunshots rang out, and people screamed as they fell wounded or dead to the ground. The wrecking ball pounded the church’s front wall, creating a great hole. The mob rushed forward. Mercy withered in the hearts of the attackers as they killed every defending parishioner. A river of blood flowed in the gutter.

Looters ran into the church, then jogged out with whatever valuables they could find before the wrecking ball finished the job.

By the end of the day, half the houses of worship in Manhattan were in flames or leveled by heavy construction equipment. The crowds murdered tens of thousands of believers of all three faiths.

On April 7, 2042, the angry mobs swelled again, and every church in the five boroughs of New York City crumbled.

Within a week, crowds in every city in America attacked all religious buildings within its borders. And like spokes on a wheel radiating from the urban centers, places of worship in the suburbs and countryside fell like dominos. Mobs snuffed out the lives of millions of defending believers.

The few remaining faithful in law enforcement and local fire departments left their posts to stand with the church's defenders. They died while their fellow officers watched, unwilling to intervene.

Within weeks, rioters demolished every holy place in America. When the mobs ran out of buildings to plunder and destroy, they hunted the faithful. Gangs roamed the streets, interrogating anyone they met and asking them one question. "Do you believe in the God of the Bible, the Torah, or the Qur'an?" If they answered yes, they died. Christians, Jews, and Muslims fell or hid from the rampaging thugs.

Dump trucks carried the dead outside the city limits. Excavators dug stadium-size holes into which the trucks dumped their grisly loads. Then, the excavators returned and covered the bodies. The process of burying the bodies took months.

Ironically, tens of thousands of atheists also died as people began killing anyone with whom they held a grudge. With no faith-based morality to restrain them, people randomly killed those they hated. Police overwhelmed or non-existent, ignored corpses piling up in the streets.

The rioters attacked any building displaying a religious phrase or the Ten Commandments with sledgehammers or jackhammers. The gangs burned mountains of Bibles and other holy books.

The insanity spread to every nation in the world. Within two months, the worldwide mobs had erased all evidence that God existed.

Nobody knows how many people died during those months. Before the Purge, the world population was ten billion people. The last reliable survey of religions happened in the 2020s. At that time, the number of practitioners of those three faiths was about fifty-five percent of the world. In 2042, it had shrunk to about thirty percent. Those weak in the faith abandoned all three religions by the millions. The government estimated that up to two and a half billion people died or went into hiding worldwide. Economies and governments neared total collapse.

All governments instituted martial law and herded their populations into the major metropolitan centers. Like lost sheep, their citizens willingly followed their Shepard's voice, enabling governments to concentrate and control them. The government put all these unemployed people to work on infrastructure. They built residential skyscrapers, sewers, water reclamation, and treatment plants. The army erected walls to keep the sheep penned but not to keep out the wolves.

Outside the giant cities lived factory and farm workers, miners, criminals, and the remnant of God's believers.

The government dealt with those outside the city when their communities grew to more than one hundred people. Then, they would send a missile barrage while they slept to eradicate them.

I wrote this narrative based on eyewitness accounts, newspaper reports, and television interviews to help future generations remember what transpired in those dark days of 2042.

Forever God's servant,

Caleb Kincade

January 15, 2044

Zachary

Monday Evening, May 31

I closed the binder that held my grandfather's words. Thinking about what he had written triggered a flood of childhood memories.

Mom told me I was the first baby born as God died on June 1, 2042. She had given birth to me in our home while the wounded and dying people of faith overran the hospitals.

I had no memories of my father, only stories told by Mom. He died in the Purge before I was two. I don't remember much from the first five years of my life because that was the time of the Great Migration. You either moved to the great cities or hid to save your life.

We often relocated, running from gangs searching for believers throughout New York State. The deeper we went into the Adirondacks, the less frequent the attacks.

Mom told me my grandparents died during the Great Migration because they wouldn't renounce God. Vigilantes shot them where they knelt.

The New York City Metroplex was closest to us. I had never seen it, and I never wondered why it was created. Mom told me the Metroplex covered the top half of old New Jersey, the southern corner of New York State, New York City, Long Island, and all of Connecticut.

Life settled down when I was eight. We found an insulated, abandoned lodge in the woods on Elk Lake in the Adirondack Mountains. It had a

fireplace, and in the garage, we found an old cast iron wood-burning stove and oven from the 1920s. With the help of some kind neighbors, they removed the useless electric stove/oven and installed the wood-burning equipment. We had a well with a hand pump, and plenty of fish and game lived nearby.

Tomorrow will be Tuesday, June 1, 2060, and I will turn eighteen.

Mom, why'd you give this to me to read now?

With a sigh, I blew out the oil lamp and fell asleep.

Anna

Tuesday Morning, June 1

I ran and twisted away from the claws that reached for me. Blankets flew to the floor as my body thrashed on the bed.

With Zachary clutched against my breast, I fled down a street. Surrounded by demons, their crimson, mottled hands reached out for us. Blood ran down my arm where the claws had raked my skin.

I fell to the ground and covered little Zachy with my body to protect him from the demon's nails. My clothing tore as the demonic hands peeled the flesh from my back. The pain was unbearable.

A rumble began deep within my soul and erupted from my mouth as it grew.

“JESUS, SAVE ME!”

Demons blew apart like a grenade exploding in the air.

I woke from the nightmare. Drenched in sweat, my nightgown clung to me like plastic wrap. My heart pounded against my breastbone as adrenaline raced through my veins.

I sat up and reached for the cloth to wipe away the tears from my eyes and sweat from my brow.

When my heart slowed, and the shaking and the tears stopped, I got out of bed to change into dry sleepwear.

The dreams were getting worse! Over the last two months, my pleasant dreams had become nightmares that visited me about three times a week.

I saw the demons my parents described to me as a child. These horrible visions felt like doom, a glimpse of the world to come.

The bedroom lightened as dawn approached. There was no point in trying to sleep. I needed to milk the cow and feed the animals.

The dawn brightened the room enough that I did not need to light the candle. *Forget the nightie. I'll get dressed.*

I staggered to the bathroom. Even though we had to fill the toilet tank each time we flushed, I appreciated the indoor plumbing. I could shower if I steeled myself against the cold water. We'd often warmed a water kettle and poured it over our heads to wash our hair.

June is the best month. The days are often 65-75 degrees, but nights could be chilly. I slipped on my jacket and stepped out the back door. Every time I exhaled, I saw my breath escape my mouth.

The small barn sat about 100 feet from the house. It housed two milking cows, a bull, two horses, four pigs, and newborn piglets. A nearby coop leaned against the barn and held three dozen chickens plus a rooster.

The rooster crowed *cock-a-doodle-do*, and a melody of animal sounds greeted me as I approached the building. I enjoyed caring for the animals. Their needs were simple.— food, shelter, and companionship. I wish people were that simple.

Today is Zachary's eighteenth birthday. How time flies. It seems like yesterday that we ran from the gangs.

And that thought took me back about fifteen years. Tears pooled in my eyes as I thought of my parents, Caleb and Caroline.

We had moved into a small neighborhood in the village of Little Falls, east of Utica, New York. Several Christian families had gathered there. We lived peacefully for months and began to feel comfortable. We didn't realize the gangs had found us that August 2045.

They must have watched us from afar as we went about our lives. They attacked at sunset after each family returned for a quiet evening at home.

Several vehicles raced down our street, and tires squealed as they halted. A Molotov cocktail shattered the living room window, and liquid fire landed everywhere. After scooping three-year-old Zachy into my arms, I ran through the garage and out the back door. An island of ever-green bushes and trees grew in the side yard. The outer branches formed a dome. Once inside, we found a hollow space. I ran there clutching Zachary and hid.

My ears rang with the sound of breaking glass, gunshots, and the fire crackling as it consumed our home.

My parents ran out the front door and straight into the waiting gang. I peeked out of our hiding place and watched as my parents knelt before the gang leader in the light of the burning homes. Dad said something the leader could not quite hear.

“What’d ya’ say?” he shouted.

Dad shouted, “I said, I forgive you all. Your anger is misplaced. God is not your enemy. The true enemy hides in the shadows.”

The gang leader trembled with rage. He slowly pulled a pistol from its holster. Set the barrel against Dad’s forehead and pulled the trigger. The leader stepped sideways before Dad hit the ground; he repeated the process with Mom.

The gang members turned and walked down the street to a new house. I watched another Molotov perform a graceful arc and crash through another window.

I clutched Zachy to my heart as I sobbed and rocked back and forth. The gunshots subsided, and I heard several vehicles roar off. Soon, the only sound came from the burning houses as they collapsed.

We hid in the bushes until daylight, then crept out and looked around. A few survivors milled about gathering what they could. I set Zachy down and dragged my parents to the backyard. Six-year-old Bernice Olsen and her mother, Jana, joined me and helped bury Dad and Mom. They deeply loved each other in life. They always stood together. I thought it fitting to

bury them in the same hole. I threw the last shovel of dirt on their unmarked grave, stared at the disturbed soil, and wondered what to do next. Bernice walked little Zachary over to me. I took his chubby little hand and said a few words about how “Heaven had two more saints and asked God to look over them for us.”

Jana and Bernice left to look for her husband. He had lured two gang members away by running into the woods. She feared he was dead since he had not returned and decided to search for him in the direction he ran.

Lazy wisps of smoke rose from our house. I salvaged what I could from the nearby houses that didn't thoroughly burn. I felt like a thief, but their owners no longer needed them. I found an SUV with keys in the ignition in an undamaged detached garage and loaded it up.

I had one last hole to dig. Dad had buried a large, weatherproof box that held our valuables in the backyard along the back property line. It contained family jewelry, cash, medicines, photos, and papers like Dad's book. It also included the Armor of God.

The “Armor of God!” What a joke! These mighty spiritual weapons are utterly useless in the face of earthly gangs. Even if Dad still had the power to use them, they were probably ineffective against man's flesh and blood.

I pulled out everything and stuffed it into an empty backpack except the Armor of God. I left that in the box, closed the lid, and threw it back into the hole. Anger burned in my soul, and I didn't even bother to bury it.

Jana and Bernice returned. They found her husband dead, and the thugs had beaten the life out of him. Jana had dragged him back to our yard by the feet. This time, I helped her bury her husband next to my parents. Jana said a few words. No one shed a tear because we had none left. The horror of the night overwhelmed us. With an SUV loaded with children and our meager supplies, we drove north deeper into the Adirondack Mountains.

The four of us slowly migrated north between April and October for a few years. Threats pushed us that way. Usually, marauders or too many people in the area and a village developed. Dad was right. The government

would not tolerate large communities outside the Metroplex. Early one morning, we heard explosions in the town we had passed through the day before. We camped about a mile outside. We rushed to the village and found it ablaze. Bodies littered the ground. Screams of agony floated through the air. My anger toward God burned even hotter. Since we couldn't help and nothing remained to loot, we left the area. We continued our trek north.

We couldn't travel with snow on the ground, so we had to find a winter home before the snow returned. We took a zig-zag route. As we traveled north, the encounters with human dangers lessened. Gangs and psychopaths decreased. Jana and I looked at the map one day and noticed a small, out-of-the-way body of water named Elk Lake.

We decided to explore the area, and we liked what we found. We found a few other humans in the region. About a dozen homes surrounded the lake. I liked the lodge on the southwest side, and Jana wanted the cozy cottage about a quarter mile away on the southeast side of the lake.

That was ten years ago. Ten years! We almost forgot about the dangers of this new world. Several other families have moved into the area since then. They, like us, just wanted a place to live in peace. All of us believe in one God, but not all are Christian.

Mouser, the barn cat, rubbed against my shins and returned me to the present. She kept our immediate area rodent-free. We'd fed her scraps and gave her a warm place to sleep in exchange for her services.

I fed the animals and let them out into the pen so they could enjoy this beautiful first day of June.

Milking the cows and completing the rest of the chores took about an hour. I loved our simple life and few needs. It had become easy to forget the wider world and the hatred it contained.

Loaded down with a full milk pail, I returned to the kitchen. We always pasteurize the milk to make it safe to drink and store longer.

Periodically, we head to the old towns in search of supplies. While not as dangerous as it used to be, we still took extreme care. For a long time, gangs lived in the towns and villages, but once supplies ran low and victims scarce, they made their way to the New York Metroplex and joined the rest of the sheep behind the walls.

About a month ago, I discovered a locked, heavy-duty cabinet on our last foray. It stood about three feet wide, three feet tall, and maybe fifteen inches deep. A shelving unit had fallen against it and hid it.

I pushed the shelves aside and cleared the debris. It looked like someone tried to smash it open, but they barely dented it. As I struggled to open it, I noticed the rounded edge of a tarnished brass key swinging from a hook on the back of the cabinet. *No, it can't be that easy.*

I reached behind it, lifted the key from the hook, and inserted it into the keyhole. It reluctantly turned, and the cabinet opened with a twist of the handle.

Every shelf contained seasonings, salt, and sugar vacuum-sealed in plastic. I discovered several sets of restaurant-quality knives, plus measuring cups and spoons. *MATCHES!* I whooped and did a little jig. We had to keep a few logs smoldering in the woodstove or oven because it was easier than starting a fire with a flint lighter. I felt like I had found a pot of gold. Then I thought about Zachary's birthday. *I could bake a cake! I have almost all the ingredients.*

I emptied the cabinet, and it took several trips to set everything on the front counter. After relocking the cabinet and pocketing the key, I left the building and hunted for Zachary. Fortunately, I saw him a few doors down. We never yelled for each other. While foraging was becoming less hazardous, you never knew who might be nearby.

I met Zachy, told him the good news, and retrieved the supplies I'd found. We loaded everything onto the horses and returned home.

And today, I intended to bake that cake for my son's special eighteenth birthday. We expected a visit from the not-so-little Bernice and Jana Olsen

today. We'd visit each other about once or twice a week as time and weather permitted. I invited them to Zachy's birthday dinner.

I opened the kitchen door and accidentally sloshed milk out of the pail and onto the floor—Mouser, who had followed me from the barn, pounced and began lapping it up.

"Morn'n, Mom," Zachary said from the table as he slathered a slice of bread with the butter we made yesterday. "This bread tastes sssooo good!"

"Happy Birthday, Zachy," I replied, setting the pail on the counter. "What're you doing on your birthday?" I asked, wondering if I could bake the cake in secret.

"I'm huntin' for a while, and if I don't get anything, I'm goin' fishin'. I'll be back around lunchtime."

"Remember, guests are coming tonight to celebrate your birthday. Catch as much as you can. Oh, and did you have a chance to finish Grandpa's paper?" I asked while slicing bread for my breakfast.

"I did last night. It was interesting. I didn't know about a lot of that. But why did you want me to read it.?"

"I found it in an old backpack in my bedroom closet yesterday. I also found some old photos taken before the Purge and a few more items. You had no opportunity to get to know your grandparents. They were great and Godly people. I wish they were still around, and I thought this might give you a little insight."

"I wish they still lived, too," Zachary said. "Why didn't God save them?"

"I don't know, Sweetie."

"You say, 'God did this or that years ago,' but I don't see any evidence of God doing 'this' or 'that' today. Where's He hiding?" Zachy asked with a hint of anger and pushed away from the table.

"I admit, my faith in God has been shaky. I believe in Him and His son Jesus, but they seem far away. Finding that paper reminded me of long-

forgotten events. I used to be able to see human spirits, although I never did see any demons. Did you know I died when I was six?" I asked.

"What? No! What happened?" Zachy asked.

"I'll tell you everything when you come back. I need to think about it more. I also need to tell you about my nightmares."

"Nightmares? What do you mean? What else have you kept from me?" He shot me a questioning look.

"We'll talk when you return. You're burning daylight, and I have some things I need to do this morning."

"Died! Wow!" He stopped at the back door. "You better tell me all!"

"Don't worry. I'll tell you everything later today."

"I'm taking the crossbow and heading up the valley."

And with that, Zachary marched out of the house.

Zachary

Tuesday Morning, June 1

Mom had died! My mind had a tough time processing that thought. I had no idea! She never mentioned it.

She would have told you that if she loved you! She's keeping secrets!

I know Mom loves me. Still, she should be more open.

It seemed like I had argued with myself all the time. Part of me thought, "Good, I can see both sides of any issue," and another part thought I was nuts.

I unslung my Raven R2060 Annihilator Crossbow. I retrieved it from the gun cabinet and hung it by the back door. It was old, reliable, and beautiful. The flat camouflage finish reflected no light and blended with the environment. I took great care with the weapon because there was no way to replace it, plus it was wickedly dangerous.

I passed the barn, heading for the gap between the mountains behind us. I approached my practice range and decided to do a little target practice before hunting.

Years ago, I built a berm because I didn't want to embed an arrow into a tree trunk or lose the bolt in the weeds when I missed the target. I set various targets before that pile of dirt. Most of the targets were branches of assorted thicknesses.

I practiced firing the crossbow often. I could hit a hand-size target four out of five times at 50 paces.

While surveying the area, I spotted a suitable branch on a nearby maple tree. I cut it off with my hunting knife and plucked all but three medium leaves off. After sticking the tree limb in the base of the berm, I turned and began counting my paces.

On the fiftieth step, I turned and faced the target. The Raven hung on my back. I slid it around to the front, raised the weapon, and looked down the sight. Satisfied, I lowered the crossbow, drew the string back, and loaded the bolt. Mom never used the Raven because she didn't have the strength to pull the line back.

Once I locked the string, I laid a bolt on the barrel. I raised the weapon, pushed the safety to fire, and peered through the scope.

A lone leaf fluttered on the tip of the branch. I focused on that single leaf and blocked all else from my mind. I held my breath and pulled the trigger.

The arrow sailed true and pierced the leaf, embedding itself in the berm. I repeated the process two more times, and I successfully killed a leaf each time. It took a few moments to find the bolts and clean them off. It's time to get going.

Squinting in the morning light, I surveyed the area and decided to head north along the lakeshore. Hunting seasons didn't matter because no one enforced the old rules. I decided to try for a young white-tailed buck or a Tom Turkey. I hoped my prey would come to the water for a drink. Tracking a deer up the hill and into the dense woods often presented a significant challenge.

As I hiked along the shore, I thought about my grandfather's words, some of which I had heard from Mom previously, but not all. Humans sure knew how to mess things up. Grandpa and Grandma's faith was unshakable. Nothing else mattered to them.

Mom's faith was not as strong as it had been. She still believed in God and Jesus, and we went to services on Sunday. A small group of us met in

a cavern that fit thirty to forty people. Old plastic folding chairs supported our bottoms, while plastic tables gave us a place to write or eat meals.

The cave provided privacy from prying eyes and satellites and relief from hot July and August days. We wore jackets in the spring and fall and did not meet when snow lay on the ground. We did not want anyone following our tracks.

My belief in God was not well defined. I knew about Jesus, but I did not know Jesus.

Jesus is a myth, a crutch for the weak.

I wouldn't go so far as to say Jesus was a myth, but there doesn't appear to be much substance to Him.

When I was a kid, my Mom read me Bible stories. I ate them up, and my imagination ran wild. I'd imagined what it felt like as Jonah slid down the gullet of that giant fish.

Or when I made a sling and pretended I was David launching a stone at the giant's forehead. The sling whizzed above my head and made me feel invincible. I loved to watch the rock fly to the target and the satisfying SMACK that followed.

But as I grew older, the stories of wonder became just stories.

The SNAP of a twig stopped my musings, and I instinctively crouched. A deer stuck its head out of the brush line, glanced around, and gingerly stepped on the rocky shore. I lined up my scope. Safety off and finger resting lightly on the trigger, I drew a breath and held it.

One . . . more . . . step . . . and two fawns bounded from the woods and pranced around their mother. I flipped the safety back on and lowered the weapon.

You shoulda shot her. Now you'll have to eat fish for your birthday dinner.

"That's okay. Have a good day, Mrs. Doe." The little family of three jumped when I stood and watched me turn and return the way I came.

I walked along the shore back towards the house. Occasionally, I'd picked up a flat, rounded piece of shale and sent it skittering across the water. I couldn't believe how many times it skipped. Typically, the stone would go a few skips, plunge into a wavelet, and be gone, but this day had no breeze. The only ripples came from my skipping stone. The air seemed like it held its breath.

Our dock and shed came into view, and I walked toward them. We had scavenged half a dozen rods, reels, and tackle years ago and stored the gear in the shed. I considered using the nine-foot fly fishing rod, but my favorite was a five-and-a-half-foot ultra light. It made the fighting trout feel like a Chinook Salmon.

I pulled out a supple five-and-a-half-foot ultralight fishing rod and reel. When we first moved into the house, I started a second pile of dirt mixed with vegetable waste and manure behind the shed. Then, I laid a few large flat rocks on it. When I wanted to fish, I slowly lifted a rock and plucked a juicy worm from the soil. I favored the tiny wigglers because the trout in the lake preferred them.

After plucking some worms out of the soil, I deposited them in an old can, grabbed my fishing pole, and headed for the dock.

"What a great day," I said. The morning chill departed as the sun beamed down from the cloudless sky. Not even a feather could stay afloat in the air. The sky and surrounding hills reflected perfectly off the water.

Brook trout loved small worms. I folded them repeatedly on the hook, leaving their little ends to wiggle in the water. I never used a bobber or a weight. With a twitch of my wrist, I'd flick them out as far as possible and let them slowly settle to the bottom.

I shed my shirt, sat on the edge of the old wooden planks, and watched the string play out as the bait settled. The fishing line moved to the right, then the left. I waited a few more moments before setting the hook. I felt the fish zigging and then zagging as I reeled it in. I plunged the net into

the water to scoop up my dinner. The foot-long brook trout slid onto the stringer with little effort, and I placed it back into the water to keep it alive.

I rebaited the hook to start the process again. Soon, I had a dozen trout on the stringer. I thought about returning to the house, but instead, I stretched out on the dock and soaked up the sun's warmth.

I'm eighteen today. Mom told me that before the Purge and Great Migration, a boy my age thought about colleges and careers and desired to meet a girl and raise a family.

Not anymore! How is tomorrow going to be any different than today? The only goal is survival. You always have to be alert. It's one thing when you are the hunter. It's another when you are the hunted. There could be more persecution. You never knew if or when someone appeared to capture or kill you.

There aren't too many girls around, either. There's Bernice, but she's more like a sister than a potential girlfriend. And there is Claire Johnson, but I think she's ten.

And what about God? Mom used to ask me all the time about accepting Jesus as my Savior. She hasn't asked for a couple of years.

"Hey God! Are you fact or fiction?" I shouted.

Fiction! God isn't out there. God doesn't want to hear from you.

But then, I don't know about that. I think Christ exists but as a Savior. My Savior? I didn't feel like I needed saving.

That's right. You don't need God, Jesus, or saving!

I rolled over and looked across the glass-like water. I glanced into the mirror below and leaped to my feet. I brushed my hands all over my chest and shoulders.

I peered into the water again. Nothing looked back at me. I thought I'd seen a red face with pointed ears looking at me over my shoulder. Now I didn't see anything.

Sufficiently spooked, I pulled the string of trout from the water and headed to the house.

Anna

Tuesday, Late Afternoon, June 1

My stomach flipped and flopped all afternoon. I hoped to finish the cakes before Zachary returned. I jumped at every little noise.

Until about three weeks ago, I didn't think I could bake Zachary a birthday cake. I had almost every ingredient. I lacked baking powder and vanilla extract. Then fortune smiled on me. On our way home from church last Sunday, we saw a family of Tinker's camping by the roadside.

Tinkers were technically illegal. However, the government tolerated them and viewed them inconsequential to their grand plans. Tinkers moved products from the metroplex into the countryside, bringing home-made and hard-to-find goods back. Besides, the guards loved the bribes the Tinkers paid to pass in and out of the city.

On this day, we stopped and chatted. Zachy played with the Tinker children played in a nearby creek. They laughed and splashed each other. Their simple joy made me smile. I asked about baking powder and a large bottle of vanilla extract.

"What do you have to trade?" they asked.

Hmm. What did I have? Not the salt or sugar from last month. Maybe the kitchen knives. We got plenty of eggs and maple syrup.

"Would you take a dozen eggs? Laid just this morning." I stated.

"That is tempting, but it is not enough."

"I could throw in a pint jar of maple syrup."

“Make it two jars of syrup, and you got a deal,” they said.

“Nope, can’t do it. I can add a professional meat cleaver or a small jar of last season’s honey, but I need a second baking powder.”

The husband-and-wife team looked at each other. The wife gave a slight nod. “If you include the knife and the honey, you got a deal.” He stuck out his hand.

“If I go get them, will you still be here for an hour or two?”

“That is no problem. We rest on Sunday and do not travel.”

“Then we have a deal,” and I shook his hand. I had the last two ingredients for Zachary’s cake two hours later.

God does provide!

1-2-3-4 Cake is Zachy’s favorite cake. Those years after the Purge were challenging, and we often moved. On Zachary’s tenth birthday, we found ourselves with this older couple, and the wife made a 1-2-3-4 Cake for him. He loved the light and sweet confection. The cake’s easy-to-remember recipe was not as heavy as many pound cakes.

1 cup of butter

2 cups of sugar

3 cups of wheat flour

4 large eggs

Plus milk, baking powder, vanilla, and salt.

Our farm had no problems with butter, wheat flour, eggs, and milk. Sugar was not a barrier because I learned how to substitute maple syrup for sugar. Still, the baking powder and vanilla created a wall. Getting two containers of baking powder and a large vanilla extract just in time for Zachary’s birthday helped restore my faith in God, at least a little bit.

I expected Jana and Bernice later today, but I had no idea how many others might show. A few more folks might show up because I mentioned it at church the previous Sunday. I tried to speak privately with Jana, but others overheard us talking and invited themselves. So, more were coming, but I had no idea how many.

1-2-3-4 cake is baked in a 9 x 5 loaf bread pan. I had six pans, so I made six cakes and prayed it would be enough. Even if they proved to be too much cake, I doubted Zachy would protest.

I finished Zachy's cake, made the maple drizzle (his favorite topping), and cleaned the kitchen before his return. My excitement wanted to bubble up through my throat and out of my mouth. I had a big smile plastered to my face.

I went to the living room to look out the large picture window. Where is Zachy? I couldn't see him, so I stepped onto the porch. I saw him exit the shed and watched as he approached the house carrying a stringer full of trout. He held up the fish with a smile from ear to ear and turned toward the cleaning hut. While we never kill animals for sport, we must survive. It is better to keep that kind of mess separate from our home. Bears occasionally sniffed around, looking for scraps to eat. We dumped that kind of waste far from the house.

Look how big he is. What happened to that little boy? Light brown hair with eyes to match, tanned skin, and look at those muscles. His quick wit and willingness to chip in made a living with him a joy. However, lately, he has been a bit moody.

People should be arriving in the next hour or so. Zachy finished cleaning the fish and brought them to the house.

Sniff. Sniff! SSNNIFFFF!

"I smell cake!" Zachy exclaimed. "I thought we had no baking powder."

"Remember the Tinkers a few weeks ago?" I asked. "Now you know what I traded for. It would help if you cleaned up. You smell a bit fishy. Our guests will be arriving soon."

Somewhere between 4:30 and 5:00, an assortment of canoes and rowboats pulled up to our dock or beached themselves on the lakeshore. I sent Zachy to greet them. Everyone brought a variety of food and beverages with them.

My closest friend, Jana, was among the guests. Jana, an attractive African-American woman about five and a half feet tall, started barking orders to organize the party. *That's right, and she was a drill sergeant in her former life.* The next thing I knew, food was sorted, drinks poured, and people seated themselves around the bonfire.

"Hi, Anna," Jana greeted.

"Hey, Jana, you're a lifesaver. I didn't expect so many people! How many are out there?"

"Forty or fifty, I guess. Pretty much everybody from church." Jana replied as she scanned the dock area.

"I don't have nearly enough food!" I panicked and scoured the kitchen, looking for something else to set out.

"Relax, Anna. There's plenty of food. Everybody brought at least one dish to pass, plus their place settings and drinks. You need to get out of the kitchen and come enjoy your son's birthday."

"You're right. What are we doing in here?" and I untied my apron.

"But . . . before you do that, I have a question for you," she stated. "What do you think about encouraging Bernie . . . and Zachary . . . you know . . . romantically?"

"What d-do ya mean?" I asked, puzzled.

"The opportunity for a spouse out here is limited at best. Zachary is no longer an awkward boy but a handsome young man. Bernie was twenty-one in February. She's only three years older than he is. That's not too big of an age difference . . . at least I don't think so."

Thump, thump, thump, followed by the screen door creak. "C'mon, Mom, Jana! People are hungry, and we've been waiting for you to come out. What's keepin' you!"

"Nothin' at all," I said. As I passed Jana, I whispered, "We'll talk later."

Everybody cheered as we approached the gathering. "Pastor John, would you give thanks?" I asked.

We gathered in a large circle and clasped hands. “Lord God Almighty, we thank . . .”

I peeked and surveyed those who had joined us. We were a genetically diverse group for such a small community. Before the Purge, we probably wouldn’t have known each other. We would’ve stayed in our communities. The Purge did one thing: it erased the lines between skin color and, to a certain degree, faith. We all suffered immense loss and persecution during the Purge. We all worshipped one God. We all acknowledged Jesus as an actual person. For most of us, he was our Savior, but not for all. Some saw Him as a teacher, rabbi, or prophet.

The chorus of Amens brought me out of my reverie. As people lined up, laughter and conversation floated in the air—fish, venison, wild carrots, potatoes, bread, and more disappeared as the guests filled their plates.

About an hour before dark, people began their goodbyes and drifted home. Nobody wanted to travel after dark. With the departure of most of humanity, mountain lions and wolves moved back into the area. Usually, they didn’t bother humans. However, mountain lions hunted at night, and no one wanted to face them after dark.

Jana and Bernice helped clean up and were the last to leave.

“Hey, Bernie, why don’t you give Zachy a big birthday hug before we leave?” Jana encouraged. Bernie glared at her mother, then approached and embraced Zachary. Jana gave me a conspiratorial wink and turned toward the door.

Zachy and Bernice? Hmm, they do make a cute couple. Bernice’s father was of European descent, so her complexion was lighter than Jana’s. Bernice got her curly brown hair from her father and her rich brown eyes from her mother.

The air temperature dropped as the sun went behind the mountains. I closed the windows and doors. I still locked them after all these years of living in the wilderness. There hadn’t been any home invasions for years. Still, you can never be too cautious.

I sat and put my feet up, happily exhausted.

Zachy walked in from the kitchen and plopped onto the sofa opposite me.

“Okay, Mom, spill it. How’d you die?”

Instead of responding, I raised my finger, indicating he needed to wait. Then I left the room and went to the bedroom closet. Far in the back, I found the old duffle bag.

I rummaged through it as I returned to the living room.

“Here it is,” I said and handed a book to Zachy. “If you want to know everything and if you want to understand the nightmares I’ve been having, you need to read that. Your grandfather knew people would not believe his story, so he wrote it like a fiction book. *Demons and Dreams* is that book. Please read it. Remember, everything in it really happened. Then you’ll know how I died and lived again. You’ll also be able to understand my nightmares, and we’ll be able to talk more.”

“I don’t understand why you can’t just tell me,” he whined.

“Understanding will come with reading. I suggest you start reading,” I encouraged. “I am exhausted and heading to bed.”

Zachy stood and walked over to me. “Okay, I’ll read. And thank you for everything you did today. I didn’t expect the cake. It tasted SSSOOOO good; I’m gonna cut the last one. Good night. I love you!” He engulfed me in his muscular arms and turned for the kitchen.

I turned and headed for the bedroom with a tear in my eye.

Zachary Tuesday Night, June 1

I watched Mom walk to the bedroom. I lengthened the wick in the oil lamp so I could read better.

The title read *Demons and Dreams* by Caleb Kincade. The book felt old, and the pages yellowed. It had been read several times, as evidenced by the dog-eared pages. I carefully turned it over and read the back cover.

Mom says this will help me understand, but understand what? Her dreams? Her near-death?

That's crazy! How is a fiction book going to enlighten you? You already understand how the world works now. What is this old story going to show you?

I need to read at least some of it to get an explanation from Mom.

NO! That is a stupid idea.

Maybe it is stupid. If nothing else, it is something new to read. I might find it entertaining.

With that, I opened the book to Chapter One.

The sun peeked over Elk Lake when I closed the book. I couldn't put it down. If the book's events were actual, that explains the scar on her stomach. I asked about it several years ago, and she said it was nothing.

I stood, blew out the oil lamp, and walked to the mirror in the bathroom. I looked long and hard into it. I turned to look at my back. I leaned towards the mirror and looked closely at my face. *I need to shave today.* I shaved a couple of times a week. *I doubt I'll ever grow a full beard.*

I closed my eyes, and, in my mind, I imagined lying on the dock yesterday and gazing into the water. *What did I see peeking over my shoulder?*

You saw nothing! It was your teenage imagination.

I don't know. The book described small demons riding on a person's shoulders and whispering in their ears to influence them toward something evil.

Do you know how crazy that sounds?

Yes, I do. But am I arguing with myself or a demon?

Anna

Tuesday Night, June 1

As I retired to my bedroom, my stomach tightened. *Will there be demons in my dreams tonight?* I could feel the lack of sleep catching up to me. I went through my bedtime routine, brushed my teeth, and took a tepid sponge bath. The room temperature in June wasn't too bad. During January, it felt like you were washed with snow.

I lay on the bed. And I thought about Dad's book, *Demons and Dreams*. As a teen, I read the book several times and often discussed it with him.

I ran through the different scenes in my head. I remembered how we struggled, but God provided for us at the right moment. We all grew spiritually during those trials. And even if we had died, we knew the end was the beginning of a new life.

You know, Anna, you haven't prayed in a while.

I don't know where that thought came from, but it was true. My faith waned over the last ten years or so. I went to church, sang, and prayed, but my thoughts turned to worldly survival the minute I left the service.

I slid out of bed and onto my knees. With folded hands, I prayed.

Dear Jesus, Forgive me for my absence. Renew my faith in you. Let me have ears that hear and eyes that see you in all we do. Please keep the demons at bay.

I knelt a little longer without thinking about anything specific. I did thank God for Zachy and the fine young man he has become. I felt myself

drifting to sleep, and if I stayed there much longer, I'd spend the night on the floor.

With a final *Amen*, I crawled back into bed, and for the first time in months, I wasn't afraid to let sleep take over.

"Anna . . . Aaaaanna. Wake up, Sweetheart." I felt a hand shaking my shoulder.

"Aww, Mom, can't I sleep a little longer?"

"No, Sweetie, our time is short, and there is much to be said. Now wake up!"

I felt both sides of the bed shift and sag like someone sat on each side of the mattress. I opened my eyes, and to my right sat my mom, Caroline, and my adopted dad, Caleb, on the left.

This can't be! It must be a dream!

"It's not a dream, Sweetheart," said Dad. "It is a dream, as in you're asleep and in your bed. Think of it as a dream plus."

"We wanted to come sooner, but you had drifted away from God, and He would not let us approach you until you acted and rekindled your faith. Your prayer tonight accomplished that," Mom said. "And in the days to come, your faith will be tested. You must cling to God like never before. God has put the outcome of the coming trials into your hands. The possibility of failure is real."

"The time is near when the Soldier for God will be called into service again," Dad said.

"What? I don't understand. Aren't you already the Soldier for God?"

"My time has passed. God has chosen another," he said.

"Is . . . is it me? Or Zachy?"

"I don't know. All I know is the message we were to deliver," Dad responded. "You are to retrieve the Armor of God."

“But I left it behind years ago.”

“We know, and your choice saddened me. Not that you left the armor behind, but your reason for leaving it behind. The way God allowed our death to happen angered you, and leaving the armor behind was your first step away from God.”

“You’re right. I was angry. I watched that evil man place the pistol against each of your foreheads. The boom of the gun and watching your heads explode. The thud of your bodies as they hit the ground wounded me more than any bullet could. Every night I closed my eyes, that scene replayed on my eyelids for at least a year. If Zachary didn’t need me, I don’t know if I’d still be here!”

Mom placed her hand on my cheek, like when I was a little girl. I longed for those sweet caresses. “We know, Sweetie, and we are sorry you witnessed our deaths, but we need you to focus on what’s to come and not what’s been. Can you do that?”

I nodded.

“We don’t know if these are the end times for Earth, but great evil is growing. The Soldier for God will be raised, and those around that person will be battling for the world’s souls. What happened in Stanton is tiny compared to what is coming. We don’t have any details and only know what God has told us to relay to you.”

I pushed Mom’s hand aside and scrambled out of bed. “What if I don’t want to fetch the Armor of God? Why can’t He transport it here? Why does he need puny humans doing his dirty work?” I raged.

Dad came around the bed and joined Mom and me. He said, “We don’t know the answers to those questions. You know that God loves us more than can be described. He does everything for a reason, and this is YOUR task. The sooner you accept that and start your journey, the greater your chances for success.”

“I’m so hurt and angry and so glad you’re here. I miss you so . . .” I buried my face into my hands, and the tears squeezed between my fingers.

I felt two sets of warm arms embrace me. Their love tangibly flowed through their embrace. That love pushed out the darkness that had invaded my heart that awful night.

The tears stopped, but I never wanted to end their embrace.

Mom whispered, "Day is about to break, and we must leave." They released me and stepped back.

"Nooo!" I cried.

"Understand that we are always nearby watching. God is with you. Cling to Him when the darkness surrounds you," Dad said.

My parents became translucent.

"Wait! Do I take Zachy with me?"

You can take whomever you need to . . . ,” Mom’s voice faded away. If there were more, I’d never know now.

I found myself alone, standing next to my bed.

Had I been awake or asleep that whole time?

It didn’t matter. I decided to get up and dressed. It was time to feed the animals anyway.

Zachary

Wednesday Morning, June 2

I heard rustling from the bedroom, and the door creaked. Mom entered the living room, fully dressed, on her way to feed the animals.

“Did you go to bed last night?”

“No. I was going to read Chapter One and stop, and then I couldn’t. Did everything really happen, like the book said? Is that how you died?”

“It’s all true,” Mom said wistfully. “That’s how I died. My spirit spoke with my parents about how God gave me a choice through Remiel, the angel. I chose to stay, but my six-year-old mind was tempted to go. I can still remember how beautiful it was and how loved I fe . . . It . . .”

Mom quickly wiped a tear from each eye.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” I asked. *She looked . . . I don’t know . . . different today.*

“I-I had an . . . emotional night, and I need to think about it for a while,” she said. “I’ll tell you about it later over dinner?”

“Do you want any help with the animals?”

“No, Sweetie, why don’t you go and sleep for a few hours,” she said. “You must be exhausted.”

Now I know something is up. Mom always wants me to help with the animals.

But she was right. I was exhausted but also felt guilty for not helping with the animals. Instead, I went to the kitchen, threw a log in the wood-

burning stove/oven, and scrambled some eggs with homemade sausage. I set out our last jar of strawberry jam next to some bread slices. I surveyed the table, grabbed a piece of bread, slathered it with jam, and went to bed.

Shortly after I closed my eyes, I found myself surrounded by white fog. Shadowy silhouettes came into view and departed just as quickly. They did not come close enough for me to see any detail.

Another shadow approached.

“Excuse me! Can you help me?” The figure shook its head, turned, and vanished into the fog.

Now, I’m getting angry. *I’m asleep, right? I must be dreaming.*

It felt like an actual place. My mind was awake and alert, and my senses heightened.

Another shadow entered my view and stopped.

“Hello, Zachary,” it said.

“Uh, hello. Where am I? Who are you?” *The shape looked and sounded like a man.*

“You are in an . . . in-between place. And you wouldn’t believe it if I told you who I was,” the shadow responded. “I am here against the will of others to warn you.”

“Warn me? About what?”

“My book describes actual events, and the story your mother will tell you this evening is equally true,” he continued. “You will face seemingly insurmountable challenges over the coming months. Cling to your faith and trust in God.”

“Know that I love you . . .” he opened his arms in an all-encompassing way, “that this is all real. I wasn’t supposed to tell you this much. You are a smart man. Figure it out. Dwell upon it and be alert for possibilities and opportunities. I’ve got to go, and so do you. Goodbye, Zachary.”

He turned, and his voice faded as the fog filled the space where he stood.

“WAIT! COME BACK!” *Whump!* I hit the floor after rolling out of bed. Unhurt and confused, I jumped up, whirled around, and recognized my room.

A dream! It's just a silly dream. None of it is real!

It didn't feel like a dream. My mind churned with thoughts and emotions, trying to understand it all.

I stood there muttering, “he said, ‘his book.’ Was that Grandpa Caleb? Then Mom will tell me a story later, which is true too.” Out the window, a few clouds lazily floated past in the mid-morning sky. Falling back to sleep seemed unlikely, so I dressed and headed to the kitchen.

I needed time to think. For me, that meant a hike to the top of a mountain behind our home. Our home faced Elk Lake, but the back door led to a valley. At the far end of that valley lay my favorite mountain to climb. It took about three hours to reach the mountain peak from the house.

I wasn't sure where Mom was, and I didn't want to explain what had happened yet. We have a piece of shale on the porch that we use as a chalkboard. I wrote my destination and approximate return time. My day-pack sat next to me. I grabbed it, stuffed a water bottle, bread, and salted meat into my bag, and strode out the back door. These backpacks carried all the essentials for survival. Mom and I always kept them stocked and ready to go when we left home. You just never knew what would happen out in the wild.

The morning sun warmed my back until I reached the tree line and entered the cool woods. The cheerful creek babbled as I followed it up the valley.

I think best when I am alone and talking aloud. I think it slows down my thoughts to explore them more fully. Today was no different.

“Grandpa Caleb . . . ” I decided to name the silhouette from my dream, “said we were in ‘an in-between place,’ but in between where? This life

and next? Heaven and Hell? Was it like the Dream World from *Demons and Dreams*?”

It's none of those. It's a meaningless dream!

I walked on autopilot as I thought out loud to myself. “Other people were in that place. They were coming and going, but coming from where and going to . . . I don't know.”

“*Demons and Dreams* made Heaven and Hell seem like real places. I had considered them more myth than fact . . . maybe they are real? If they are ‘real’ places, do I need to consider demons and angels ‘real’?”

NO, we . . . demons and angels are NOT real beings!

“And if those creatures exist . . . then God and Jesus must exist,” I concluded.

I stopped in my tracks. I stood at the base of my mountain. I knew in my spirit that I had spoken with Grandpa Caleb, and the “in-between” place existed. Mom said *Demons and Dreams* was factual. She also believed and taught me that Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God existed. My head kept telling me that was false. But . . . now . . . I think . . . I believed her.

NOT TRUE! NOT TRUE! All is false! There is nothing!

Grandpa's book and the Bible claimed you must believe and acknowledge Jesus as your Savior to gain Heaven. If all of that is accurate, then logically, I must . . .

NNNNOOOOO!!!! You mustn't . . .

I wanted to kneel. I needed to kneel, but my knees locked up and kept me standing. “What is going on? God help me! Please!”

He's Mine!

NO, HE IS MINE! A more powerful thought deafened my mental argument.

My knees buckled, I dropped to the ground, and my hands reached skyward.

“Jesus, I've been a fool and didn't believe you could be as in the Bible. I want to acknowledge and accept you as my one and only Savior. Please

show me your will and your way and forgive my sins. Help me to trust and become more like you.”

I felt a rush like a wave of love and beauty crashed over me. Swept up in the emotions, I collapsed and fell forward and wept. I wept like a small child in my mother's arms. Pent-up fears, doubts, and anger washed out of my spirit and replaced with love and acceptance. I don't know how long I lay crumpled in the middle of the trail by the mountain.

I must have fallen asleep. When I opened my eyes, I discovered it was dusk. There's no way I can make it home before dark. I had just enough light left to make a fire and a camp for the night.

I envisioned Mom sitting at home, wringing her hands, afraid that something horrible had happened to me. Instead, something incredible had occurred.

“Dear God, please protect me tonight and give my mother peace!” I found some dead twigs on the forest floor and dug out the flint fire starter from my backpack. Sparks flew and ignited my pile of dead grass and leaves. In no time, a cheerful fire warmed my feet.

I unintentionally picked an excellent campsite. It sat at the mountain's base, in a hollow space against a giant boulder with an overhanging ledge. The rocks protected me from the wind and offered shelter from any rain. A large, round stone next to the fire became my seat.

My stomach growled, and I opened my backpack. *I guess my lunch just became my dinner.*

Plastic bags and containers were a luxury if you could find ones that haven't become brittle over time. I pulled the tin from my backpack and pried the lid off. Clean cloth napkins kept my bread and salted venison apart, and the somewhat stale bread and meat filled the hole in my belly. Both required some strenuous chewing, and I took my time eating.

I found a stick to poke the fire. The hypnotic flames made me tired, and I thought about lying down. I cleared an area between the boulder offering shelter and the fire.

I am so glad Mom and I carried backpacks whenever we left the house. They had all the necessities to survive in the woods. These items included an old canvas tarp, the fire starter, 25 feet of rope, and a hunting knife, among other things.

In my cleared area, I laid the tarp down. It was about eight feet long and five feet wide. It's not super warm, but it's big enough to wrap me up and offer some protection from the weather. The backpack became my pillow.

I hope Mom's not too worried. God, please help her know I am okay.
And with that final prayer, I drifted off to sleep.

Anna

Wednesday Evening, June 2

I lived my worst nightmare!

Where are you, Zachary?

He should have been home hours ago. I have never felt so vulnerable. What do I do? Look for him? Wait? Do I go to Jana's for help?

I always feared a day like this. I, being a single parent, am now separated from my child. No one else to help me make decisions. No one else to help search. I didn't know what to do.

I haven't been this afraid since the night Mom and Dad died!

Outside, starlight dimly illuminated the yard. *He's an intelligent kid. He won't stumble around in the dark. I bet he's made camp and hunkered down for the night.*

The worry I felt threatened to overwhelm my mind and emotions. For every rational thought I had, there were two irrational thoughts to feed my fears. *I wish I had told Zachy about my dream with his grandparents last night instead of putting it off. Now, I may never get to tell him!*

There's one thing you haven't done.

One thing? What could it . . . yes . . .

I knelt in the living room and bowed my head. *Dear Jesus, I pray for a hedge of protection around Zachary tonight. Please bring him home to me tomorrow. Please let me have the faith to know he'll be alright. Amen*

It was not a long or elaborate prayer, but it was sincere. Then it happened. It hadn't happened for a long time. I felt at peace; a calm came over my spirit that I couldn't understand. I knew Zachary would be home tomorrow. I did not need to live in fear and worry. I needed to trust God in whatever came.

My hours of worry were for naught, and I headed to bed.

Zachary

Thursday Morning, June 3

A chorus of songbirds woke me at daybreak. My empty stomach competed with my full bladder for attention. I had no more food, so I attended to my bladder.

I walked about five or six steps from my camp to some small shrubs at the base of a different boulder. I unbuttoned my pants and began to water a clump of weeds.

I jumped a foot and wet myself when I heard, “Hey! What the Hell are you doing!” and a small red missile launched towards me. It latched onto my face, and the creature screamed. Its small hands smoked as it pushed away from me.

The creature floated away and landed on the boulder above me. It was the size of a small monkey. It rapidly blew on its smoking hands, trying to cool them down. Its arms and legs were too long for its torso. It had smooth, maroon-colored skin, bright white pointed teeth, and was hairless. It stood about eighteen inches tall. It had no . . . I shook my head and looked again. It had no reproductive organs. That’s nuts! I guess it is an “It.”

“What a disaster! Could this day get any worse?” the creature complained, and then it pointed at me. “First, I lose him, and then he pees on me, and now my hands are scorched. What else could go wrong.”

What is that? Is it? No, it can't be. Is that a demon! It looks like the demon's Grandpa's book. It's not as ugly as I expected. But what is it talking about?

I should have been afraid. Above me squatted a live demon straight from Hell! But curiosity overrode any fear I had.

“What do you mean, ‘You lost him’?”

I jumped again when the demon screamed and rocketed up into the air.

“He sees me! . . . No, no, no, no, this is not good . . . not good . . .,” Our eyes met. “Do you see me?” it asked.

“Yes, I can see and hear you.”

“NNOOO!!!” the little monster began to blubber and sob like a two-year-old who didn’t get his way.

The tears and the wailing went on and on.

“HEY! DEMON!” Its head popped up. “I thought you’d be some evil monster, yet you’re bawling like a baby. Stop it and talk to me!”

“I’m not supposed to talk to you. You’re not to see me. You’re not supposed to know I exist. I’m supposed to keep steering you away from knowledge and desire for God. But no, you had to be strong-willed and ask Jesus to be your Savior. You belong to God now. I am an embodiment of my name. I failed my assignment. The rest of the demons will torment me for this epic failure!” and the tears started again.

“What’s your name demon?” I asked.

“Belial,” it responded.

“What does that mean?”

“WITHOUT WORTH!” It launched itself off the rock, circled above me, and rained a few tears down on me. Each tear produced a “Pfft” and disappeared.

“Belial, you gotta stop. Get a hold of yourself and focus on me.”

Sniff, sniff. It stopped circling and hovered above me. “What do you want to know, human?” it asked.

“Was that you in my reflection at the lake?”

“Yes, that should have been my first clue that something had changed.”

“How long have you been with me?”

“I came to you when you were twelve. At that time in a boy's life, the hormones and brain chemistry change, producing a period in your life where you question everything. I had no difficulty keeping your focus off God and on the world. But there was a change in your thinking over the past year. Keeping you distracted became harder and harder.”

“Why did your hands smoke when you grabbed my face?” I asked.

“My flesh burns when I touch the skin of Christ's children, causing me great pain,” Belial said. “Questions, questions, too many questions. I shouldn't be talking to you.”

“If you find talking to me so horrible, why don't you leave?” I responded.

“BECAUSE I CAN'T,” Belial yelled. “I-I left another assignment after failing years ago. My supervisor has a long memory, as do all angels and demons. My boss BOUND ME TO YOU.”

“You're bound to me? What does that mean?” I asked.

“You might call it a magic spell. It doesn't matter. What matters is that I can't wander more than 100 yards from you. I am connected to you whether you lived or died, whether I succeeded or failed, or until a superior demon releases me,” Belial said as it landed in a heap on the rock above me.

“What happens if you go beyond 100 yards?”

“More questions! Can't you stop with the questions . . . I guess it doesn't matter. I'm stuck here,” moaned Belial. “Pain. The further I go, the more pain I experience. If I persist and continue, then I am unmade.”

“You mean die,” I replied.

“Demons and angels don't die. We can be injured and feel pain. When we battle, and one of us is 'slain,' we are automatically removed from the battle and returned to Heaven or Hell. There, we heal until we are whole again. Then, we return to service. Only God has the power to unmake an

angel or demon at will. He has never done that I know of, but He made us so He can unmake us.

“Satan can unmake a demon under certain situations. One of them is with a binding spell. It is always used as punishment,” a calmer Belial explained.

“So, when you say you’re ‘unmade,’ . . .”

“It’ll be like I never existed,” Belial finished. “We do not have a spirit that persists after our worldly life like you do. We can follow orders and work here or suffer with everybody else back in Hell. For demons, it is a place of pain and pleasure. We love tormenting human souls, but we also suffer. It is much better here than there. The only other way to escape the binding is when you die. When that happens, I will return directly to Hell. With my record, they may never let me out again.”

The morning sun warmed the world around me. I had absorbed a lot of information. The dejected Belial sat on the boulder, and I had an overwhelming urge to go home. I felt terrible for that little demon, yet thankful to God for delivering me from its influence. Our intertwined futures looked uncertain at best.

“C’mon, Belial, let’s pack up and head home.”

On November 13, 2009, I experienced the nightmare in Chapter One of Demons and Dreams. 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.

Demons and Angels, while still inspired by God, were inspired in smaller doses.

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

