



A Miraculous Story

Pride Island

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Are “coincidences” always merely accidental and random; or should we consider that, sometimes, maybe a supernatural factor is in play? Might a transcendent Source issue directives to *alter* certain things—like *time*, for example—just to “make a point”? *Pride Island* will cause you to ponder these and other possibilities!

SUMMARY

What does it take for one man to relinquish his *pride*? Colton’s past is reviewed instantaneously in his mind, during an apparent automobile accident...as he feels himself “sliding off of a slippery time line and into the infinite nebula of forever.” But is the freak collision on the freeway *real*, or is it merely an *hallucination* caused by the effects of an illegal drug? In any case, in one critical moment, Colton recalls an entire story—“Pride Island”—which he had finished reading *that very day*.

You will venture through the riveting story of “Pride Island” as it streaks across Colton’s mind—discovering, before long, that the main character, Pierce, bears an uncanny resemblance to Colton. From the moment Pierce is awakened out of a fantastic dream by a reverberating *BOOM!*—“sucked out of his bizarre phantasm, like a paper man on a magazine page being ripped away into a vacuum cleaner hose”—you will find it difficult to walk away until you have read the unique, inimitable conclusion!

In an early chapter, you will witness one of the most exciting, down-to-the-wire basketball games you ever have experienced! Then...you will progress from glimpsing the eerie gateway to *hell* and entering the creepy domain of *Pride Island*, to journeying through the consummate realm of *heaven* (led by an angel) and all the way to the supernatural, miraculous *finale*...which is much too unfathomable even to guess! You also will depart with a greater awareness of spiritual intervention into personal affairs. After reading the opening, action-packed chapter, *resist* the compelling urge to *vault* prematurely to the final chapter...*no cheating now!*

Chapter 1

“She deserved it...they *all* deserved it!” brayed Colton. Lighting up a joint, laced with the hallucinogenic PCP, and steering his one-week-old red Corvette onto the 405 Freeway, he issued forth another vociferous tirade: “Why should I hang out where I don’t get any respect! Any guy would be a *fool* if he did!” Colton’s fury boiled hotter as he obsessed over what had happened only ten minutes before.

Although alone in the car, he headed straight for the carpool lane, reserved for cars with two or more passengers, boldly defying any legal consequences. “I hope the police catch me alone in the diamond lane! Maybe a telecopter will pick up the high-speed chase and put it on TV. Then maybe that *ditz* will pay some attention to me!”

Once in the left-most lane, Colton found himself behind a sluggard in a car with an out-of-state license plate. “Stupid *tour-on!* Get movin’ you *dimwit!*” (“Tour-on” was short for “tourist-moron,” a term applied by Colton to any driver in front of him who prevented him from speeding.)

Wishing—almost believing—that the driver could see and hear him, he shook his finger repeatedly at the exit coming up in less than a quarter of a mile and continued to rant, “If you’re gonna drive like a snail in Southern California, *get in the right-hand lane* or else *get off the freakin’ freeway!*” He was incensed that anyone would obstruct the passage of Robert Colton Lowe, III.

The second that Colton saw the illuminated street exit sign, he realized he was headed south instead of north. “Incredible! *Un-be-liev-a-ble!*” he roared through gritted teeth. Peripherally, he detected a car alongside him to his right. Anxiety briefly gripped him, recalling an episode in a manuscript, “Pride Island,” which he had finished reading that very day. He felt trapped.

Jerking his head reflexively to the right, he was prepared to slam on the brakes if he saw what he dreaded seeing the most at that instant: a rifle leveled at him. But it was only a silver Porsche filled with high school-aged teenagers, most with their eyes glued to the 33-year-old narcissist. He could see them clearly because their interior light was on.

He observed two of the girls laughing, and one guy was shaking a finger at him in the same ludicrous manner in which Colton had been pointing toward the street exit. Two others were eyeing him apprehensively, as though they suspected he had escaped from an insane asylum. But one girl—the closest one to him in the back seat—stared at him, wide-eyed, curiously paralyzed.

Having seen that enamored look before, Colton speculated that she never had beheld such a good-looking guy in her life. Nevertheless, the signals and gesticulations of her companions made him feel like a donkey, and he hated that. “Cretins!” he shouted. He pondered whether or not, if he had had a loaded gun, he might have fired a few rounds at them—though he thought maybe he would not have because of that girl who seemed to be so captivated by him.

In any case, Colton was not going to let these jerks cause him to miss the upcoming freeway exit. Glancing in the rearview mirror, he estimated the nearest headlights to be at least 30 to 40 feet behind him. He applied the brakes, permitting his sports car to slow down enough to change lanes, just grazing the rear bumper of the carload of “cretins.”

Colton then cut across the next two lanes, barely making the freeway exit and almost causing an accident in the rash maneuver. The driver he carelessly beat to the off-ramp sounded his horn behind Colton all the way up the ramp to the traffic light, while Colton shook his clenched fist in the air. “Lucky for you the light is green, or I’d go back and pop your stupid face!” Colton snarled. But it did not matter. The other vehicle turned right, while Colton’s car screeched to the left, crossed over the freeway, ran through the next stoplight, and entered the northbound freeway lanes.

Colton was trembling a bit from his little reckless driving episode, enough so that he stayed out of the carpool lane but still continued to speed down the middle of the highway at 85 mph. With almost no traffic in his way, he could refocus his thoughts on that green-eyed “airhead” at the party. “Who did she think she was, anyway?” he growled, applying a little more pressure to the accelerator.

A still, small inner “voice”—maybe it was the remnant of a constantly seared conscience—seemed to reason, *You knew she was a nice girl. Why didn’t you make a proper advance? What if you had seen another guy approaching your sister the way you were moving in on that girl?*

“I woulda punched his brains out, but her brother wasn’t there.”

Aren’t you employing a double-standard? How can that be right?

“Maybe, but I’m entitled...*I Am* entitled! I have that ‘look’ people like!”

He wished that convicting “voice” would shut up; but it continued, though it became even less discernible. *How is it that you are entitled? If you demand respect, why were you unwilling to extend the same respect to her?*

“I Am Who I Am! That bleach-blonde bimbo wanted me! And every guy was envious of me, because every other girl wanted me too! That broad was being graced by my attention, and she should have felt honored to get it!”

So you disgraced and dishonored her by placing your hand where you knew she did not want it to be, especially in front of all those people. How could you have expected not to have been met with some resistance?

“*No...NO...NO!!!*” Colton exploded, trying to drown out the annoying inner “voice” and to quell that troublesome feeling of guilt. “*Nobody* refuses me and gets away with it...not *her*, not *anybody!*” He recollected how she gently had moved his hand, softly stating, “No, please.

Let's just talk, OK?" He seethed with rage again, inducing a curious sensation of lightheadedness.

Almost imperceptibly, the inaudible "voice" seemed to make one last entreaty of reason: *Wouldn't it have been better to have overcome your **pride**, or is this impossible for you? You could have said something like, "Sorry, I guess that last drink affected my better judgment," and then continued the conversation. No one would have thought anymore about it. In any case, you might have dealt with the situation more appropriately than to have knocked the glass of wine out of her hand, called her that ugly name, then yelled, "This party bites!" and stormed out. How much of a positive impression did that make?*

"I won't be embarrassed by *anyone!* I have a *right* to be proud, because *I'm exceptional!* Anyone can tell that just by looking at me!" Swiveling down his sun visor, Colton reconfirmed this to himself by admiring his phenomenally handsome face in the mirror. He insisted on having a mirror on the driver's visor, though this particularly oversized reflector, with extra illumination, had to be specially ordered.

Smirking, he recalled how, in front of a handful of customers, he had insulted and shamed the car salesman, who was not certain if that size of mirror would fit. Colton had called him an "imbecile" and had suggested that he flip hamburgers at McDonald's instead.

With his fingers, Colton combed back, into their proper place, a few short strands of black hair dangling over the right side of his forehead; he did not like to look "lopsided." As his turquoise eyes darted back and forth from one ear to the other, he reassured himself that they were matched. Sometimes he was preoccupied with the notion that one ear might be protruding a millimeter or so more than the other one. But he would not worry about *that* again.

The loudest blasting of Colton's favorite B-52's compact disk coincided with a sudden unanticipated swerving of his car, as the preliminary effects of a tremendous earthquake began to be evident. It felt like he had four flat tires.

Gripped with dire consternation, he flipped up his visor, only to discern a gargantuan, orange and black steel crane—which he instantly supposed had been hurled by the quake off of the overpass under repair ahead—crashing down and embedding itself across three freeway lanes. His was the middle lane. *Did I buckle my seat belt when I left the party?* raced through his mind; but, no—his raging anger, unfortunately, had precluded his having done so.

Colton momentarily felt troubled that, at the time he would be found, he would be less identifiable than he would have been had a seat belt been restraining him. The precious moments before impact began with two lucid thoughts; the first was *Man, am I gonna get messed up!* and the second was *What'll happen after this?*

An instant after he perceived the collision had occurred, he presumed that his perfectly symmetrical face was shattering the windshield. In the twinkling of an eye, Colton's mind reviewed his past—the good and the bad, the happy and the sad, the few things done for other

people and the countless things done for himself. Mostly, he recalled the mischief he had created as a boy and the hearts he had enjoyed breaking as a young man, the ways he had manipulated people and the lies he had told to get what would profit him, the commitments he had made and broken, and the things—and women—he had taken that were not his.

And what do I have to show for it all? he reflected. Colton had had virtually everything he had wanted; yet, ultimately, he possessed nothing. Eclipsed by the bad, any good he had done flickered like a tiny 5-watt bulb. His entire life seemed fruitless and worthless in the radiant, white-hot spotlight of eternity.

Could time have “decelerated” abruptly, giving him the distinctively peculiar sensation of being trapped in a transitory “time warp”? Or, rather, had time only *seemed* to slow down but, somehow, his mind had speeded up? He felt like an infinitesimal photon of light which, while propelling effortlessly through the air, suddenly enters a water-filled aquarium. Though remaining on its set course, it undergoes an ephemeral state of slow-motion.

Can this be? he wondered. It felt like he was sliding off of a slippery time line and into the infinite nebula of forever. He was powerless. Yet, in any case, *something bizarre was happening.*

Perceiving that his head was penetrating the glass, he became reconciled to the horror that, shortly, he would meet the huge, orange and black metal monster face to face. A moment later, that *entire* telling tale—“Pride Island”—a novel which he had completed reading earlier that afternoon, traveled across his mind. He remembered...he remembered....

Chapter 2

Pierce reluctantly wore his glasses to the health club on Friday; one of his soft contact lenses had torn. Although his black metal frames looked great, he disliked the “unnatural” appearance they imparted. Plus, they crept down his nose as he progressed through his advanced weight workout.

Nevertheless, he felt compelled to wear them at the gym, since it was important to him that he be able to survey himself in the mirror and to ascertain who might be watching him. Besides intensifying the grimacing expressions on his face, it also helped him to squeeze in two or three more reps if he felt he had an audience.

After showering and then drying off in the locker room, Pierce wiped his glasses with the damp towel wrapped around his waist. Geoff was a few feet away, in front of a mirror, brushing his hair. Pierce and Geoff had seen each other around the gym for 5 or 6 years, but they never had conversed. Neither was very talkative. Geoff inquired, “Say, you normally wear contacts? I’ve never seen you with glasses before.”

“Yeah, ordinarily,” replied Pierce. They both offered amicable smiles as they exchanged glances in the mirror. “These things are really a hindrance,” Pierce continued. He held up his glasses to view a fluorescent light through the lenses to see if he had removed all the smudges. “I’ve got an appointment in a few days with an optometrist to replace the lens I tore.”

“Oh, yeah?” responded Geoff, turning toward Pierce and continuing. “Contacts are great, aren’t they?”

“*Absolutely!* I see better with them than with glasses, and they’re great for sports. I hate playin’ basketball with glasses, ’cause they cut out so much of my peripheral vision. Plus...they hurt my nose if something hits ’em.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve worn contacts for a long time, but I’ve always had rigid lenses. I find them a lot easier to take care of than soft....”

“But don’t they pop out of your eyes sometimes?” Pierce interjected.

“Well, they can if your face gets whacked, like in contact sports. But normally they shouldn’t...not if they’re fitted properly.”

“Don’t they hurt, though?”

“Mmm...they shouldn’t if the edges are polished smoothly.” Asking to see Pierce’s glasses, Geoff took them and, with one eye closed, held them about two feet away. He rotated them one way and then the other, looking at the same fluorescent light that Pierce had viewed through the lenses.

Pierce, mostly dressed by then, began to comb his hair and resumed the conversation with Geoff's reflection in the mirror. With a glint of curiosity in his voice, he inquired, "You an optician or what?"

"Optometrist," replied Geoff, returning the glasses to Pierce.

"Yeah?...*no kidding?*" Glasses on, Pierce straightened them as he looked in the mirror.

"Yep. If I had my own place, I'd get you a new contact lens at cost. But I work for an HMO, and you'd have to be a member for me to examine you."

"You don't happen to work for VHG, do you?" Pierce queried.

"If you mean Valley Health Group, yeah I do," replied Geoff, zipping closed his gym bag and moving toward the door. "Is that your health plan?"

"Sure is! You're not by any chance Doctor Hutton, are you?" Pierce smiled inquisitively, slinging his bag strap over his shoulder. He joined Geoff in stride as Geoff passed by on his way out.

"At your service! Is your appointment with *me*?"

"I'm sure that's the name the receptionist gave me. Can you believe it?"

"Small world!" replied Geoff, though he was not at all surprised, as he perceived "coincidences" merely as examples of divine Will. "When's your appointment?"

"Monday afternoon...I think at five...bet I'll be your last patient."

"Yeah, you are. Oh...be sure to bring your glasses with you...along with your most recent prescriptions for glasses and contact lenses, if you have 'em. We can determine if your eyes have changed and, if so, how much."

"Good idea. I'm pretty sure I know where those prescriptions are," replied Pierce. "Hey, Doc...what'd you see when you looked through my glasses?" As they departed together, Geoff related that, along with low to moderate nearsightedness, Pierce had only very mild astigmatism in both eyes.

Geoff added that, on Monday, he would give Pierce some explanatory handouts that he had generated for his patients. Geoff took great pleasure in providing people with information which might enhance the knowledge and understanding of their eyes, vision, and visual hygiene.

"OK, Doctor Hutton...have a good weekend. By the way, I'm Pierce Nevin," he announced, extending his hand. "I coach basketball at Foothill High—we've got a decisive game tonight—and I also teach science."

Accepting Pierce's right hand heartily with his own, Geoff returned, "It's a pleasure. Call me 'Jeff,' OK?...that's G-E-O-F-F. By the way, Coach...I hope you win your game tonight! And, while driving with those glasses, watch out for other cars in your periphery when you change lanes!"

Walking toward his car, Pierce waved his right hand. "OK, Geoff!"

As Geoff departed, he contemplated some of the optometric handouts he had created, considering which ones should be the most helpful and informative to Pierce. He felt curiously at ease around Pierce and believed they had the potential to relate to each other on a deeper intellectual—maybe even spiritual—level. He hoped that they would.

Pierce was unusually enthusiastic to have made a new acquaintance at the gym, something he ordinarily refrained from doing—but not because it was difficult for him. With his strikingly good looks and absorbing personality, practically everybody wanted to get to know him. Rather, he was more of a loner. And because he often was wary of people—believing that most of them were drawn to him by his external appearance rather than by his character and integrity—he felt comfortable relating only to a select few.

Suddenly, a familiar apprehension in Pierce's spirit resurfaced as he noticed the small, orange clasp envelope with black trim which had been placed on his car windshield behind a wiper. He paused and, with a sense of trepidation, took a deep breath before retrieving the envelope. Upon opening it, he found a cassette tape. After starting up his car, he reluctantly inserted the tape into the tape deck before driving away.



Coach Nevin walked into the Foothill High School gym at 7:00 a.m. on Monday for a skull session, an hour prior to the beginning of his first period class. He was greeted by the blissful faces of the boys' basketball team.

The team captain and point guard, Jerry Wells, shouted, "Let's hear it for Coach Nevin!" causing the entire Warrior team to gather around Pierce and, between exuberant cheers, bombard him with praises and slaps on the back. It was a repeat of the scene at the same location on Friday night, after the team barely had defeated their biggest rivals, the Demons, 84–83. The win had placed them as runners-up for the district title; all they needed was a victory the following Friday, and they would go to the regional tournament.

"OK, OK guys!" shouted Pierce above the clamor, pushing up his glasses with the middle finger of one hand. He held up the other hand to quiet down the boys; yet, at the same time, he did not want the praise to subside. "We've still got a lotta work to do, team. This week's practices have got to be *intense* so we can come out on top Friday night. So, *fire up*, men!"

“All right, Coach!” and “Let’s get down to business, Coach!” were the collective responses, which resembled the cries of a pack of confined wolves longing to be unleashed for a kill. Pierce echoed, “OK...let’s get *fierce!*”

This was Pierce’s first year coaching and teaching at Foothill High, and he could not help but feel proud of himself. Besides having been voted “most popular teacher” by the student body, he had led the boys’ basketball team to an unprecedented 18–2 season. He was liked and respected by most of the students, even by those he did not instruct, and by all of the faculty members except for one: Steven Young, the football coach.

Coach Young, whose office was adjacent to Pierce’s, had arrived a few minutes beforehand, though rarely was he there that early. Steven had been the best-looking and best-liked instructor—that is, until Pierce had joined the staff. Remarkably, both men were the same age, 33, and had markedly similar appearances: short black hair, blue eyes, handsome features, and athletic, well-defined physiques, though Steven was a bit taller than Pierce’s 5'9".

Pierce had detected enmity in Steven when they had met—exhibited by his remark, “*Great...a short basketball coach!*”—and sensed it had escalated over time. As a result, Pierce felt awkward when he unexpectedly noticed Steven, his left hand stroking his chin, observing Pierce with his players from his office doorway. Pierce did not recall ever having seen the football squad, a few of whom were on his basketball team, granting Coach Young such a spirited reception.



Geoff arrived at work at 7:50 a.m.—ten minutes before his first patient’s appointment—and carefully perused his schedule on the computer, as he normally did. He noticed Pierce Nevin’s name in the five o’clock time slot but, just as quickly, forgot about it.

Geoff did not like stressful “surprises” during the day, such as insufficient time being scheduled for a contact lens fitting, nor more than half the number of his patients’ being over age 70. It was not that he disliked fitting contact lenses or examining seniors. Rather, he knew that these and certain other patients often required more time-consuming testing and special attention to be serviced properly. He wanted to be sure he had adequate time to spend with each of them without falling behind. Unfortunately for his stress level, he usually *did* run late.

“How’re ya doin’, Doc?” came an exuberant greeting from Tom, Geoff’s lead receptionist for two years, who appeared in the doorway of the file room. The lean, tanned surfer was 22. He ran the long fingers of each hand through the full expanse of his damp, almost shoulder-length, sun-bleached hair.

“Hey, dude, I’m doin’ great! You have a good weekend?” returned Geoff, who, though twice Tom’s age, never treated him as a subordinate.

“Yeah, I sure did! Liz and I surfed both days. The waves off Huntington Beach have been *awesome* for a week!” Tom replied enthusiastically. “I even got in a few radical rides at dawn today—barely had time to shower—and, just between you and me, dude, I was tempted to call in sick and ride those ‘killer’ waves again all day! D’you have a good weekend?”

“Not as action-packed as yours, but it was exciting. I went camping out at Joshua Tree with my friend, Luke...even felt a little earth tremor. We ate like pigs and did some hiking to burn off the calories. I took Penny along, too. She likes the new venison and rice food I switched her to. Luke has just about taught her how to open the cans by herself.”

“Penny *is* smarter than the average pig...uh, *dog*...ya know! How is that mut, anyway?...she recovered yet from gettin’ her innards yanked out?” continued Tom, his eyes closed. He repeatedly combed his wavy blond hair with his spread fingers and shook his tilted-back head from side to side to finish drying it.

“She’s had a pretty remarkable recovery in a week. I guess she’s reconciled to the fact that she’ll never be a mommy. She went on a coupla short hikes with us but spent a lot of the time in the tent lickin’ her stitches.”

Tom already had printed out Geoff’s daily schedule and handed him a crisp copy. “Looks like a gruelin’ day, Doc!”

“Yeah, I noticed,” agreed Geoff with a distinctive sigh. “By the way, Mrs. Nolan’s ophthalmologist was supposed to laser a few of her post-cataract sutures last week to reduce her astigmatism before I refract her. Can you call her, before she comes in, to see if that procedure was performed?”

“Been there, done that, Doc!” beamed Tom proudly. “I called her the last thing on Friday; the doctor had zapped her eye that mornin’.”

“I shoulda known you’d be on top of that one, bud!” Opening a drawer, Geoff retrieved an open package of small adhesive stars, peeled off a gold one, and reached up to stick it in the middle of Tom’s forehead—just as the first patient of the day was walking into the room through the open doorway. Seeing the broken glasses in her hand, Geoff whispered through the side of his mouth, “Mrs. Bolger couldn’t see Godzilla if he were charging her.” The two exchanged smiles; and Tom, stifling a laugh, removed the gold star—applying it to Geoff’s ear—before welcoming Mrs. Bolger to the office.



Pierce moved with his typical deliberate, self-assured stride down the hall on the way to room 238, where his science class awaited him. He deeply was contemplating the two vital offensive plays which he had diagrammed on the blackboard and had discussed in great detail with his players.

His mind preoccupied, Pierce was not (though he often was) cognizant of the admiring, longing eyes of a few female teachers—including those of Mrs. Andrea Young, a.k.a. Mrs. Steven Young—which pursued him from classroom doorways. Two students bolted past him en route to their classes as the eight o'clock bell sounded.

Energetically scaling two flights of stairs, two steps at a time, up to the second floor, Pierce continued down the wooden hallway in a jog. “Hey, Coach! Your eyes fallin’ apart like the rest o’ you?” echoed a goading voice, which originated from the entrance to room 232, just ahead.

Pierce felt like he had been jerked abruptly out of an engrossing dream. He wrenched his head toward the source of the disconcerting verbal affront and, slowing his gait a bit, responded, “Wh...what’s that again?”

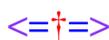
Coach Young, a wry smile revealing his overt pleasure in having violated Pierce’s innermost thoughts, inquired, “Nice glasses. Are you the new *librarian* or what?”

Refocusing his attention directly ahead, and increasing his pace again, Pierce raised up one hand and responded just loudly enough for the intruder to hear: “I tore a contact.” He was chagrined that someone who made him feel so ill at ease had reminded him of his visual deficiency. Before entering his classroom, he removed his glasses and slipped them into his shirt pocket.

Raquel Lacey, the ravishing head cheerleader—and girlfriend of Jerry Wells, the basketball team captain—was in her regular seat at the front of the center row. Pierce tangentially recognized her in her characteristic pose: lounging sideways in her desk, and bouncing one sculpted leg up and down as it dangled over the other. She clasped an oversized pencil, the eraser of which Pierce knew she must be nibbling. The pencil projected outward from between her thumb and first two fingers; her two end fingers pointed upward, as if she were holding a dainty cup of tea.

Although it was an effort, Pierce always made a conscious attempt not to pay more attention to Miss Lacey than to any other student, whether inside or outside of class, especially since he could feel her leering intently at him whenever they were together in the same room. Today, he had in mind to educate his students about the range of wind speeds in each of the five categories of hurricanes.

This task was made a little easier than usual because, without corrective lenses, he did not observe the new, stimulating hair style, low-cut flowered dress, and fluorescent-pink lipstick which Raquel had purchased over the weekend. Had he noticed, he rightly might have assumed that their sole purpose was to seize his attention.



A bit overwrought as he arrived at the reception desk, Pierce noticed the Eye Care office wall clock, maintained accurately to the second each day by Dr. Geoff Hutton. It was 5:12 p.m., and Pierce apologized to the lone receptionist for being late. Tom, caught in the middle of a big end-of-the-day yawn, looked up from his paperwork. “Hi...could I have your name, please?”

“Nevin...Pierce...for five o’clock.” Pierce ran a comb through his hair. “Boy!...seems like the number of cars on the freeway at rush hour increases constantly in Southern California. More accidents seem to hinder traffic flow everyday!”

“No kiddin’...but you’d be lost around here without a car! Say, d’you remember me from Lowe High School a coupla years ago...Tom Hastings?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah...how’re ya doin’, Tom?” replied Pierce, extending his right hand, which was shaken by Tom’s as he arose partially out of his seat. “Hey...as I recall, you’re a pretty tall fellow.”

“Six foot four-and-a-half,” gleamed Tom, standing up the rest of the way, his mouth settling into his trademark broad, pure-white smile, which all the local surfer girls deemed as “killer.” Retrieving the doctor’s schedule onto the computer screen and tapping the keyboard with his pen, Tom found Pierce’s name and pressed the proper keys to highlight it, indicating that he had kept his appointment. “Another perfect record.”

“Scuse me?” inquired Pierce.

“Oh...all of Doctor Hutton’s patients showed today...not an uncommon occurrence.” Tom, sitting back down, maintained eye contact with Pierce. “The doctor’s runnin’ behind right now, so don’t worry about bein’ late. I’ll let him know you’re here.” Tom buzzed Geoff’s intercom once, notifying him that his last patient of the day had arrived.

As soon as Tom had done so, Pierce remarked, “Tom, didn’t I tell you once that I thought your height, big hands, and long reach might enable you to shoot some big scores for us on the Lowe High basketball team?”

“Yep...,” chuckled Tom, “and I told you that the only thing I knew how to ‘shoot’ was a *gun*—I’m a Marksman First Class—and that I probably couldn’t stuff a basketball into a swimmin’ pool from a divin’ board!”

“That’s it...I remember now!” laughed Pierce, whose smile also was deemed to be “killer” by many of the lady faculty members at Foothill High.

A familiar voice suddenly originated from the hall doorway. “Hey there, Pierce! I just now saw your name on my schedule and remembered you were coming.” The chipper voice did not match the weary countenance, which Pierce and Tom perceived as they turned their heads toward Geoff. “How’re you doin’ today?”

“OK, Doctor...uh, Geoff. Sorry I’m late; the traffic was horrendous.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. As you can tell, I’m lagging behind as well. But if you can hang on for about ten more minutes, I’ll see you then.” With furrowed eyebrows, he added, “Will that put a damper on your schedule?”

“*Not at all...*I’m skippin’ the gym today. But I don’t wanna rush you. Would it be better if we rescheduled this for another day?”

“No, no...believe me, I’m used to it...and the only ‘rushing’ I have to do is going home tonight to walk my dog and then to heat up leftovers.”

“Great!” Pierce grabbed a generic sports magazine from the nearest table, sat down, and crossed one ankle over the opposite knee. “I don’t mind waiting. Tell you what...I’ll even treat you to dinner for your time,” he tendered, pointing his finger as a friendly gesture toward Geoff.

Geoff never, *but never*, passed up free food. Although he liked his own cooking, ever since his divorce, he always enjoyed the opportunity to have a restaurant meal with someone else. Pierce might just as well have presented him with a winning lottery ticket. “You’re on, pal; that’s the best offer I’ve had today!” He pointed back at Pierce, turned around, and returned to his exam room, all the while sensing a familiar supernatural “power” establishing a bond between them.

Tom buzzed the optical dispensary and handed Pierce’s file to the optician when she emerged. With a pleasant smile, she asked Pierce if she might take his glasses. Removing them from his shirt pocket, he handed them to her. Her fingers passed deliberately over his as she took them. Then she vanished back into the dispensary.

Having measured the strength of both lenses on the automatic lensometer and stapled the digital printout to Pierce’s chart, the attractive optician returned his glasses and handed back his chart to Tom. As she left the room, she smiled once more at Pierce. Had he not seen a diamond on her finger, he knew he would have engaged her in a conversation.



The subjective portion of the comprehensive visual examination was routine. Geoff ascertained that neither Pierce’s spectacle prescription nor his contact lens prescription had changed. Removing the phoropter from in front of Pierce’s face, Geoff remarked, “You sure make my job easy, Coach! You’re an excellent observer!”

“*Really?* Some of those lens selections you gave me looked the same, and I didn’t know if I was giving you the right answers,” replied Pierce. “Were you checking for astigmatism? By the way...what *is* astigmatism, anyway?”

“That was one thing I measured, along with your degree of myopia or nearsightedness. I also measured how balanced are the muscles that move your eyes, your ability to refocus between far and near distances, and other things.” As he swung the slitlamp into place in front of his patient, he motioned for Pierce to place his chin on the chinrest and forehead against the headrest.

Geoff added, “Ideally, the cornea—the clear dome at the front of your eye upon which a contact lens rests—is shaped round...like the side of a *basketball*. But most people’s corneas are *not* exactly round; the shape tends a little toward being like the side of a *football*...whether it is situated upright, or on its side, or at any axial orientation in between. That’s astigmatism. It’s the most common type of refractive error, and it causes the focus of light inside the eye to be ‘smeared’ rather than sharp and clear. I’ll give you some detailed handouts when we’re done. Now, hold still just a minute while I measure your intraocular pressures.”

Pierce held his breath and refrained from blinking his eyes, which had been anesthetized with orange-colored drops. Geoff touched each eye with the applanation tonometer and withdrew the apparatus. “Is that it, Doc?”

“Not yet. Let me scan your eyes under very high magnification with my biomicroscope.” Geoff surveyed Pierce’s eyelid margins, corneas, conjunctivae, lacrimal ducts, and irises. As he slowly scanned over the second iris, Geoff noted aloud, “This is pretty fascinating. I rarely observe eyes with exceptionally blue irises like yours. Usually, there are brown, yellow, or green fibers woven in, or I see a dark freckle or two. But yours appear *pure blue*, even under the highest magnification. Interesting. You can sit back now.”

“I remember a couple of old girlfriends who seemed to have a certain preoccupation with my eyes. I guess I really don’t why when I look in the mirror.”

Geoff’s attention was centered on recording all that he had observed during the biomicroscopic evaluation. “Sorry, what was that again?”

“Oh, nothin’...just reminiscing about old girlfriends,” laughed Pierce.

“Yeah, I do that too sometimes. I’ve been married once, almost twice. You?”

“Four times—almost—for me. But I was always the one who got ‘cold feet’ and backed out. I didn’t wanna hurt any of ’em; I just wasn’t ready. Now they’re all married—I hope happily—but none of ’em stay in contact with me. I wanted to stay friends with ’em, but I guess that wasn’t mutual.”

“I know what you mean,” mused Geoff. “I guess if they couldn’t have us, they didn’t want to have anything to do with us! Oh well, their loss, right?”

“No doubt about that, Doc!” replied Pierce, backhanding Geoff on the biceps. “Anyway, I guess I’m skeptical that I’ll ever find the *right* girl.”

Geoff approached his extensive stock of contact lenses to find a pair: one to replace the lens Pierce had torn and the other to replace his second lens, onto which protein and other assorted organic matter had been deposited. “Pierce, daily-wear contact lenses should be enzymed no less frequently than once every two weeks. Another option would be to obtain disposable contact lenses, although you would have to pay an additional amount over and above what your health plan covers.”

Pierce opted for the disposable lenses at the extra charge.

Applying a brand new pair of disposable contact lenses onto Pierce's eyes, Geoff changed the topic back to marriage and stated matter-of-factly, "You know, in the Bible, the writer Paul alleged that married people will face more troubles and distractions in life than unmarried folks. For that reason, he advised unmarried men not to look for a wife."

"Really? That's hard to believe!" Pierce exclaimed, with a detectable note of surprise. His new lenses in place, he blinked several times. Geoff sensed that Pierce's reply was due partly to Geoff's having made a direct reference to the Bible and partly to Pierce's incredulity that the Bible would have such a statement in it about marriage. "Do you think that writer felt it's *wrong* to get married?" continued Pierce slowly, almost cautiously.

"No, no...I didn't mean to give the impression that the apostle Paul felt that way. He stressed that there is nothing wrong in getting married and, in fact, that married people should not seek to get a divorce. These statements are in First Corinthians, chapter 7, verses 27 and 28."

"Hmm...hey, I can see like an *eagle* with these new lenses, Doc!" Geoff verified each eye's acuity to be 20/15+. "By the way, Geoff, what's your favorite kinda food?"

"Well...I really like Vietnamese cuisine. Would you consider eating over in Little Saigon?...that is, if you still want to go to dinner."

Pierce was somewhat reluctant to try a new cuisine, but he had made a commitment. And if he was anything, he was adaptable. "Uh, sure...why not. I've never had it, but I'm willing to try almost anything once!"

"Great! Tell you what," offered Geoff, "let's go in my car, and I'll bring you back here to get yours afterward. How's that sound?" This suggestion was acceptable to Pierce, who took the leaflets Geoff handed him.



While waiting to be served, Geoff listened intently to Pierce recount how, thus far, he had taken his basketball team to within a hairsbreadth of the district title. When the platters arrived, however, the attention was reversed, as Pierce eyed his newfound acquaintance with wonder and even a sense of awe.

Having disregarded the waitress' words of caution, Geoff had ordered the spiciest menu item. Yet the only perceptible sign that the fiery food had any adverse effect on him, other than an occasional snuffle, was a telltale flush on his face whenever he consumed a whole, dark red chili pepper. Shaking his head, Pierce confessed, "I don't get it! You sure don't look Vietnamese...nor, for that matter, Mexican or Persian! Are you *Cajun*?"

His ardent concentration on the food before him broken, Geoff looked up. He was not surprised to hear a remark like that from Pierce, as he had from many who had observed him in one of his favorite states of bliss.

“Huh?” came the response. “Oh...I’m mostly Scotch-Irish, but I was raised in Northern New Mexico, well-known for its unique Mexican-Indian cuisine. I’ve rarely found it like that in California. When I was little, my brother-in-law used to get me these outstanding rolled tacos, and I learned to eat them with incredibly hot salsa. Pretty soon, I craved the heat.”

“Hmm...what’s the hottest stuff you’ve ever had?”

Geoff paused and thought. “Let’s see...probably it was once in college when I was studying with an Hispanic girlfriend. We were at her parents’ home, and I took a break to go out and look at the stars for a few minutes. On the way back in, I walked through the garage and noticed a plastic container on the clothes dryer. Inside was what looked and smelled like red-hot chili.

When I asked her about the chili, she said that her mom, unfortunately, had made it way too hot for anyone in her family to eat. So, when I asked for some, she was hesitant—like our waitress tonight—but I insisted. I ended up eating three large bowlfuls because it was so good; then I took the rest home. She couldn’t believe it and called me the ‘red hot tamale’ after that.”

“Man!...just looking at you eat that food makes my eyes water!” uttered Pierce. “It’s a good thing I ordered mine mild.” He continued staring as Geoff proceeded to devour his meal, like a man ending a long hunger strike. “You look as if you get some weird kind of *buzz* from eating that stuff!”

Swallowing another mouthful, Geoff explained, “Actually, *you* may get a similar high after you’ve pressed weights one or two reps beyond the point where your muscles begin protesting. You see, what makes chili hot is *capsaicin*.” Saying this, he wrote “**C18H27NO3**” on his napkin. “That’s its molecular structure. It’s been discovered that some people develop an addiction to the stuff, and I must be one of ’em. Your brain thinks your mouth is on fire when you eat it, so it triggers the release of endorphins, which are like internal morphine, to kill the pain. Runners get a similar high whenever they push themselves past the limit.”

“I know about endorphins, but I didn’t know *chili* released ’em.”

“Yep,” affirmed Geoff, using his fork as a tool in an attempt to scrape every molecule of **C18H27NO3** off of his plate. “So, how was your food?”

“Actually, it’s one of the tastiest meals I’ve ever had. I’m glad you recommended it! I definitely will try it again. In time, maybe I can take it a little hotter...,” replied Pierce with a grin and raised eyebrows, “like you!”

“Uh-oh...I hope I haven’t created another ‘chili addict’ like myself!” They laughed. “Say, uh...I’m just curious...what’s *your* ethnic background?”

“Well, I’ve got mostly Finnish and Italian in me; but, officially, I’m *Jewish*,” returned Pierce.

“So, your mom is Jewish?”

“Her mom was, and you apparently realize that you’re regarded as Jewish if your mom is Jewish.” Pierce seemed to anticipate Geoff’s next question. “My mom took me to synagogue when I was growing up—with no objection from my dad—and I learned all the Hebrew chants and songs. But I guess I don’t adhere to the faith of Judaism...nor, really, to that of any religion.”

“What religious faith was your dad?”

“Catholic. But, as I recall, he mainly went to church around Christmas, soon after my mom celebrated Hanukkah.”

“Hmm.” Geoff nodded, maintaining visual contact with Pierce. “So I guess the subject of ‘Jesus’ was sort of a foreign topic around your house.”

Pierce broke eye contact for a few moments and then regained it. “Yeah. As you know, a Jew believing in Jesus is as incongruous and contradictory as...well...a person of Northern European descent like yourself loving hot, spicy food...doesn’t make any sense.” Pierce finished his soda, crunched a little ice, and noticed three waitresses huddled together across the room, eyeing them and whispering to each other. He figured they could not believe that his companion had consumed an entire platter of blazing hot scallops.

“You know, of course, that *Jesus* was Jewish, right?”

Pierce gaped at Geoff for a couple of seconds, responding, “Really?...no, I guess I didn’t realize that,” before closing his mouth.

“Yeah. In fact, not only were the authors of all the books in the Old Testament Jewish, but so were all the writers of the New Testament—except, possibly, for Luke.” Pierce nervously readjusted himself in his chair. “And I have seen convincing evidence indicating that even Luke was Jewish.”

Pierce’s only reply was, “Hmm.” He wiped his mouth with his napkin.

“So...are you at all familiar with the Bible?” Geoff queried.

“Uh, sure. The Hebrew Scriptures, especially the *Torah*—you know, the first five books of the Bible—were drilled into my head as a kid. I remember a lot of those ancient stories about guys like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and others. But I never saw how they applied to me, so I never had much interest in ’em.” Covering the check with one hand, Pierce laid down his napkin with the other—ready to reach for his glassful of water, as his soda glass contained only melting ice. The inside of his mouth felt like cotton.

“It seems clear in the Scriptures,” proposed Geoff, “that all those men you mentioned had extraordinary missions in life. Actually, I have a strong feeling that you do too, Pierce.”

Reflexively, Pierce’s hand jerked, knocking over his water glass, as he recalled similar words he recently had heard on the cassette tape left on his car. Water covered the tabletop. Pierce arose from his chair at once, but Geoff perceived that this was due more to sheer uneasiness than to an avoidance of getting wet. Pierce used the situation to his advantage, announcing, “I think I’m ready to go. How ’bout you?”

“Uh, yeah...my dog’s probably crossing her legs by now.” Following Pierce to the register, Geoff continued in a subdued tone, “Hey, man, this was an exceptional dinner! Thanks a lot; the next one’s on me, pal!”

Pierce raised his right hand in the air but did not reply. He also did not have much to say as they drove the long ten minutes back to his car, as though he did not want there to be a next time.

Geoff gathered that he had touched a sensitive nerve but did not want to press the issue by asking. He reiterated in what excellent health were Pierce’s eyes, and probably the rest of him as well—since Geoff saw the eyes as a type of “window” into a person’s body—and that his first six-pack of disposable contact lenses should be ready to be picked up in three days.

As Pierce exited the car, Geoff repeated, “Thanks again for dinner. See ya around at the gym.” He did not notice until later that the handouts he had given to Pierce had been left on the floorboard.

“Sure, man,” was the response. But Geoff did not see Pierce at the gym late any afternoon for the rest of the week, nor even when Pierce dropped by the office to pick up his contact lenses during his lunch hour on Thursday.

Chapter 3

Geoff sensed the electrically charged atmosphere inside of the Foothill High gymnasium Friday night, as he entered the front door. He felt that if someone were to have brought in a container of gasoline, it likely would have exploded. Geoff wanted to make a showing at this important event, primarily as a goodwill gesture toward Pierce, as he wished to redeem himself for having “pushed a button” a few nights before.

He found an excellent seat in the third row of the bleachers, in almost the exact center, directly behind the home-team benches. Scanning the crowd behind him, he was surprised to discover his friend Luke Steen near the border of the adjacent section. Rising to his feet and waving his arms, Geoff caught Luke’s eye and motioned him over. Then Geoff looked around for anyone else he knew.

He spotted two of his patients, Steven and Andrea Young; an entire section separated the two of them. He recalled that when they had visited his office together for visual examinations a few months before, they had behaved toward each other like the King and Queen of Abrasion. Geoff mumbled to himself, “I bet they’ve split up by now,” just as Luke placed a hand on his shoulder and sat down beside him. “Hey, buddy!” saluted Geoff.

“Hi, Geoff! I didn’t expect to see....”

“Hey, Doc!” interrupted another voice very familiar to Geoff. Turning forward, he acknowledged Tom Hastings with a wave. Tom was walking by with three of his surfing buddies. “I didn’t know you were a B-ball fan!”

“Penny asked me to leave so she could invite over some of her pals for a Kibbles-’n’-Bits party! I didn’t have anywhere else to go!” Geoff quipped.

“Next she’ll be demandin’ the car keys!” guffawed Tom, almost out of earshot. “See ya bright and early...unless the waves are too big!”

Suddenly, the pep band began to boom a medley of excerpts from recent blockbuster movies. Concurrently, the Warrior cheerleaders performed an intricate routine, created and choreographed by the resplendent Raquel Lacey, who always was situated in the middle of the pack.

The nine cheerleaders were draped in identical silver and purple, scanty two-piece ensembles with complementing accouterments. They had a flashy pom-pom in each hand, sparkling ribbons in their hair, and ornate puffballs on their shoes—all moving in a continuous blur. “Great ‘routine,’ eh?” Luke noted. Geoff smacked his lips.

Scores of people, milling around, began to grab available seats, the supply of which was diminishing by the second. Random “waves” ran the entire length of each bleacher, as spectators alternately stood up and sat down with thunderous shouts and upraised hands.

Sometimes two waves, if simultaneously begun at both ends, “collided” with one another in the middle.

Brightly colored banners and pennants swayed back and forth in time to the music. On one side of the arena, the flags exhibited orange and black scorpions; while those on the opposite side displayed silver and purple warriors. The Scorpions’ mascot—covered with an orange, segmented, styrene shell, complete with black eyes, pincers, and a stinger—slinked across the court and approached its opposing counterpart. The latter was sheathed in silver, multi-sectioned, semi-iridescent armor—replete with purple belt, breastplate, boots, and helmet—and wielded a purple shield and sword.

The scorpion jammed its black stinger into the purple heel of the warrior, who instinctively pivoted around on the other foot. The warrior “crushed” the offender’s head with his “wounded” heel and thrust his double-edged sword into the side of his adversary. A mock battle ensued for a few seconds, with each contender inflicting “injury after injury” upon the other, after which the crowd on each side collectively declared its respective competitor the victor.



In the locker room, after having warmed up, the Warriors formed their usual circle, waiting for a customary pep talk from the charismatic Coach Nevin, who stood at the center. Pierce knew that, even with his back turned when he talked, his boys listened. He was proud of the guys—exhibited by his inspiring smile as he slowly rotated through 360 degrees—and made eye contact with each one.

At first glance, they all looked the same, the uniform of each differing from that of another only in the numerals embossed onto its surface. But Pierce discerned an individual, unique from the rest, as he acknowledged one player after another. “It’s been a long haul, guys,” began Pierce, “and the sweetest victory so far is in our grasp...*tonight!*”

Uproarious cheers and shrill whistles were emitted from the members of the tightly knit basketball team. Jerry Wells began repeating emphatically, “Go, Coach...go, Coach...go, Coach...” The rhythmic chant quickly was picked up by his best friend, Billy “the Stilt” Stillinger, the team’s first-string center, who clenched his huge fist and pounded the air in sync with the beat. Then the cadence was picked up, at once, by the rest of the team in unison.

As Pierce made another complete revolution, the chanting became louder, and the meter grew faster. He raised his right hand and, in his typical authoritative tone, commanded, “OK, OK, men...quiet down, quiet down!”

As the clamor subsided, Pierce continued. “This is it, guys. Now, I *don’t* wanna see any mistakes out there! You’ve got to remember *all* the plays we’ve practiced this week, when they’re called, including all the new ones. I’m counting on you more than ever...and so is the

rest of Foothill High and your city! This is a *must-win* game! Don't forget, guys: That basketball is your *best friend*, and we know how to take care of our best friend...*right?*"

From the group of boys, wholly unified in spirit, came the responses, "Through the hoop, Coach!" and "Right on, Coach!" and "That's it, Coach!" along with some cheering and applauding—all of which their esteemed coach swiftly repressed with his upraised hand.

"Let's give 'em the ball *only* from the bottom of the net!" Pierce charged. "Now, get out there and have some fun, but remember this: When you get your chance to drive in that last nail, don't be afraid to *swing the hammer!*"

That was it; the boys went berserk. They crowded in on their favorite coach, slapped him on the back, ruffled his hair, and joined hands with him and with each other, chanting, "*Go, fight, win, team!...Go, GO, GO!!!*" with their arms oscillating up and down in unison.

As the Warriors filed onto the basketball court and over to their benches, amid joyful music, jubilant cheers, deafening applause, and standing ovation, they were hailed by the cheerleading squad with a familiar cry, "*Go, fight, win, team!...Go, GO, GO!!!*" Pierce humbly trailed the team, but his heart was exploding with pride and expectation.

As he passed by the cheerleaders, he stole a furtive glance at Raquel Lacey; she was gazing at him. Then he looked straightaway at Jerry Wells, who was leaning forward, preparing to sit down. Pierce silently vowed that he could *not* allow himself to be distracted tonight.



From the time the team lined up for the jump ball, Coach Nevin had a sinking sensation in his stomach—not unlike that of most coaches at the beginning of a big game. The Scorpions raced out to an 8–0 lead, drilling their first four baskets in a row. After the fourth two-pointer, Pierce signaled for a time-out.

Somber-faced, the concerned coach spoke to his team: "All right, guys...we've gotta stop their scoring *right now*. I want you to run every possible second off the shot clock on each possession, and I want nothing but open shots...lay-ups would be even better. Jerry, I want that ball worked *inside* everytime before we shoot...*no more long shots* for awhile! All you guys get tougher on defense...*now!*"

The change in strategy began to pay off on the Warriors' first possession. "The Stilt" broke open underneath the basket; and Jerry spotted him for a quick assist, leading to an easy lay-up. By the end of the first quarter, the Warriors had trimmed their rivals' opening lead by five points: 21–18.

With two minutes left in the first half, the Warriors had managed to take a two-point lead: 46–44. The Scorpions called time-out. Pierce correctly surmised that his boys were about to face a very tight, man-to-man, full-court press. "Guys, we wanna take care o' that ball! Pass it the

instant you feel 'em start to double-team any of you. If no one's open when you take the ball inbounds, remember we have two time-outs left. *Use 'em* if you have to."

The Scorpions steadfastly worked in the ball. However, Billy "the Stilt" put pressure on the Scorpion center by fronting him on the entry pass. The guard, unable to complete the pass, attempted a fifteen-foot jumper. Billy gathered in the long rebound and made a quick outlet pass. The Scorpions immediately applied intense pressure and shut off all Warrior dribbling.

The Warriors deftly made their passes and crossed the mid-court line. Coach Nevin breathed a sigh of relief as his players set up their offense. Jerry, the "field general," held up two fingers on his right hand, indicating that he was calling for the second new play they had practiced. The play was a pick-and-roll to the right, designed to give Billy a clear screen shot at ten feet. The ball swished cleanly through the hoop.

The Scorpions' resolve could be sensed as they ran the ball back down the court. Carefully maneuvering the ball, they faked the pass inside to their center; and their point guard drained a three-pointer. The Scorpions called a time-out, trailing by one point. Pierce knew that the opposition was about to turn up the pressure.

Pierce spoke to his players, particularly to Billy "the Stilt," in a calm tone: "Billy, hold the ball for four seconds before you call a time-out. We want to find out what defense they're gonna use." Addressing the rest of the team as well, he continued, "While 'the Stilt' is out-of-bounds trying to make the pass, I want the rest of you to do everything you can to open yourselves up." Pierce reiterated, "Billy, make sure you don't call the time-out *early*."

When the referee handed the ball to "the Stilt," his teammates scrambled in four directions, attempting to get open. They continued to move until Billy asked for the time-out, just after four seconds. This time, Pierce had a smile of gratification on his face, as he optimistically spoke to the team.

"All right, guys...I see what they're doin' on defense. Plus, I'm sure they think they forced this time-out. When we go back out there, we can get open best by screens on each side o' the court. As soon as a screen is made, make the pass if the man's open. If he's not, then get him on the second screen. Once again, don't rush anything; take your time with that ball, and get in a good shot! This basket's the *big-un*!"

Turning, Pierce happened to observe Geoff and Luke conversing. *I didn't know they knew each other*, he thought. He did not recall ever having seen the two of them talking together at the health club. But then he realized that he rarely focused on anything there, other than his workout.

When the Warriors got back onto the floor, their plan to get the ball across mid-court worked flawlessly. This time, Jerry signaled for a double pick-and-roll, knowing full well that he was going to attempt a three-pointer if he was open. He was. The shot fell short, but it was scooped out of the air by "the Stilt," who thrilled the crowd with a tomahawk jam, even before returning

to the floor. The whistle blew as he shot, the opposing center having slapped his wrist in the attempted block.

When Billy converted his free throw, the Warriors took a four-point lead with 15 seconds remaining in the first half. The Scorpions were careless on their attempted inbounds pass; Jerry intercepted the ball and immediately went in for a successful lay-up. This time, when the Scorpions threw the ball inbounds, there were only three seconds on the clock; and they were unable to get off a shot before the buzzer. The Warriors led 53–47 at the half.

Coach Nevin wondered if his team would benefit by the momentum they had generated near the end of the half or if, instead, they might become too confident. Maybe they would think the six-point lead was enough of a cushion. He counseled the team in the locker room accordingly.

Returning after half time, Pierce looked at Geoff and Luke. Geoff pointed at Pierce, while Luke nodded. Pierce returned a cursory nod and then spontaneously looked away. Geoff commented, “I examined the coach’s eyes the other day. Nice guy.” Luke was silent.

The second half was almost a carbon copy of the first half. The Scorpions fought back against their six-point deficit, taking a two-point lead at the end of the third quarter. Both teams were beginning to get into foul trouble. Jerry and Billy, the combined nucleus of the team, each had acquired three personal fouls. Another lead player had four fouls. Since Jerry often had finished the game without getting a single foul in the fourth quarter, Pierce chose to leave him in the ball game. However, Billy had picked up two of his fouls in the third quarter and often fouled out before the end of the last quarter. Consequently, Pierce put in the second-string center to start the final quarter.

“Hey, Coach! Leave me in! I *guarantee* you I won’t foul out!” pleaded Billy. Pierce leaned over to his big center and exhorted, “I can’t risk that right now, Stilt. Please don’t bring it up again.”

During the first half of the fourth quarter, the Scorpions worked the ball inside to their center, who scored most of their points against the Warriors’ less-experienced second-string center. The latter player garnered a slew of catcalls from the onlookers, prompting Billy to approach his coach again. “*Coach! I know* I can stop his momentum without fouling out!”

Pierce replied tersely, “OK, Billy...but *no fouls! You got that?*” Billy re-entered the game as the Scorpions were awarded the ball out-of-bounds. On the Scorpions’ ensuing play, they promptly fed the ball to their center, who wheeled around and released a soft hook shot. The basketball fell gently through the net—in spite of the fact that Billy came down and brushed the opposing center’s hip with his own. Pierce sent in Billy’s substitute at once. As Billy reached the bench, Pierce admonished, “Billy...that’s *four* on you!”

“Hey, I *know!*” retorted Billy. Pierce glared back, silencing “the Stilt.”

With only two minutes left in the ball game, the Warriors were down 85–80. Pierce called over Billy and asserted, “We need you in there now, Stilt, and I *don’t* want you to foul out, understand?...now *hustle!*”

“*Yes, sir, Coach!*” responded an ecstatic Billy.

An outspoken fan was disgusted with the performance of the alternate Warrior center. Upon the player’s second return to the bench, he hollered, “You *spineless wimp!*” as the player sat with his face resting between his hands.

The Scorpions immediately sagged in to double-team “the Stilt,” and Jerry put away a three-pointer. The opponents lost the rebound, giving the home team the opportunity to tie or to take the lead on their next possession. Billy waved his arms frantically, even though he was well-guarded. Jerry adeptly dunked another three-pointer, giving the Warriors a one-point margin.

With one minute left, the visitors brought down the ball, planning to get it into their center, who had been extremely effective the entire second half. Finally, they made the pass to the center, who had worked loose from Billy. In an effort to intercept the pass, Billy caught the opposing center’s thigh with his knee.

A referee with glasses blew the whistle, assessing the foul to Billy, who followed him to the edge of the court, shouting, “That wasn’t a *foul*, you *four-eyed fool!*” As the brutal buzzer proclaimed that Billy had fouled out of the ball game, the “four-eyed fool” formed a “T” with his hands, indicating that he also was charging Billy with a technical foul.

As a red-faced “Stilt” ambled off the court, an austere Coach Nevin shook his finger in Billy’s face, chiding, “We didn’t need that technical, *Mister!*” Billy impetuously grabbed his warm-ups and stormed off in the direction of the locker room. Pierce made no move to restrain him.

The Scorpion team captain sank the technical foul shot. Their center went to the foul line with a one-and-one shooting situation and made his first shot, missing the second. The rebound went deep into the right corner and was retrieved by a Scorpion forward. Before a double-team could develop, he made a quick pass to the two guard, who drained a three-pointer—giving a four-point lead to the adversaries.

With fifteen seconds left on the clock, the Warriors needed to score without delay. They quickly took the ball across the mid-court line and passed it to Jerry. He was open and drilled his third successful three-point attempt.

With eight seconds remaining, the Scorpions seemingly needed only to get the ball inbounds and run out the clock. But, with an impossible burst of speed, Jerry again wrested the inbounds pass from an unsuspecting Scorpion and launched a ten-foot jump shot—with one second showing on the clock. The referee’s whistle sounded shortly after the ball left Jerry’s hands.

As the final buzzer blared, the ball ricocheted off of the backboard, wound twice around the rim of the basket, and rolled out. Everyone looked at the referee, who indicated that a foul had been committed by a Scorpion.

At the foul line, preparing for the first of his two free throw attempts, Jerry cast a sideward glance at his sweetheart, Raquel, fully anticipating her rapt attention and support. Her concentration, however, seemed to be focused elsewhere. Tracing her apparent line of gaze, he zeroed in on Coach Nevin, who gave him a “thumb-up” gesture. *My eyes must be deceiving me*, Jerry thought uneasily. *She wouldn't...*

He riveted his eyes on the basket. Bouncing the ball three times and taking one deep breath, Jerry shot. The ball rebounded off the front of the hoop; he caught it as it sprang back. “Ooh’s” and “aah’s” swept through the Warrior assembly, and a few claps echoed from some Scorpion fans.

Jerry felt like a complete jerk. He reflected on his performance so far in the game, having racked up a commendable double-double tally with 19 scored points and 13 assists. Undoubtedly, everybody on his team and in the Warrior bleachers now expected him to tie the score and force an overtime.

The crowd was hushed. The only detectable sounds were soft whispering and some water trickling through a pipe somewhere. Jerry bit his twitching lower lip hard. *This isn't a dream, man! You've got to concentrate and perform!* His thoughts composed him—momentarily.

As he methodically bounced the ball twice, he looked over again at Raquel. *Can it be?...she is looking at Coach Nevin!* he cogitated. This time, Jerry saw Pierce returning her stare. Jerry wished he had not looked. His heart had been racing; now it was pounding. He felt dizzy, but he had no opportunity to recompose himself, as the allotted time to shoot nearly had expired.

Twice more he bounced the basketball—his “best friend” besides “the Stilt”—and, in one continuous motion, discharged it. It was released just at a maximum palpitation of Jerry’s heart, causing it to overshoot the basket, rebound off of the backboard, and bounce twice on the front rim of the hoop.

As though on a fence with a mind of its own, the ball cruelly chose that moment to breach its “friendship” with Jerry, falling in front of the basket and plummeting to the floor. The devastated Warriors had lost their final district game 90–89 and would not be going to the regional tournament.

A frenzied state of delirium instantly overcame all who wore a Scorpion uniform or who identified with the Scorpions, as everyone on that side of the arena erupted in uproarious jubilation. Conversely, the mood on the opposite side tended toward confusion and disorientation. For several seconds, every Warrior or Warrior-at-heart appeared not to know what to do nor which way to turn. They looked at each other in dismay. It was as though they all were frozen somewhere between time and eternity.

“That was a severe loss for Pierce,” Luke expressed in a conspicuously sympathetic tone. “Listen...I’m gonna beat the crowd...got somethin’ I need to do, OK? See ya!” He was two rows down before Geoff could respond.

“Yeah, OK...see ya!” reacted a puzzled Geoff. Then, as an afterthought, he added with a shout, “Hey, Luke! When’re you leavin’ town?”

“In a week...but I’ll see you before then,” Luke returned hastily, retreating ahead of the crowd as though escaping a relentless lava flow.

Grabbing his blue jacket, on which he had been sitting, Geoff observed that Pierce seemed to be the first Warrior to “get a grip.” He trekked across the court, evidently to congratulate the winning coach, the latter meeting him halfway. They shook hands and exchanged a few words.

On his way back, Pierce took a detour toward Jerry Wells—still fastened to the foul line, his hands cloaking his face—and gave him a firm hug. At first, Jerry, clearly sobbing, returned the hug with equal intensity. But, almost as quickly, he released his hold, pulled back, looked downward, and turned away his face. Pierce abided for a few moments, apparently perplexed; then he walked back to the sideline. He grabbed the shoulder or neck of each remaining player; a few already were wandering toward an exit, heads hung low.

Geoff observed the lead cheerleader—he searched the program for her name—approaching Jerry. Fleetingly pressing her nose into the back of Jerry’s neck, she accorded him an ostensible, conciliatory hug. She then turned and dashed toward Pierce.

Before Raquel could reach Pierce, though, he was ambushed by Andrea Young, who clutched him tenaciously in a lingering embrace. Wriggling loose, Coach Nevin quickly scanned the crowd, seemingly concerned that someone in particular—Geoff suspected Coach Young—might have witnessed the spectacle. Raquel halted her advance, hesitated a few moments, and turned around, slowly returning to Jerry.

Geoff started to find his way through the crowd and over to Pierce, wishing to offer him some sincere consolation and a little moral support. But the throng of people forced Geoff away from his intended destination. When he finally caught sight of Pierce again, he had entered his office and was closing the door.

It’s probably just as well, mused Geoff, at this point voluntarily moving along with the horde toward the front exits. He resolved that, next time he saw Pierce at the health club, he would tell him what a superb game his team had played—fully attributable to Pierce’s excellent coaching abilities—and that he still should stand tall at Foothill High. Maybe next week, with this night behind him, it would be more appropriate to offer the phrase, “There’s always next year!”

Raquel and Jerry walked somberly to his car, following his quick shower. They were not holding hands. A few hours earlier, both had found it impossible to contain their enthusiasm and excitement. Now things were agonizingly different, especially for Jerry. “Do you still want to go to Dale’s party?” questioned Jerry, attempting to repress his intermittent sniffles.

“Uh...yeah sure, babe,” came the reply from the overtly distracted cheerleader. “But you know what, Jerry...I just remembered that our cheerleading sponsor wanted to have a few words with us girls after the game. I can catch a ride over there with Julie or Morgan, OK?”

“You won’t be long, will you?” inquired a leery Jerry. “How ’bout if I just wait here?” The full moon’s light revealed his disconsolate expression.

“Mmm...well, it might take awhile,” countered Raquel. “I dunno,” she shrugged. “And I don’t want you waiting here alone, licking your wounds, for too long.” She placed her hand on his knee, gently digging her long, silver and purple nails into the sides of his leg. He always liked that. “Some of the guys’ll be at the party, and they’ll console you ’til I get there.”

“Right, uh-huh...*not!* None of the guys’ll wanna see me now. *Nobody*’ll wanna have anything to do with me for the rest of the school year,” returned the dejected athlete, desiring some sensitive reassurance.

“Oh, come on now, Jer! You know nobody feels that way about you!” Raquel’s nails dug in a little deeper. “Nobody blames you for losing the game, babe. And no one *is* to blame. Those things just happen, ya know?”

Jerry suddenly recalled why he felt he had missed both of his final shots. He pried Raquel’s fingers off of his knee. “OK...‘babe.’ You go on and do your thing...‘babe.’ Maybe I’ll see ya later.” He looked straight ahead.

Raquel gazed at him, but he refused to look at her. “Jerry...honey....”

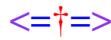
“*Go on, Raquel! I’ll see you around!*” came his irrevocable rejoinder.

Raquel sniffled and reached for a tissue; but Jerry, wise to her Oscar-caliber flair of simulating tears, remained unmoved. She opened the door and stepped out. Jerry revved up his car and screeched away. Raquel headed back toward the gym.

Inside, almost everyone had left. Some janitors were sweeping up the colossal mess around the concession stand. A few clusters of discontented Warrior fans stood, grouching to each other.

Still adorned in her provocative cheerleading attire, the gorgeous young lady strode briskly across the basketball court—straight to the office of Coach Nevin—and knocked on the door. Several seconds later, the door opened. She gave Pierce a hug, which he reciprocated perfunctorily.

They conversed for a couple of minutes, and then Raquel entered the room ahead of Pierce. Pierce left the door ajar. Unbeknownst to Raquel, Jerry had driven around the block and returned to the gym. He watched from an opposite doorway for another minute or so, after which he retreated to his car and sped away.



“What can I do for you, Miss Lacey?” initiated Pierce judiciously.

“Well, to start with, maybe you could call me Raquel.”

“I thought you’d be out with Jerry,” Pierce urged, hoping she would get a clue and leave. He knew he was too vulnerable now to be in the company of a dazzling blonde, and he did not want to do anything he would regret.

“Oh, he’s somewhere sulking,” replied Raquel, rolling her eyes upward.

Pierce sat down behind his desk, distancing himself from the stunningly beautiful eighteen-year-old. “But shouldn’t you be consoling him?”

Raquel sauntered around one end of the desk. “There’s plenty of time for that,” she laughed dismissively. “Pffft...he’ll get over it!” she shrugged.

As she coyly sat on the edge of the desk, Raquel crossed one leg over the other and slowly began to wiggle her foot back and forth. Then she grasped a pencil between her fingers, daintily bringing the eraser to her teeth.

Pierce stood up and walked around the opposite end of the desk toward the door. He stated, in no uncertain terms, “I really think your place right now is with your boyfriend, Miss Lacey. I’m sure he needs your encouragement.” He employed the use of his right foot to draw open the door widely. “Anyway, I need some time alone to write a report for the press.”

Raquel gaped at Pierce with a half-smile. She stilled her foot, uncrossed her legs, and slipped off the desk, in no hurry as she made her way over to her model man. She paused next to him—staring as if into the handsomest face she ever had beheld—seeming to anticipate a reprieve.

However, Pierce returned to his initial location behind his desk, remaining standing. Fabricating a full smile, Raquel countered, “OK, ‘Teach’...you may have just lost more than a ‘big game.’” As she turned and walked away, Pierce overheard her murmuring, “Hmm...so there’s time for Mrs. Young but *none* for ‘Miss Lacey’”

Pierce reseated himself. He obtained a pen and spiral notebook from a drawer and worked for almost an hour recording the highlights of the game, as well as of the season. Intending to present the account to a reporter from the *Orange County Register*, he represented all of his key players—particularly his point guard and both of his centers—in the best possible light.

Finally having completed his carefully written narrative, Pierce yawned widely. He laid his forehead on his folded hands, figuring he would rest his eyes, just for a few minutes, before heading home. He meditated upon Raquel's two final pungent declarations. While pondering the notion that they might forebode the brewing of a sensational scandal, involving Andrea Young and himself—which potentially could jeopardize his chances of being rehired next year—he dozed off.

Pierce began dreaming. In the fantastic dream, he sensed that he gradually was changing into a cornea shaped like the side of a basketball. The image of Coach Steven Young, positioned in front of him, was transmogrifying into a cornea shaped like the side of a football.

As Steven became fully transparent, Pierce momentarily perceived, on Steven's surface, what appeared to be a swirling object of some sort—maybe a spiral galaxy or a hurricane. It appeared to be a reflection of something; but with a backward glance, Pierce observed nothing behind him. Through the cornea, which had been Steven, an azure disk materialized. A black aperture in the middle of the disk dilated and constricted rhythmically, as though it were “breathing.” The disk began to fluoresce a bright neon blue.

Pierce's attention was drawn toward two irregular brown spots, resembling indented freckles, which had formed on either side of the scintillating blue disk. One expanded in size and acquired increasing depth until it looked like a bottomless pit. Pierce perceived, within its interior, a chaotic mixture of faint orange glimmers and spiked black shadows, much like the light from the cozy fire in a fireplace produces unsettled flickers and ever-shifting silhouettes on a wall. It was eerie, yet fascinating—repelling, yet alluring. He floated toward it. *Dare I touch it—or even venture inside?*

A resonating **BOOM!** rang out. Pierce's kaleidoscopic dreamscape shrank to a point, like the image on an old TV screen which has been clicked off. His consciousness was sucked out of his bizarre phantasm, like a paper man on a magazine page being ripped away into a vacuum cleaner hose.

Sitting immediately erect and blinking his eyes, Pierce felt dizzy as he attempted to ascertain whether the briefly echoing sound emanated from within his head or externally. Within a few seconds, the reverberating noise had subsided. But it was followed almost immediately by what he determined to be the rapidly retreating footsteps of someone with soft-soled shoes, sprinting the length of the basketball court. A door on the opposite end of the gym clanked open and then slammed shut.

Pierce's pupils were dilated to about triple their normal size. He sprang away from his desk, his swiveled chair tumbling over backwards and crashing to the floor. Hurriedly, he ran to the open doorway.

Pierce looked across the gym, wishing he had had enough presence of mind to dart to the door, while he still had heard the footsteps, rather than to petrify in his chair. He supposed that there was enough light in the spacious room for him to have gleaned a clue as to who had been

running away. His peripheral vision then detected movement below and to the side of him, about three feet from where he stood.

Automatically, Pierce's head whipped down and to the right. Stepping back, he gasped. An arm dropped to the floor from the chest of a felled body, its hand grasping a bloody white envelope. The envelope apparently had been withdrawn from the person's shirt pocket—adjacent to a bullet wound. As Pierce's eyes adjusted to the dimly lighted area, he flinched when he recognized the victim: Geoff Hutton's friend, Luke Steen.

Chapter 4

Pierce decided that the grayish-blue room in which he was waiting was not exactly “dreary”; it was more “sedating.” He had read about how certain colors had a calming effect on even the most savage of criminals, and he wondered how many of them had sat right where he was now.

A chill brushed the back of his neck, as the picture of a bloodied Luke Steen swept across his mind. *What happened tonight? Who could have done such a thing?* “Was that bullet meant for me?” Pierce inadvertently muttered aloud.

He wondered if anyone were eavesdropping on him from the opposite side of a two-way mirror, which took up about half the area of one wall. He surmised that the two microphones, on either end of the long table, were linked to speakers in that other room. *Keep quiet, dummy!* he thought.

An edgy Pierce jerked as the metal door opened. Two police officers entered. One remained standing near the closed door, while the other introduced herself as Lieutenant Müller and took the seat across from Pierce. He marveled at how a dark uniform and gold badge could give this stunning, blonde-haired, green-eyed lady such a commanding, authoritative appearance. “Mr. Nevin,” began Lt. Müller, “could you please tell me all you know about what occurred at the Valley High School gym tonight?”

He wished that they were sitting over dinner with candlelight and that he could call her Vanessa, the first name imprinted on her badge. He noticed that she was not wearing a ring. “Well, I coach the varsity basketball team at Valley High, and tonight our team, the Warriors, played a district title game against the Scorpions. It was a close game all the way to the end, when....”

“*After* the game, Mr. Nevin,” Lt. Müller interrupted. “What can you tell me about the shooting episode?”

“Oh...well, uh, I was resting my head on the desk in my office, and I fell asleep. I remember that I was having this crazy dream, and then....”

“What was your dream about?” interjected Lt. Müller again.

“Uh...well...”—Pierce wondered if maybe she were testing him to see if he really had been asleep—“it was a pretty strange dream.” *If I tell her my dream, will she think that I’m making it up because it was so bizarre?*

“Go ahead, please.” Her emerald eyes remained affixed to his.

“OK...,” he began. “I dreamed that both Coach Young—the football coach—and myself were...well, *corneas*...you know, the front clear parts of your eyes?” Pierce pointed to his right eye. Lt. Müller, her velvety hands folded on the table, nodded once. He continued, “Behind

him, a blue ‘iris’ appeared...I guess it was an iris because a ‘pupil’ at the center of it kept changing size.” Lt. Müller blinked once. “You see, I had an eye exam last week, and my eye doctor was describing things about my eyes to me....”

“Do you remember the name of your eye doctor?” requested Lt. Müller.

“Uh, yes...Doctor Geoff Hutton...at Valley Health Plan, over in....”

“OK, that’s fine. Now, what happened when you woke up, Mr. Nevin?”

Pierce’s instinct told him that she was as enamored with his looks as he was with hers; yet she had the best poker face of any he had seen. Unlike most females meeting him for the first time, she did not turn to jelly. In fact, she had an intimidating, yet tender, quality about her. He liked it. It made it hard for him to concentrate; yet he knew he must.

Suddenly, the grisly image of a guy he barely knew haunted him again. He felt his palms starting to sweat. He never had had an anxiety attack and wondered if this is what it felt like before somebody had one. *I’ve got to maintain...I must....*

“Mr. Nevin?”

“Huh?...oh, sorry...what was your question again?” Pierce entreated.

“Do you remember exactly what happened after you woke up in your office tonight?” the strikingly attractive officer reiterated.

“Uh...yeah, I do...very well.” The thought that he could have had his life taken from him tonight re-entered his mind. His thinking clarified. “As I said, I was sound asleep...dreaming...when a loud noise suddenly awakened me. I heard the sound echoing throughout the gym for several seconds. My mind was foggy. I was trying to determine if maybe a door had slammed shut, or else if maybe someone had set off an M-80 or something. I have to admit, I was completely freaked out for several seconds. During that brief interval, I heard the footsteps of someone running away, down the full length of the court. Then I heard a metal door open and close.” He recalled how he had frozen.

“Yes, go on,” she encouraged.

“So...I jumped away from my desk—my chair fell over backwards—and I ran to the doorway. I remember wishing I’d reacted more swiftly, ’cause I felt maybe there had been enough illumination from the auxiliary lighting above the tops of the bleachers to identify who was running away...or, at least, to get a clue from the clothing or something.” Pierce looked down at his lap and shook his head from side to side. “I was so stupid to *freeze* like that.” His lips quivered for a moment, but he quickly tensed them.

Lt. Müller seemed to be intuitive enough to grant him the next few seconds to recompose himself. “Then what?”

“Then...”—Pierce took a deep breath and looked back up—“I detected a movement on the floor. I looked in that direction,” he said, snapping his head diagonally downward, as the disturbing memory of what he had seen sadistically re-emerged from its dark hiding place. “And I saw Luke Steen lying there. His arm slid off of his chest to the floor.” Pierce paused.

“So, then, you know the victim.”

“Well, sort of...not very well. He’s an acquaintance at the health club I go to. I know his name...that’s about it.”

“What did you do then?”

Pierce could not tell if it was more Lt. Müller’s countenance or her interruptions that had distracted him before. In any case, he was glad she was letting him just state the details as he remembered them. His palms stopped sweating. “I saw that he was shot. I immediately checked his breathing and pulse. He had a weak pulse, but he wasn’t breathing. I know that, if you’re alone, it’s important to call 911 before initiating any CPR. So I ran to the phone on my desk—it’s a good thing they finally installed one last week—and pressed 911. I explained the situation to the operator. She asked if I knew CPR. I said I did, so she directed me to initiate it and assured me that the paramedics were on their way.”

“Go on.” Lt. Müller, though expressionless, seemed entranced.

“So, I rechecked his pulse when I got back to him. It was less regular but still going. I tilted back his head, pinched closed his nose, and exhaled twice into his lungs, watching his chest rise each time to make sure the air was getting down. I repeated this...I don’t know...I guess about five or six times. Suddenly he took a deep breath, followed by a few quick shallow ones. His eyes opened about halfway. I put my face in front of his, in case he was conscious, to see if he knew me. He said, ‘Pierrccce...,’ and then his eyes closed again. He continued to breathe until the medics got there.”

“Had Mr. Steen been to your office before?”

“Uh, no...never...not that I know of.”

“Do you have any idea why he might have gone there tonight?”

“Well, I saw him in the stands at the game tonight. And he’s always seemed like a friendly guy, so maybe he dropped by to say he was sorry we lost the game. I really don’t know.”

“You handled the situation very well, Mr. Nevin. I think anybody would have panicked a bit after having been so rudely awakened. But you came through when it counted,” Lt. Müller commended. “You should feel proud of yourself for having saved a man’s life tonight.”

Only then did Pierce realize that he had had done that. He also gathered that his interrogator believed him. He felt more at ease, and he respected her for having given him the benefit of the doubt, or so it seemed that she had.

“Is there anything more you recall about the incident?” she continued.

“Well...” As Pierce spoke, he recollected the bloody envelope, with his name on it, which he had stashed in a manila folder as he was talking with the 911 operator. After he had revived Luke, he had inserted it at a random place in his file cabinet. He got a sudden knot in his stomach, wondering if the officers looking around in his office had been thorough enough to find it. He hoped not. Part of him wanted to level with her and tell her about the envelope, but most of him wanted to see what was in it first. *What if it just complicates matters further?* “I...can’t think of anything else. By the way, do you have any information about Luke’s...uh, Mr. Steen’s...condition?”

The enchanting lieutenant nodded and replied, “Presently, he remains in stable condition in the intensive care unit at Hoag Hospital. X-rays show a bullet lodged inside the left ventricle of his heart. A little while ago, one of our experts determined that it is a thirty-eight-caliber bullet. We’ve requested procurement of the bullet for ballistics testing, but Mr. Steen’s doctor is afraid to remove it at this time.” She smiled for the first time. “Anything else?”

Pierce closed his eyes for a few seconds and took another deep breath. “No, I guess not.”

“Fine. Now, Mr. Nevin, have you planned any out-of-town trips for the immediate future?” Lt. Müller queried.

“Uh, no. Why?”

“Well, you’re free to go, but I’d like to request that you not leave town until this case gets wrapped up. If you must leave, please inform me first.” Lt. Müller handed Pierce her card. Her glossy scarlet fingernails grazed his fingers as her hand withdrew. Regaining eye contact with her, he could not tell if this action was intentional or inadvertent. He thought, *She could be holding a Royal Flush in hearts, and she wouldn’t give even the slightest clue...*



Pierce was sweating. With his extended-wear contact lenses, he easily could see the time on the digital clock near his bed: 2:22 a.m. He threw off the covers and reflected on the dream he had been having moments before.

He had been driving under the speed limit on the freeway. An impatient driver, who had been tailgating him, suddenly had begun to pass him on the right. As soon as they were even, Pierce had recognized the driver as an enraged Coach Young, who had lifted up a rifle and had fired directly at Pierce. Then Pierce had awakened.

He thought about once when Luke had tried to talk to him in the parking lot at the health club. He had told Luke to leave him alone. Now Pierce regretted having said that. He tossed and turned in bed for the next couple of hours.



Pierce typically began his Saturday mornings with an early workout at the health club. Today, he had felt like sleeping in; but the phone rang at a few minutes after 7:00. It was a reporter from the *Orange County Register* asking if she could come over to get the scoop on the shooting incident the night before.

He was in no mood to talk to a snoopy reporter—even if it had been about the basketball game, much less an attempted homicide. *Besides, what if she misstates something I say because she wants to embellish the story?* “No, sorry. I’ve spoken with the police, and I’d rather not discuss what happened with anyone else at this time.”

“But if you could just....” Pierce pressed the “OFF” button on his speaker phone. Minutes later, the phone rang again. After three rings, his answering machine intercepted the call. It was the same reporter. Leaving her name and number, she implored him to call her sometime that morning. He knew that he would not.

On his way to the front door to get the morning paper, the doorbell rang. “Who the heck could *that* be at this time of morning...another reporter?” a vexed Pierce asked his reflection in the mirror, which was hanging on the wall.

Peeking out the peep-hole, he could see a van in the street with a small satellite dish on top. On the side of the van was written *Channel 4*—or maybe it was 7; he could not quite tell which—*Action News*. The reporter wrenched his head and peered into the peep-hole. Pierce moved away.

Pierce remained inside all day, answering neither the phone nor the door. He worked on lesson plans for his science classes, but unsettling thoughts kept assailing his mind. *Why did Luke come to my office?* Maybe whatever was in the envelope would explain it. *Was Luke the one with the gun?* No, that made no sense. *Had the person with the gun been following Luke, or else had that person been coming to get me and was intercepted by Luke?* Somehow, Pierce sensed that the latter was the case. *If so, might the would-be murderer try again?*

The notion that someone could be stalking him troubled Pierce greatly. At times, he felt anxiety—a sensation totally foreign to him until recently—building up inside. He kept suppressing it. Of all the people he knew, not one of them would be able to relate to what he was going through. He wondered if anybody could. *I don’t remember ever feeling so...isolated.*

That night, with no reporters in sight, Pierce drove to the school and entered his office. Only a few things were out of place. Apparently, the police search had not been very extensive. He

retrieved the bloody envelope, which contained a less-bloody letter, and returned home. As he sat in bed, he read the letter, then turned off the light.



Waking up late on Sunday morning, Pierce stared at the ceiling. Stark apprehension overtook him for a few moments, sensing that something “big” was going to happen that day. Then the feeling subsided. “God help me.”

No sooner had these words left his mouth than a still, small voice within him—speaking, he felt, more to his heart than to his mind—seemed to urge him to go to church, somewhere he never had considered going before. He wondered if it might help. *After all, other people I know seem to get consolation and strength from going to church, don't they? What the heck.*

Luke once had told Pierce about a church attended by people wearing anything from three-piece suits to shorts and tank tops. It was not too far from where Pierce lived. He called and listened to a recording stating the times of the three services; the next one was at 11:15, in forty-five minutes. He showered, put on a sport shirt and slacks, downed some nonfat yogurt and coffee, and headed out—hardly believing that he actually was doing this.

During the service, Pierce sat near the back entrance. He had heard of “Palm Sunday” but knew nothing about it. The pastor spoke about Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, on a donkey and her colt. People had spread their cloaks and palm branches on the road before Him. *Wasn't this an old Jewish tradition whenever the Passover lamb was being brought forth to the temple?*

Pierce mindfully considered every word, including the declaration by a weeping Jesus: “The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side.” This was how Pierce felt: unable to elude his enemies, even in his sleep.

During the service, Pierce looked in the bulletin to identify the passages he had heard being read: Matthew 21:1–11 and Luke 19:28–44. He thought he had heard of the biblical writer “Matthew” but never of “Luke.” At that moment, Pierce got another compelling urge: to go see Luke at the hospital.



After lunch at a local cafe—during which he had kept out a wary eye for anyone around him behaving the least bit strangely—Pierce drove to the hospital. At the main desk, a receptionist told him that Luke Steen still had not been moved from the ICU.

A nurse overheard the conversation and informed him that she had seen Mr. Steen about an hour earlier. He had continued to drift in and out of consciousness. Pierce began walking toward the ICU. Halfway there, though, he paused; somehow, he could go no further. *What is it that prevents me from going in to converse with Luke? After all, I did save his life.* He could not explain it.

Returning to the main desk, Pierce asked the same receptionist if it would be possible to speak with Luke's doctor. She told him that Dr. Cohen probably could be found on the sixth floor, at the nurses' station.

As the elevator moved upward, Pierce was deep in thought, painstakingly pondering the things Luke had written in his blood-stained letter. He was taken by complete surprise when he met Geoff Hutton, holding a Bible under his arm, face to face as the elevator door opened onto the sixth floor. They both hesitated.

With one hand holding open the doors as Pierce remained inside, Geoff spoke first. "Hey, Pierce...I just spoke with Luke Steen's doctor...Doctor Cohen...and now I'm going back down to see Luke. Would you...like to join me?" Geoff stepped inside.

Pierce consented to this. "Yeah, OK...sure." He allowed the doors to close without intervening. "So...do you think Luke's gonna make it?"

"Doctor Cohen said that he's still in critical but stable condition. If you've never seen anyone attached to a bunch of breathing tubes and IV lines, get prepared. It's not a pleasant sight." Geoff grimaced.

"Did Luke talk to you at all?" queried a hopeful Pierce.

"Well, he..." began Geoff, but he abruptly ceased as a strange vibration seized the elevator. For a few seconds, the two men looked anxiously at each other. As the quivering suddenly changed to violent shaking, the lights flickered off and on. Then they turned off and remained that way.

After what seemed to be an eternity to them, although it was only a few more seconds, the elevator stopped. "*Wow!*...either someone didn't bother to make a repair report on this elevator, or else we've just had a *whopper* of an earthquake!" stated Geoff, nervously.

"I vote for the latter!" exclaimed Pierce. Distinct uneasiness was detectable in his voice. Both men had dropped to the floor. Geoff was sitting down, while Pierce was on his knees, his hand holding a railing nearby to maintain his balance. "I never realized until now how much a big quake feels like strong turbulence on an airplane. And that was a *big* one all right!"

"I'd guess it wasn't as big as a 6.0, though. It lasted only, what, ten or eleven seconds?" returned Geoff.

"I don't think it was that short..." countered Pierce, "maybe even fifteen or sixteen." After a brief pause, he continued, "I hope there's a phone in this elevator. We need to get outta here before we get rocked again by an aftershock."

Geoff entreated quietly, "Dear God, please get us out of here safely."

After a few seconds, Pierce added, "I *second* that...!" The lights abruptly flickered and then remained on. Next, an electric hum resumed as the elevator cable mechanism engaged. After

an initial jerk, the elevator smoothly continued its downward descent. “*Whoa*, that was more of a rip-roaring experience than a bronco ride at a rodeo!”

“*No kidding!*” agreed Geoff. As the doors opened on the bottom floor, Geoff thanked God for delivering them safely out of danger. No damage immediately was apparent. However, as the two walked to the main desk, they passed by waiting rooms where pictures, charts, and other objects had fallen to the floor, small cracks could be seen in some of the walls, and crying patients were consoled by various hospital personnel.

A food service employee was observed to be picking up food trays and broken dishes, which had been hurled out of his multi-layered meal cart. Various urgent announcements—“Attention: Code Blue in the ICU,” “Doctor Traylor, please come to the pediatric ward immediately,” and the like—flooded the public address system.

There was significant commotion at the main desk; everyone was too busy to speak with Pierce and Geoff. Pierce suggested going directly to the ICU to check on Luke’s status. They arrived at the large automatic doors, which opened as a nurse hurried through. They saw Dr. Cohen running down the hall toward them. As the nurse exited the ICU, Dr. Cohen slipped in through the closing doors. Geoff began, “Hey, can we see Luke...?” The doors shut.

The agitated nurse, seeming to recognize Geoff from his earlier visit, retorted, “I’m sorry, no one can see Mr. Steen right now.”

“Well, is he *OK*?” inquired Pierce.

Rapidly retreating backwards, the nurse responded, “I’m afraid not. The quake jolted him halfway out of his bed, and his pulmonary artery line—which measures his pulmonary wedge pressure—was yanked out. Extensive bleeding has resulted in hypovolemic shock. We’ve begun a transfusion.”

Geoff clearly was shocked. “I can’t believe it...I *just saw* him! I read some Psalms to him. He even said my name once.”

Pierce, stunned as well, laid his hand on Geoff’s shoulder in consolation. “I didn’t realize you two were such good friends. I’m sorry.”

Eyes cast downward, Geoff nodded.

Pierce suggested, “Geoff...maybe we could go sit for awhile in my car in the parking lot. That should be a safe place in the event of another quake.”

Geoff agreed to this idea. On their way out, he asked a visibly upset receptionist if she knew how much damage had been done to the hospital.

“I think it’s pretty extensive.” Her voice quavered. “I hear the power is out in most of Newport Beach. Fortunately, our auxiliary generators seem to be managing *our* load,” she added, knocking on a wooden doorframe.

Pierce and Geoff proceeded to the front door. Returning Pierce’s offer of support, Geoff noted, “Hey, Coach...I’ve been wanting to tell you that you did an outstanding job Friday night with your team.”

“You know that we *did lose* the game, don’t you?” Pierce replied, with a look of incredulity. “*Now* I wonder if they’ll even have me back next year.”

“Come on now, Pierce,” encouraged Geoff. “Your guys lost by only one point, and you gave the school its best season ever. You’re too valuable of an asset for them to let go.” Pierce smiled, casting a grateful glance at his new friend, who had stopped walking. “So Pierce...you wanna tell me what happened Friday night?...you know, after the game.”

Pierce also halted. “Sure, man...I’ll tell you what I told the police.” His thoughts immediately centered on his uniformed examiner. “By the way, the officer who questioned me, Lieutenant Vanessa Müller, was downright gorgeous. Her blend of strength and sensitivity sorta threw me for a loop.”

Geoff smiled. “Sounds like you may have checked her finger for a ring.”

“Yep,” chuckled Pierce, “and she didn’t have one.” He proceeded to tell Geoff everything that had happened that night—including the encounter with Raquel Lacey—and recounted his dream in even greater detail than he had related it to Lt. Müller. “There’s no way I spontaneously could’ve made up a freaky dream like that! Anyway, I got the impression she believed me.”

“I believe you too, man.” Pierce appreciated these words tremendously.

As they walked past a perfectly manicured flower garden, down a short flight of stairs, and onto the main parking lot, the role of questioner was reversed. “So, tell me, Doc, how do you know Luke?” inquired Pierce.

“We met at the health club about ten years ago,” Geoff began. “I overheard him telling someone how he had written a lengthy manuscript which, basically, was an overview of the Bible. We started discussing our common Christian views and have developed a very close friendship over the years since then. In fact, a couple of years ago, Luke named me his durable power of attorney agent for health care. He’s been divorced for some time and thinks he has only two family members left. He isn’t even sure where they are.” Reaching the car, Pierce unlocked and opened his door, then reached across and unlocked Geoff’s.

No sooner had they sat down and rolled down the windows than they felt the car vibrating. Neither man moved for several seconds. Pierce’s sunglasses, hanging on a strap from his rearview mirror, began to sway. Pierce turned on the radio as the announcer reported, “...but,

fortunately, no children in that preschool yard were injured by the falling crane. Again, Cal Tech seismologist Doctor Kate Hutton has assigned the main shock, at 2:22 p.m., a preliminary magnitude of 5.4. She says the best guess now for the location of the epicenter is in the ocean, just southwest of Newport Beach. For updates on today's strong Southern California quake, keep tuned to...." Pierce clicked it off.

"Well, that's enough of *that* for now. I think my heart is fully back in my chest where it belongs," Pierce quipped. "Yours?"

"Yeah, I think so." Geoff placed his hand on his chest, as if to make sure. "So how are you holding up otherwise?" Geoff seemed genuinely concerned.

In all the commotion and activity of the previous 20 minutes or so, Pierce realized he had not told Geoff that he had gone to church only a few hours before. "Well, hold onto your seat...this morning I went to church for the *first time ever*, at the place where Luke goes and once told me about...."

"Oh, yeah...I go there too, but not this morning, since I've been here at the hospital much of the day. Was it a good service?"

"Actually, I enjoyed the service. I've been pretty stressed-out all weekend. When I woke up this morning, something inside of me seemed to tell me to go to church.. Coincidentally, there was a phrase read from the Bible—I guess it's in the New Testament—that I could relate to. It was something about your enemies coming at you from all directions and entrapping you." Knowing it had been a Palm Sunday service, Geoff began searching in his Bible for Luke 19:43.

"Anyway, that's sorta how I feel, I guess. For all I know, that Lacey girl is gonna spread rumors about Coach Young's wife and me—even though there's *nothin'* goin' on—which may threaten my chances of being hired next year. It also would give Steven that much more of a reason to hate me...*not to mention* that whoever shot Luke may have it in for me. But I can't just...just *go somewhere and hide!*" Pierce was not raising his voice, though he was troubled—in fact, the most disquieted he had been since he could remember. "Why am *I* getting blamed for things that I didn't do and which aren't my fault?" He turned to Geoff, anticipating a supportive response.

"You know, Jesus was *murdered* for all the bad things in the world that He didn't do and which weren't His fault." That was not exactly the answer Pierce was anticipating. Geoff looked at his Bible and read, "'The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side'—Luke 19:43." He looked back at Pierce and asked, "Is that the phrase you heard in church?" Geoff's sincere smile soothed Pierce's spirit.

"Yeah, that's it. You don't think my hearing that today, at the same time all this is happening to me, is more than just...a *coincidence*, do you?"

Geoff emphasized, “I don’t think that there are any coincidences, with God directing things. I’m sure there is a reason for the entire sequence of events that have transpired in your life since Friday—even since the day you and I met, especially if you consider that some of the things I described to you during your visual examination appeared mysteriously in your dream.” He paused as Pierce pondered his statement, then continued. “Even the earthquake today...what are the chances that it would occur just as the two of us, having met only recently, were taking what is normally less than a one minute elevator ride together? Now, here we are talking about it.”

“Hmm...I guess I never considered that God would be concerned about the details of my life,” Pierce deliberated aloud.

“He sent His only Son to die for our sins, Pierce. He’s *greatly* concerned about the life of *every single person* who’s ever lived.” Pierce stared at him, not fully comprehending the monumental significance of what Geoff had just stated. Geoff meditated upon a silent prayer: *Father God, in Jesus’ Name, please open Pierce’s mind to grasping the truth about You.* He then added aloud, “I’m convinced there’s a reason for everything that happens in the world, and in our lives, Pierce. And God is in control of it all, whether we like it or not.”

Pierce recollected something. “What time did she say the earthquake occurred?...you know, that radio announcer.”

Geoff looked out over the ocean for several seconds. “I think 2:22.”

“I think you’re right. You know what? That’s kinda weird. At 2:22 Saturday morning, I woke up from a nightmare in which I was being shot. What do you think: happenstance or not?” Pierce’s expression invited an answer.

The cool breeze changed its mind, and the sublime fragrance of some nearby jasmines wafted through the car. “That’s my favorite scent,” Geoff remarked. “I hope there are jasmines in heaven.” Pierce’s eyebrows still were raised questioningly. “I don’t know, Pierce; my first guess is...*not* happenstance. But I will tell you what I *do* know. I’m sure you know about the slaughtering of the Passover lambs in ancient Israel, each year, for the sins of the people.”

“Yeah, of course. Moses began this tradition just before the Israelites left Egypt. Each family selected a male lamb without a single defect, kept it for a few days—I think to give everyone the chance to examine it, to make sure it was unblemished—and then sacrificed it.” Geoff found the account in Exodus 12 as Pierce continued. “The blood of a slain lamb was placed on the sides and top of the doorframe in each home. That night, the death angel *passed over* and did not harm anyone in a home with blood in the doorway.”

“Very good...I’m impressed! You shoulda been a rabbi!” commended Geoff.

“Now...considering what you just said, would you be willing to acknowledge the possibility that at least a drop or two of the blood, being brushed with a hyssop branch onto the *top* of a doorframe, would drip straight down and onto the floor below?”

Pierce shrugged. “Uh, yeah...so what?”

“Well...connecting the top and bottom spots of blood with a line, and the right and left spots of blood, what figure does this make?”

“Mmm...”—Pierce suddenly envisioned it—“I guess, a *cross*.”

“Right.” Geoff grinned. “You coulda been a geometry teacher, too!”

Pierce smiled. “So...are you saying...you think that God had ‘Jesus’ and ‘the cross’ in mind when he decreed the first Passover to Moses?”

“Yes, absolutely; but that’s only a tiny tip of a vast iceberg, Pierce. There are *countless* events, prophecies, and Messianic depictions in the Old Testament that were fulfilled by *no one else* but Jesus.” Geoff paused to let Pierce absorb this.

Pierce recalled thinking, during the church service that morning, how similar the Jews’ reception for Jesus on Palm Sunday was to the traditional welcoming of the Passover lamb. The people laid the same things in the street and sang the same praises. “I guess I’d be more persuaded if the crucifixion had taken place *on Passover*...something Jesus couldn’t plan...”

“Jesus *did* die on Passover.” Pierce’s eyes remained affixed to Geoff’s. He was skeptical. “It is clear in the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—that this is the case. Moreover...”—Geoff flipped through the pages of his Bible again to show 1 Corinthians 5:7 to Pierce—“the Jewish apostle Paul wrote, ‘Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.’ You see, God incarnate...that is, Jesus...was the only *perfect, unblemished, sinless* sacrifice available in the entire universe to remove the infinite multitude of humanity’s sins throughout history. Jesus is the *only one* through Whom anyone can be reconciled to God and have eternal Life with Him.”

Pierce searched his mind for a rebuttal but, offhand, could not find one.

“Furthermore, look here at Leviticus 23—in the Pentateuch—at all the appointed feasts God told Moses to proclaim to the Jews. The Feast of Unleavened Bread begins at sunset after Passover. As a kid, you ‘hid’ or ‘buried’ an *afikomen matso* during each Passover Seder. In like manner, Jesus—Who professed to be the ‘bread of life’—laid in a tomb for three nights, following Passover.”

Pierce concealed from Geoff his increasing sense of intrigue.

“The next appointed feast, the Feast of Firstfruits, occurs on the first day after the regular Sabbath of Passover week. On that day each year, the Israelites were to celebrate the first grain harvest. And on this *same day* virtually every year, Christians ‘just so happen’”—Geoff drew an imaginary set of quotation marks in the air—“to celebrate *Easter*...which I prefer to call ‘Resurrection Day.’” Turning to 1 Corinthians 15:20, he read, “‘But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep’ ...that is, the first Who

would rise from the dead and never die again.” Geoff paused again, waiting for all of this information to funnel in.

“Then...logic would seem to dictate that *Shavuot*, the fourth Spring Jewish feast, should have some major significance as well,” Pierce deduced.

“And you’re right again, pal. Another name for *Shavuot* is the ‘Feast of Weeks.’ God decreed that, numbering the day of the Feast of Firstfruits as ‘day one,’ exactly *fifty days*—that is, *seven weeks* following this day—were to be counted. On the fiftieth day, a sacred assembly of *all Jewish men* was to take place in Jerusalem, celebrating the second grain harvest of the year.”

Pierce continued to give Geoff his complete, yet judicious, attention.

Geoff quizzed, “Do you remember what extraordinary event traditionally is accepted to have occurred on *Shavuot*?”

“Uh, yeah...the giving of the *Torah* or ‘Law’ to Moses on Mount Sinai.”

“You’re batting a thousand, Coach!” Pierce lauded. “All of Mount Sinai trembled violently as God descended upon it in fire. A spiritually similar event, again involving God, occurred on the fiftieth day of Jesus’ resurrection from death, which was ten days after He physically ascended into heaven in front of witnesses. Christians call it *Pentecost*, which means ‘fiftieth’ in Greek.”

Pierce’s fascination escalated as he awaited Geoff’s entire explanation.

“You see, while Jesus was here, He promised His disciples that the Father would send the *Holy Spirit* after Jesus departed. Allow me to read this account from Acts 2: ‘When the day of Pentecost came, they’—that is, *Jewish representatives* from every nation—‘were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind’”—Geoff paused for a handful of seconds—“‘came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.’”

Geoff had paused briefly, because another small aftershock had begun; it lasted until he completed the passage. This small “rocker” was somewhat stronger than the preceding “roller.” Pierce confessed, “That was sorta uncanny...you know, the way that tremor happened while you read that.” He clicked on the radio again.

They heard the same announcer as before: “...and doubt that this 5.6 quake was a dual-epicenter event, as was suspected by many seismologists of the quake on the Northridge Fault back on January 17 of 1994. The sizable Newport-Inglewood Fault runs through western Orange and Los Angeles Counties. In March of 1933, the fault ruptured with a magnitude 6.3 in the ocean off of Huntington Beach, near the intersection of Brookhurst and Pacific Coast Highway. This quake devastated much of Long Beach, sections of which are extremely prone

to the phenomenon known as liquefaction. Potentially, the largest quake that could occur on this fault....” Pierce again turned the radio knob.

“I don’t wanna know!” admitted Pierce. “I’m jittery enough as it is.”

“Looks like they upgraded that big quake’s magnitude to 5.6. With a shaker that big,” Geoff reasoned, “I’d think significant aftershocks could occur for months.”

“Yeah, well, let’s hope not,” exclaimed a skittish Pierce, shaking his head and crossing his fingers. “Hey, I recall somethin’ else I wanted to ask you. Today, in church, the pastor said that Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and her colt. Do you know if this is prophesied anywhere?”

“Believe it or not, it is,” affirmed Geoff. “Here, in Zechariah 9:9”—Geoff turned to it—“the ancient Jewish prophet wrote, ‘Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’ Luke likes this prophecy a lot, because it depicts the utter humility of the Messiah at His first coming. Incidentally, the three Jewish *Fall* Festivals signify events at Jesus’ *second* coming, yet to occur.”

Momentarily, the gory scene of Luke, lying on the floor, streaked through Pierce’s mind. He wondered if these flashbacks ever would stop. “No kidding? I find that to be very curious. By the way, speaking of Luke...you remember the day that you and I met at the gym—just over a week ago?”

Geoff visualized the image of the slanting light fixture, in the gym locker room, as viewed through Pierce’s glasses. “Sure, but Luke wasn’t there.”

“No, but that particular day, I found an envelope, containing a cassette tape, resting on my windshield in the parking lot. I played the tape on my way home.” Pierce reached over in front of Geoff and retrieved the tape from the glove compartment.

Geoff angled his head curiously. “You mean, it was from Luke?”

“Yes. Would you like to hear it?”

“If you don’t mind, yes I would,” confessed Luke’s good friend.

“OK,” Pierce agreed, inserting the tape partway into his tape deck, “but let me briefly explain to you Luke’s and my relationship. We communicated fine for awhile after we met at the gym—the health club, that is—over five years ago. Then he began relating his Christian views to me. That really turned me off. He made it clear to me that he believed God had special missions or purposes in mind for me. That turned me off even more.”

Geoff immediately recalled Pierce’s hand knocking over his water glass at the Vietnamese restaurant, they day they had met.

“I wanted to lead my own life. I didn’t think I needed *God* to help me through it...although, now, I think I’m beginning to see things differently. Anyway, I nicely rejected Luke’s overtures of friendship. Every few months or so, he’d try to communicate me again; but I never responded positively toward him. Then I just started ignoring him altogether. Eventually, he began treating me like I treated him...coldly.” Pierce paused to take a deep breath; Geoff suspected it was to regain control of his faltering voice. “After I heard this tape, I *should* have accepted his extended hand of friendship. But my stiff-necked pride wouldn’t allow it.”

A *Channel 7 Eyewitness News* van rolled along the corridor behind Pierce’s car. He glimpsed it in the rearview mirror and then turned to confirm it. He thought the driver had made eye contact with him. Pierce told Geoff he’d be back, adding, “If a reporter comes looking for me, just say you don’t know where I am.” He started the tape, stepped out of his car, and trotted toward the hospital. The van continued on.



Geoff listened to Luke’s taped message to Pierce:

Hi, Pierce. Due to our inability to become more than mere acquaintances over the past few years, I am reluctant to speak personally with you. But, since I am moving away soon and want to communicate a few things to you, I’ve decided to record this tape. I hope you will take a few minutes to listen to it.

I recollect how, when we first met at the gym about five years ago, we got along pretty well. However, I ardently believed...and still maintain...that, with your charismatic qualities, you could be used by God to reach many people, for Him. As a result, I did things I shouldn’t have done.

I feel like I exploded into your life similar to the way...well, a “flaming meteorite” crashes to earth. I regret thrusting my unsolicited Christian views upon you, partly because it interfered with a potential friendship we could have had between us, but mostly because my...I guess it was “impatience”...to get you to serve God, the way I felt you could, may have resulted in your being completely turned off to God.

At this time, I want to express my most profound apology to you for not mastering my own...well, stupid pride...the many times I acted coldly and unfriendly toward you. In doing so, I feel that I was a very poor example of Jesus. He never would have...well, made eye contact with you without saying “hi,” nor completely ignored you as He walked by you, nor sat two feet away from you on a locker room bench without speaking to you...all of which I did, numerous times. I often felt that you should have overcome your pride and accepted my friendship. Yet, it was inexcusable for me to

have wavered from being friendly and cordial to you...regardless of how you ignored me...and I very much regret doing so.

I am not worthy of your friendship, nor am I worthy of your forgiveness. As such, I ask for neither. I request only one thing of you: that you not discredit my name to anyone after I move away, though I would deserve it if you did. If you ever feel the compulsion to speak negatively about me, I ask that you sleep one night on it. If, overnight, your conscience does not entreat you to keep silent, then go ahead and speak.

I always will think of you with the highest regard, and my hand of friendship always will remain extended to you, should you ever deem it worthy to accept. Good luck with your Warriors. Whether they win or lose, I know you're the best thing that ever happened to them. Take care, Tank.

Geoff listened a few more seconds for anything else which might have been added, but he heard nothing more. He ejected the tape. *Tank?* Geoff thought. *Why would Luke call Pierce 'Tank'?* Geoff wondered if Luke had meant to do so or if it merely had been a slip of the tongue.

Scanning the parking lot for Pierce, Geoff discovered a tall palm tree. Its trunk looked half-dead, and it was leaning at a precarious angle toward the pavement. It appeared as though some of the tattered tree's gnarled roots were protruding out of the ground on the opposite side, like contorted tentacles on an octopus. Geoff supposed that, perhaps, it had been uprooted by the first big quake almost an hour before. *Good thing there aren't any vehicles beneath it,* he thought.

Geoff detected Pierce's sunglasses swaying again. A couple of seconds later, the car lurched what seemed to be an inch or two off the ground and then back down again. A sonorous rumbling accompanied the waves of pure energy rolling by. *Pierce was right; it does feel like riding in an airplane that's experiencing moderate to severe turbulence!*

Geoff turned his head toward the source of a crackling noise—just in time to see the aged palm tree crashing to the ground. Large palm branches were strewn all over the pavement around the tree. He imagined a donkey, carrying the King of the Universe, walking over them. The strongest shaking lasted about eight or nine seconds. Geoff estimated its magnitude: *Maybe a 4.6 or 4.7.*

Geoff exited and stood by the car, continuing to look around for Pierce. After a few minutes, he heard a siren, then another. He noticed smoke rising one or two miles to the southeast. He thought that, perhaps, a gas line on Lido Isle or Balboa Peninsula had ruptured during this most recent, significant aftershock. Geoff rolled up the windows and locked and shut the doors of Pierce's car, remembering first to remove the keys from the ignition.

As he walked toward the hospital, he recognized Pierce coming out of the front door. They met at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the flower garden. Pierce looked somber. “They’ve got a TV crew in there recording some of the damage—I kept a low profile—and they caught that last aftershock on tape. I was at the ICU. Doctor Cohen said Luke took a turn for the worse about half an hour ago. He added that his chances of pulling through don’t seem very good now.”

Chapter 5

It was Monday morning. Still at home, Geoff completed the “Analysis” and “Plan” sections of the last visual examination chart, downing the remaining bit of coffee in his mug. He did not like to remove his patients’ records from the office. However, sometimes, when he had no time at work to complete them due to a full patient load, he felt compelled to bring them home.

He would have stayed later at the office on Friday to finish his notations, but he had wanted to be on-time for Pierce’s basketball game. “Thank you, Lord, for helping me to recall all of the information I wanted to write down on these four charts,” Geoff acknowledged out loud. “And Lord, if it is in your will, please perform a miracle and heal Luke, for *your* glory and honor, in Jesus’ Name.”

A familiar sound, resembling a racehorse gulping water, ceased. Penny Patrice appeared by his chair, emitted two brief, wet sniffles, and stared up at him. “What a good Podee! Do you...”—her ears pointed up—“wanna go outside?” The small dog’s pure-white body shook ecstatically in a series of mini-convulsions. Her metal tags jingled, and her rigid tail continued to quiver after everything else had stopped.

Geoff recalled how one girlfriend, after his divorce, had misheard him when he said “Penny,” thinking he had said “Podee.” They had had a good laugh about that. That name had stuck and now was as much a part of his dog as her black nose and big, dark-brown eyes.

The phone rang. As Geoff stood up, Penny flew to the door. Praising her as he followed, he snatched up the cordless phone. It was Pierce. “Hey, Coach! I was just on my way to the office, after I walk Penny.”

“Have you heard anything from the hospital?” Pierce inquired.

“No, nothing. I’ll call Doctor Cohen today,” assured Geoff. “Thanks again for staying there late with me last night. I wish Luke’s condition had improved.”

“Me too, but I have an uncanny feeling that he’s gonna be OK. I just wish the blood we gave would have helped him more. It’s pretty amazing how we all had the same blood type.” Pierce paused and continued. “Hey, was there any damage at your place from the quakes?”

“Well, no...other than that some of my pictures on the walls were a little tilted,” replied Geoff. “How ’bout at yours?”

“Most of mine were crooked. Two of ’em fell down, along with a few books and a trophy. Fountain Valley is in a moderate liquefaction zone; whereas, most of Irvine is on some of the most stable ground in Orange County,” Pierce explained. “So, even though my place was further from the epicenters than yours, I guess the shaking effect here was slightly greater.”

“You sound like a regular science teacher or somethin’!” joked Geoff.

“Funny you should say that,” Pierce noted. “I had in mind to give my students a concise seismology lesson today. I even suspect we’ll have a drill for quakes at the school.”

“*What* was that last thing you said?” exclaimed Geoff, a detectable note of doubt in his voice.

“Uh, sorry...guess I didn’t phrase that properly. I meant there might be an earthquake drill at school today,” Pierce reiterated.

“*Oh!*” Geoff laughed resonantly. “I have a slight hearing impairment, which is more manifest if I can’t see someone’s lips moving. It sounded to me like you said, ‘I even suspect we’ll have a grill and bake a bassoon!’”

Pierce howled thunderously for a few seconds. “That’s a good one, pal! I’ll have to remember to call you up and mumble when I need a good laugh!” Coughing once, Pierce continued, “Anyway, I heard on the news there wasn’t much damage from the quakes outside of Newport Beach, Huntington Beach, and Costa Mesa. Listen...I’ve already kept you too long, so I’ll let you go. Thanks again for the laugh; it did wonders for my ‘Monday blues!’”

“Anytime, man! We’ll talk later...have a good day,” offered Geoff, before saying goodbye. He then picked up Penny’s leash and an empty plastic bag.



A small group of newspaper and television reporters awaited Pierce in the faculty parking lot. As soon as he exited his car, they pounced on him like wolves on a newborn lamb. He was encircled by cameras and microphones.

“Why have you been avoiding the press, Mr. Nevin?” “Do you have something to hide, Mr. Nevin?” “How do you know Mr. Luke Steen?” “Did you have a dispute with Mr. Steen?” These and other presumptuous questions pelted him all the way to the side door. He offered no rebuttal.

Once inside, Pierce deftly disentangled himself from the journalists’ web, effecting a successful escape to the nearby staircase. Halfway up, he met Andrea Young ambling downward. She looked askance at him and continued on without speaking or pausing. At the top, he saw three young female teachers chatting near the women’s rest room. They eyed Pierce warily.

Further down the hallway, his attention was captured by a tall, brawny, thick-mustached cop firmly planted at the end of the corridor. His massive, hirsute arms were crossed. Pierce paused just long enough to wonder if the hulk was there to protect him, or else maybe he was there to keep an eye on him. His intimidating glare gave Pierce the impression that the latter was the case.

Before Pierce entered his classroom, two male teachers, who often had bantered with him in the faculty lounge, passed by on either side of Pierce, as though he were invisible. He sat down at his desk. As Raquel Lacey walked in, there was no stare—not even a glance—as she took her

customary seat in front of Pierce. *Am I invisible?* He scratched his chin, partly because it itched and partly to make sure it was there. Raquel opened a book and stared at a page.



Tom handed Dr. Hutton his daily schedule, fresh out of the printer. Geoff's first patient arrived five minutes early. After being checked in by Tom, he sat down to peruse a magazine.

"Hey, Doc...that's really too bad about your friend gettin' shot," commiserated Tom. "Any idea how he's doin'?"

"Well, Pierce Nevin and I were at the hospital till very late last night. We even donated some blood, because our blood types matched his. He went into a deep coma yesterday afternoon—after the big quake—and hasn't come out of it since." Geoff paused to survey his patient's previous records. "His condition remains very critical, so please interrupt me immediately if I get a call from his doctor, OK?"

"Absolutely, Doc," Tom obliged. "Say...I heard that Coach Nevin was there when your friend was shot. Is that true?"

Geoff compared the glasses prescriptions from his patient's past two visits. "Uh, yeah, that's right. But he was asleep at the time and didn't see who shot Luke. He suspects that whoever did it came there to shoot *him* instead."

"*Whoa!* Heavy duty bummer, man!" grimaced Tom.

"No kidding," Geoff agreed. "Pierce went to the police station and told them what he knew. They said that a thirty-eight-caliber bullet was found in Luke's heart but that it was too risky to remove it yet, if at all."

"*No way!*...a thirty-eight-caliber, huh?" repeated Tom, eyes open wide.

"Yeah. That's their only lead...not much of one, is it?"

"Maybe not...*or*, maybe so." Tom had acquired a curious, speculative tone in his raspy, young voice. "This may not mean anything, but..."—he instantly seized Geoff's full attention—"a few months ago, I think it was President's Day, some buddies and I went surfin'. I drove. When everyone was gettin' their stuff outa my trunk, my friend Jim asked me how come I carried my gun in my..."

"What kind of gun?" interjected Geoff.

"A chrome-plated, thirty-eight-caliber revolver." Tom paused as Geoff's eyebrows raised. "Anyway, I said I was shootin' at the range the day before and forgot to take it out when I got home. Later, while I was ridin' a wave, I noticed that the guy who tagged along with Jim—I

barely knew 'im—was walkin' toward my car and carryin' his towel. Then I wiped out and forgot about it...till the next day, when I went to get my gun and it was gone.”

Geoff was so absorbed that he failed to notice it was already 8:02. “So, you think that guy took it?”

“All I know,” the surfer continued, “is that the guy never even went into the water *once* all afternoon...kind of a loner type. He easily coulda gotten my keys outa my pocket, swiped the gun, wrapped it in his beach towel, and hid it in his backpack. I remember when I opened my trunk the next day, this rolled up beach mat I keep in there was repositioned over where the gun *shoulda* been, I guess so I wouldn't immediately see that it was missin'.”

“What was that guy's name, Tom?” Geoff never had used such a firm tone while speaking to Tom.

“Uh, lemme think...I remember I called Jim to ask if he knew anything about the gun. He said he didn't, so I asked him his friend's name. He said it was...oh, jeez, what was it?...uh...Darrell or Darwin...or, no, wait a sec...Darius...that's it, *Darius*. Now I remember...*Darius Frey*. I tried trackin' down the guy but never was able to. In fact, I didn't see him again until Friday night...at the game. He was the Warrior's second-string center.”

Geoff realized what time it was; he now was running almost five minutes behind—and on a patient who was *early*, no less. He started to feel anxious, but he knew he had an obligation to Pierce. Apologizing to his patient for the delay, he retreated into the chart room and made a phone call to Valley High School.



Before class had begun, Pierce had sketched the State of California on the blackboard, drawing in the approximate locations of Orange and Los Angeles Counties, and the San Andreas and Newport-Inglewood Faults. A few minutes after the bell rang, he marked roughly where the epicenter of the 5.6 Newport Beach quake had been situated.

Next he drew some arrows, fixing to explain how the Pacific Plate, on which sits part of Southern California, gradually is moving toward the northwest, while the North American Plate is creeping southeastward. A student aide appeared at the door. “Excuse me, Mr. Nevin. You have a call from a Doctor Hutton. He says it's urgent.”

Pierce glanced at Raquel. She was twirling her hair with her fingers and looking down at her desk top, still curiously withdrawn. He excused himself from the classroom, indicating that he would be right back.

As Pierce exited the room, he checked to see if the prominent patrolman was still there. He was. On his way to the faculty lounge, near the stairs, Pierce passed by Steven Young's room. Glancing inside, he saw a substitute teacher, writing on the overhead projector. Pierce

momentarily pictured the malevolent expression on Steven's face in his dream a few nights prior.

Pierce picked up the receiver. "Hey, Geoff...what's up?"

Geoff proceeded to relate what Tom had told him about Darius Frey and the gun. "Do you want me to call the police and tell them what I told you?"

A stunned Pierce sat down, recalling the last time he had helped Darius with a science project after school. Then it occurred to him that Darius was not in class today. In fact, the last time he had seen him, he was walking alone toward the front door of the gym, head hung low, after Friday night's discouraging loss. He remembered having felt impelled to go put his arm on Darius' shoulder and tell him what an asset he was to the team, but Andrea Young had intercepted him. *I should have been more assertive....*

"Pierce? Are you there?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, Geoff...sorry." Pierce gathered his thoughts. "Uh, thanks, but there no need to call the police. Actually, there's an officer as big as a forklift hangin' around here. I'll give him the lead; he looks like he needs somethin' to do. Thanks a lot for the info, bud." He proceeded directly down the hallway to the anchored cop, thinking, *I won't be intimidated by this human behemoth.*



Jerry Wells tapped his forehead repeatedly with the eraser end of his pencil, as if to dislodge from his brain cells the answer to the next test question: **"Who is believed to have shot John F. Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States?: a) John Wilkes Booth, b) Lee Harvey Oswald, c) Jack Ruby, d) Lyndon Baines Johnson, e) Truman Capote."**

His eyes felt fatigued from focusing at a close distance for so long, so he gazed out a window nearby. For a few seconds, his vision was a bit blurry; then it cleared. He wondered if he might need glasses, focused at near, to relieve the near-point stress on his eyes while doing close work. *Truman Capote?...who's that?* he thought.

Checking to make sure his car was OK, Jerry noticed a police vehicle nearby. Two officers were searching Darius Frey's truck, but Darius was nowhere in sight. Jerry marked "c" on the Scantron card; then he erased it and marked "b" instead. He looked back out the window, pondering what the police might be looking for: *drugs? stolen merchandise?* Jerry did not hang out much with Darius—not too many people did, since he was sort of detached—so he did not know much about him.

Jerry easily answered the next twelve test questions. When he looked out the window again, the police were driving away. Staring at Darius' truck—musing on which President withdrew U. S.

troops from Vietnam—he caught sight of what appeared to be a small, folded piece of pink paper on the ground, just outside the driver’s door. He wondered if it might have been swept out inadvertently by the police. He recalled the numerous times Raquel had written notes to him on pink paper. *Who else would write pink notes?*

The noon bell rang. Jerry quickly answered the last three questions and handed in his test and Scantron card. Before heading to the cafeteria, he went to his car to lock his books inside. On the way, he walked by Darius’ truck, glanced around to make sure no one was watching, and snatched up the pink paper. It even smelled like Raquel’s perfume. *Could they be...?* No, the idea seemed preposterous. Sitting inside his car, he read the note:

Dearest Dar, don't worry—Young and me haven't told anybody. The plant will be made at lunchtime. And we can be together like we were meant to be—once you do in that guy. Just hang loose, babe! Raquel

Jerry could not believe his eyes. He surmised that Raquel must be seeing his teammate, Darius—behind his back! A flood of ideas swept through his mind: *And what about the other things she wrote? Which “Young”...the coach or his wife? What hadn’t they told anybody...could Lacey be pregnant? The plant? And once Dar would “do in” what guy? Could “that guy” be the one who got shot Friday night?—a Mr. Steen, wasn’t it?* In horror, Jerry vocalized, “Did Darius shoot that guy?” Ruminating the words he had spoken, his mouth remained open a few seconds. He closed it when he saw two cute girls standing in front of his car, staring at him and giggling.



At the end of the first class of the afternoon, Pierce collected his overhead projector transparencies in preparation to leave for the day. He taught no more classes for the remainder of the afternoon, nor did he have hall duty or any meetings to attend. He decided he would drop by the hospital on his way home. *There’s no good reason for you not to go talk to Luke!* Pierce admonished himself.

All of the students had left the room, except for Billy Stillinger. “Got a question for ya, Coach,” announced Billy, grinning.

Pierce smiled back and punched Billy lightly on his left shoulder. He was glad that Billy seemed to harbor no ill will toward him for scolding him Friday night during the game. “What’s that, Stilt?”

“Does the moon rotate on its axis like the earth does?”

“Yes...exactly once each time it orbits the earth,” Pierce answered. “That’s why the same side of the moon always faces the earth.”

“Hmm...,” mused Billy, “I’m gonna hafta think about that one, Coach! Thanks!...see ya tomorrow!” Billy brought up his right hand to “high-five” Pierce, who immediately reciprocated. “An’ Coach, you let me know if I can help you out with anything.” Pierce was moved by Billy’s offer. As Billy exited the room, Pierce overheard him say, “Excuse me, officer.”

Turning around, Pierce asked, “What’d you say, Stilt?” In the doorway was the “human behemoth,” but his arms were straight down at his sides this time—and he was clutching a set of handcuffs.

“Mr. Nevin,” began the cop menacingly, “the butt of a thirty-eight-caliber, chrome-plated revolver, partially protruding from a brown paper bag, was observed this afternoon in the front seat of your car. We inserted an implement through the partially open window in the passenger door to unlock it, and the gun was retrieved. It constituted a potential hazard for anyone who might have walked by and seen it.”

“But, uh...*I don’t even own a gun!*” Pierce countered.

The cop seemed oblivious to Pierce’s appeal. “I hereby place you under arrest for possessing a concealed weapon in your automobile, as per California code 12025: ‘carrying a concealed firearm.’” Pierce afforded no resistance as the officer handcuffed him. He only repeated to the lawman that he did not own a gun. The officer read him his rights and escorted him out of the building—amid the stares and whispers of the principal, a few teachers, and numerous students.

The departing police car, containing Pierce in the back seat, rolled off of school grounds and onto the street. Passing a parked car less than a block away, Pierce thought he glimpsed Steven Young and Raquel Lacey sitting inside.

Chapter 6

Pierce considered himself lucky: Lt. Müller had persuaded a judge to set his bail without much delay. Pierce called Geoff at his office and asked if he would be willing to come to the police station after work and post his bail, assuring Geoff that he would reimburse him. Geoff was more than willing to do so and, in fact, was able to reschedule his last two patients, thus arriving at police headquarters earlier than Pierce had anticipated.

At a nearby coffee shop, Pierce and Geoff sat at a table by a window. “So, you saw that good-looking lieutenant again, huh?” commented Geoff, adding a splash of cream to his steaming cup of house blend.

“Yeah, and she was very helpful,” affirmed Pierce, doing the same. “She questioned me again in the ‘frontal lobotomy’ room. You feel like you’ve had one while you’re in there, ’cause it’s so subdued. As before, I got the impression that she believed me, because she pulled some strings to get a judge to set a quick bail for me.” Pierce stirred in half a packet of sugar. “Oh, when I get my checkbook from my car, I’ll reimburse you.”

Geoff added the remaining sugar to his cup. “What did you tell her?”

“I insisted that I did *not* own a gun, much less transport one around with me in my car. I told her how sometimes I keep my car windows partway down to provide a cross-breeze, so someone must have pushed the gun through the open space on the passenger side. Then, I suggested that maybe whoever put it there also told the police that it *was* there.” Pierce paused, taking a long, deep breath. “I guess someone really has it in for me.”

“It sorta looks that way, doesn’t it?” Geoff reached for his cup.

Their coffee began rippling, then sloshing up and out the sides of their cups. For a handful of seconds, dishes and silverware could be heard clattering and clinking around them. Out the window, Pierce noticed a couple on a bench. Seemingly agitated, they looked at each other and jumped up. “That totally *unnerves* me whenever that happens,” Pierce protested, shaking his head. “You never know whether it’s gonna stop or get worse. Have you been feeling all those little shakers throughout the day and night?”

“Yeah, and that’s the term for it: ‘unnerving,’” concurred Geoff.

“Anyway...,” resumed a more composed Pierce, “Vanessa...that is, Lieutenant Müller...told me they suspect the weapon found in my car was likely the one used against Luke. She also told me that a cop and a detective went to your office this morning to question Tom about his stolen gun.” An aproned waiter brought over two fresh cups of coffee, wiping the spill off of the tabletop with a damp towel. “I’m really sorry Tom had to get involved.”

“Don’t be,” Geoff assured him. “They didn’t stay long, and Tom was OK with it. He’s got nothing to hide. They asked why he hadn’t informed the police that his gun had been stolen.

He said he had hoped to be able to talk with Darius alone sometime and try to get it back, no questions asked. But he never saw Darius around and was reluctant to confront him at his house.”

Pierce was curious. “Did they ask Tom if he could identify the gun?”

“They didn’t bring it with ’em, but they had photos of it. Tom recognized it immediately by a half-inch gash in the chrome on the left side of the handle. He said his girlfriend, Liz, had carelessly dropped it once.” He laughed, “Good thing it wasn’t loaded.”

“So it definitely *is* his gun,” Pierce ascertained.

“Yep. Looks like, anyway. Tom also told me that the detective said their next stop was Darius Frey’s house to ask some questions.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right,” Pierce confirmed. “Lieutenant Müller told me that the detective—I think his name is ‘Turner’—and the officer later spoke with Darius’ uncle. By the way, I’ve met Mr. Frey...decent guy, but he’s kind of unkempt, and their place is pretty sloppy. He became Darius’ legal guardian after Darius’ parents went to prison for telemarketing fraud a year or two ago.” Pierce’s countenance disclosed an internal empathy for Darius. “Anyway, Mr. Frey said that, as far as he knew, Darius went to school as usual this morning. Darius’ room was searched, but no weapon was found. They got the uncle’s permission to search Darius’ truck at school and, again, found nothing. I guess they’re looking for Darius now.”

Geoff read the back of a sugar packet to himself: [DID YOU KNOW that the blood vessel configuration within the retina of the eye is unique to each person and that retinal scans increasingly are used as a form of personal identification?](#) “I suppose the police will fingerprint him when they find him.”

“I suppose. I wonder where he is; he wasn’t in class this morning.” Pierce was disconcerted. “You know, I just don’t get it.” He held his coffee cup under his chin with both hands and then drank the last bit. “I helped Darius and his uncle clean up their yard and house one weekend this winter, and a few times I met with Darius after school to assist him with homework or projects. *If* he was the gunman, why would he want to get...*me*?”

“Who knows what goes on in the heads of troubled kids these days.” Geoff shook his head. “You want another cup?”

Looking at his watch, Pierce declined the offer. “No, thanks. Actually, I’m gettin’ sorta hungry. I’ve got a lasagna from Price Costco that I’m gonna throw in the oven. Care to join me for dinner?”

The “free meal” button somewhere in Geoff’s brain—maybe it was situated in his hypothalamus—had been pressed. “Sure, man...sounds good to me!”

“By the way,” Pierce added, “uh...Lieutenant Müller suggested that I leave my car parked where it is now...until tomorrow...so they can keep it under surveillance. I wonder if it would be possible for you to pick me up in the morning and give me a ride to school. I really hate to ask, 'cause I know it's outa your way and would be a real inconvenience....”

“It's no problem,” assured Geoff, displaying his sincerity with a “thumb-up” signal and an understanding smile. “I don't mind at all.”



Pierce pulled the lasagna from the freezer and slid it into the oven. Through the open counter top between the kitchen and living room, he apologized, “Sorry...I shoulda transferred it to the 'frig' this morning. Plus, the oven isn't preheated, so it'll probably take an hour or so.”

Geoff was examining Pierce's basketball trophies on the fireplace mantel. “That's OK; I'm still a little wired from all that coffee.” Picking up the last trophy, Geoff lauded, “Wow!...so you were the most valuable player on your college team. Looks like you were quite a star!”

“Oh, not really,” insisted Pierce modestly. He walked into the living room with two frosted mugs of root beer, offering one to Geoff. “I wasn't tall enough to make a whole lot of blocks or rebounds, so I had to compensate with assists and long-shots. Man...those were the days.” With a longing smile, Pierce gazed intently into the past and repeatedly thumped his mug a few times. Then the reality from which he temporarily had escaped wiped any remnant of contentment off of his face. “But now...well, I'm just having a hard time putting this entire situation in perspective.” He looked at Geoff, as if for some direction. “Sometimes it...it almost overwhelms me.”

Geoff sat down in a wide easy chair and placed his drink on the coffee table, atop a rustic wooden coaster into which “*The DALLAS COWBOYS*” had been engraved. “You from Texas?”

“No, Minnesota. That's just one of a set. But it *is* my favorite pro-football team. I know it should be the Vikings, but I'm just weird.” Pierce sighed.

“So...do you happen to have a Bible I could take a look at?”

Pierce's eyes turned tellingly toward the bookcase across the room. “Yeah, an old girlfriend gave me one a few years back.” With seemingly renewed anticipation, he retrieved it and handed it to Geoff. “I read a little from it once...you know, the story in the *Torah* portion about Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob....”

“Yeah...Chapters 37 through 48 in Genesis,” Geoff interjected, “except for Chapter 38. That chapter deals with Joseph's older half brother, Judah, through whom the promised Messiah would come. Yes, I think Joseph's story is one that *everyone* should read. I guess you're sort of in the same boat *he* was in, being falsely accused and all.”

Pierce was grateful that someone really understood his plight.

Geoff continued, “This is my favorite translation of the Bible: the New International Version.” He opened it to the New Testament. “I feel that the Holy Spirit has been leading me to read you something, Pierce. Now I can. Romans 5:6–8 says, ‘You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’” Geoff stared at the words for a few seconds and then looked up at Pierce. “Did you know that the word ‘Christ’ comes from the Greek *Cristos*, which in Hebrew is *Meshiach* or ‘Messiah’?”

Pierce elevated his eyebrows and shook his head no.

“Each of those terms means ‘Anointed One,’ describing Jesus.” Geoff paused briefly. “Anyway, I sense that what befell Luke was not mere happenstance. I feel that maybe God allowed it to occur as an *example* to you of the passage I read. Just as, I suspect, Luke was willing to take a bullet, evidently meant for you, Jesus was willing to suffer the Father’s wrath, via death, in our place...yours, mine, and everyone’s who would believe.”

Placing his elbow on the armrest of the couch, Pierce turned his head to bury the upper half of his face in his hand.

Geoff flipped through the pages to Matthew 18:19,20. “Jesus said, ‘I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.’” He closed the Bible and laid it next to his root beer mug. Then he stood up and walked over behind the couch, laying his left hand on Pierce’s right shoulder.

“Please agree with me in prayer, Pierce. Dear Father...we ask that you somehow would provide a miraculous healing for Luke, that the gunperson will be found, and that Pierce no longer will be under suspicion for the shooting, nor for maintaining a concealed weapon in his car. We also claim your words, in Isaiah 54:17, that no other weapon will be able to be used against Luke or Pierce and that all accusations against Pierce will be refuted. And we ask all these things in the Name of Jesus, Who died for us. Amen.”

Pierce’s voice quavered as he repeated, barely audibly, “Amen.” The intensity of many things—his past acquaintanceship with Luke, his present circumstances, and his newfound knowledge about Jesus—overcame Pierce at once. Deep emotion gripped him, and he no longer could hold back the tears, nor did he want to. “I don’t get it!” he sobbed.

“Get what?” questioned Geoff.

Pierce continued, “How could Luke have attempted to protect *me*? My own *stupid pride* prevented me from ever even initiating a conversation with him! I couldn’t count the times I ignored him if his locker was near mine or looked straight through him if he was right in front of me. If we made eye contact and he said ‘hi,’ my instinct would seize me—like when I tipped

over my water glass at that restaurant—and I instantly would look away and mumble something inaudible. Who am *I* that I am worthy of Luke’s being willing to defend me...even *die* for me?”

Geoff clutched Pierce’s shoulder. “Pierce...the Creator of the universe willed for a portion of Himself to die to save mankind. God sacrificed His very *pride* for us—something that He alone deserves to feel—to show us that the only pathway to Him is by sacrificing our own pride. You’ve just done that.”

Contemplating this for a few seconds, Pierce wiped his eyes with one forearm and questioned, “So, is that what I need to believe to be...*saved*?”

Geoff released his grip and walked to the other side of the table. Taking up the Bible again, he returned to Pierce, pointing to Romans 10:9,10, and read, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” He then sat down across from Pierce. “Do you believe that Jesus, literally, was raised physically from the dead?”

Pierce recalled Geoff’s explanation of Jesus’ resurrection on the Jewish Feast of Firstfruits. “He *must* have been. He was the ‘firstfruit from the dead Who would never die again,’ so that I can have eternal life. It only makes sense. And if He could humble Himself enough to give His life for me—and for all who accept His ultimate sacrifice—then He is my Lord. Yes, I see the undeniable truth, and I cannot help but accept it.”

Tears of joy filled Geoff’s eyes. He even speculated that the hosts of heaven also were rejoicing to hear golden words ringing from Pierce’s lips. “Welcome into the Kingdom of God, buddy!”

“Thanks!” replied Pierce, followed by a smile and a quick snuffle. “You know, I feel almost like God has breathed new life into my body.”

“He has, Pierce; I assure you, He has! You clearly have a healthy body, but it is dead without Him. The Holy Spirit *is* Life, with a *capital ‘L’!*”

Pierce took a sip of his root beer, just as the only peace of mind he had had in awhile seemed to evade him. “I wonder if God’s Spirit will help me continue to overcome my pride now. I’m so tired of being enveloped by the turmoil of...‘Pride Island.’ I almost feel like...like I’m ‘shipwrecked’ on it.”

“That’s an interesting term,” observed Geoff, crossing one leg over the other and interlocking the fingers of both hands over his knee. “What do you mean by ‘Pride Island’?”

“There’s something I haven’t shown anybody, not even the police,” Pierce disclosed. Standing up and walking over to a mirror, he removed it to reveal a wall safe underneath. “When I found Luke, he had an envelope in his hand. Inside of it was a letter. He must have written it earlier

that day. Apparently, he had planned to slide it under my office door that night, not thinking I would be there.”

Pierce briefly pictured Luke, but it was not a bloody Luke. It was Luke with a friendly smile and with his hand extended—the day, a few years before, when they had met. *Am I finally free of the gory image that’s been haunting me for days? Maybe that ‘peace of mind’ isn’t going to be so elusive after all.*

Curious, Geoff observed Pierce as he opened the safe.

“You heard Luke’s tape yesterday,” Pierce continued. “Now, you might as well read his letter.”

Pierce removed the red-blotched letter from its bloodied envelope, which had “PIERCE” handwritten on it. He carefully unfolded it and took it to Geoff. “Luke’s blood stained only the margins. All the words are visible.” Pierce returned to his seat and rested his cheek on his right fist.

Geoff recognized Luke’s handwriting immediately. He read to himself:

Pierce, I feel foolish sliding this letter under your office door, but I’m afraid you might refuse to take it if I were to attempt to hand it to you at the health club. I really hope that you and your Warriors win your game tonight. But, even if you don’t, you’re the best coach they’ve ever had. I urge you to continue your excellent job of coaching the team next year. They need you, and you’re their best hope for a state title.

This should be the last communication you will receive from me, since I’ll be moving away in a week. As I stated in my tape to you, I’m very sorry for letting my own pride impede the progress of what began as a potentially good friendship between us. Unfortunately, I cannot undo the damage I’ve done. But I would like to relate a dream to you that I had just last night.

I dreamed that I was hovering in outer space. Strangely, I seemed not to have a body. I beheld innumerable galaxies of various types. Each was unique and its own intricate design. Each galaxy seemed like an island, floating in the blackness of space. Then I looked toward the earth and observed numerous cottony clouds and weather systems randomly dotting the atmosphere. My attention was drawn to a vast hurricane gyrating silently in the Caribbean Sea. I marveled at how similar its appearance was to a spiral galaxy—not only in the way its giant outer arms curiously swirled inward toward its center, but also in the immense power which seemed to churn within it.

I wanted to float down and touch it, but I didn't know if I should dare. I felt like I knew better than to approach it, so I refrained. I sensed that if I were to abide for even a moment inside of this captivating but violent tempest, I would wish I were anywhere else but there. I thought it would be far better to remain at a distance and savor its extraordinary beauty.

As soon as I had become resolved not to advance toward the hurricane, I found myself inside a boundless, incomparably peaceful realm. Around me was a myriad of concepts and precepts—some floating, some drifting, some whirling. Each one appeared as a multidimensional, inexplicably attractive, spherical “island.” Somehow, I knew that I was in the Mind of God.

One such “island,” with a very smooth surface, caught my eye. It generated within me a fascination I had never known. As I proceeded toward it, I could not look away from it. I was mystified to discover that a distorted image of my face seemed to have been painted onto its curved exterior. I touched it; then I passed through its outer membrane.

Once inside, however, I sensed that I was being torn apart by violent forces from every direction. I was pushed and pulled mercilessly in the tumultuous environment, unable to gain my bearings. I even noticed other alluring spheres, inside of this storm, beckoning me—enticing me—to take refuge within them. I was terrified. I rebuked myself, “This was a colossal mistake! Why did I choose to come here?” I cried out, “God! Get me out!”

Suddenly, I was in the tranquil, awesomely beautiful realm of God's Mind again. I entreated, “Dear God, what was that place?” A still, small voice responded, “That was the perilous archetype of Pride, my son.” I asked why it had been so incomprehensibly frightening inside. The soft voice answered, “It is one of the chambers which should be entered by no one but Myself. I am the only One who can control its vast power. I alone am worthy to delve into its fullness—I, and I alone. I allow everyone to touch it, but only the wise turn away and retreat from it. It ruins all who embrace it.”

Again, I inquired, “Can I not have pride even in the things I do for You?” The Lord replied, “Many think they do actions in my Name, when they actually are doing these things for themselves. Such deeds are worthy of shame, not pride. The things they do genuinely for Me, and in my Name, are worthy of my pride, not theirs. I do all

good things through those who are mine. The pride they feel and express must be in Me alone, not in themselves.” I also asked Him about the smaller spheres I saw inside the larger one. He told me that pride has many toxic facets. These were sub-regions—such as self-righteousness, arrogance, and conceit—which, themselves, are deceptively appealing realms in which many people hopelessly exist. At that point, I woke up.

Pierce, I want to apologize to you for my inexcusable self-pride over the years. I feel this was a major cause of your rejecting my friendship. I clearly see that the Lord created you so that He could utilize you in a prodigious way for His own glory, but I also see that it was not my duty to pressure you into being aware of this fact. Had I approached you differently, using patience and restraint, I might have been able to present the gospel message to you without your sensing any undue “coercion” from me.

I admit that I felt pride in believing I could persuade you that God had something special in mind for you. What I did, though, was to invade your private space. Your resultant rejection of my friendship caused feelings of frustration, futility, and defeat in me—similar to the turbulent sensations I felt within the “Island of Pride” in my dream—which I erroneously blamed on you, but which I had only myself to blame for not resisting my own self-pride. I wanted you to know the Lord for my own satisfaction, rather than for His.

Let me conclude by saying that I hope I have not prevented you from discerning that you have some important missions ahead of you. And, whatever they may be, I know that God eternally will be proud of you if you complete them. I wish you all the best in life. The Lord bless you, Tank.

Luke had signed his full name on the letter and had dated it. Geoff refolded the letter. “Wow...pretty heavy. How come he calls you ‘Tank’?”

“I dunno; he never told me. I wish I knew.” As Pierce stood up, he asked, “So, do you know if Luke had other momentous dreams like that?”

“Actually,” Geoff shook his head, “I don’t recall his ever having told me about a dream or a vision or anything like that. No, wait...come to think of it...on Friday night, as he and I walked to the concession stand at halftime, he briefly mentioned that he had had a bizarre dream the night before.” Geoff handed the letter to Pierce. “He said he had written it down and would tell me about it another time. That was the dream, I guess.”

Pierce replaced the letter and envelope in the safe. “Remember that weird dream I had?...you know, in my office, right before Luke was shot.”

“Mmm hmm,” Geoff nodded, writing “T A N K” with his fingernail in the thin layer of frost on the side of his mug.

“Well, there were a few notable similarities between Luke’s and my dreams.” Pierce took a big chug of soda. “First of all, on the ‘surface’ of Coach Young—after he had changed into a ‘cornea,’ that is—I distinctly recall seeing the reflection of something...whirling. It *had* to be either a spiral galaxy or a hurricane. It’s almost as though...”—Pierce shook his head in disbelief—“as though God caused Luke and me to dream about similar things.” He looked at Geoff, fully expecting to see his eyes rolling upward.

Smiling, Geoff scratched a spiral on the side of his mug. This notion was not incredible to him at all. “What other similarities were there?”

Pierce sat back down. “Well, Luke described that before he entered the spherical ‘island of pride,’ he viewed a likeness of himself on its surface. People have commented how much Coach Young and I resemble each other, and I was facing him in my dream...as though I were looking into a mirror. Also, there’s the similarity in Luke’s and my both being strongly attracted to something in our dreams. Luke refrained from touching the hurricane, but he did go into ‘Pride Island.’ Likewise, I wanted to touch the pit or hole....”

“Or *abyss*?” Geoff suggested.

“Yeah, OK...‘abyss’...that formed in the iris freckle I saw,” Pierce agreed. “I was drawn to it and mesmerized by the mysterious combinations of glimmering orange lights and black shadows within it. I feel certain that if the gunshot had not awakened me, I would have gone into it.” Geoff was going to say it, but Pierce said it first: “Do you believe in *hell*?”

“Yes, absolutely,” affirmed Geoff without hesitation. “And I think you may have been shown the entryway into it.”

Pierce stared at Geoff. “So...do you think I am...or was...going there?”

“I don’t think you’re going there now.” Geoff paused. “As for whether or not you once were headed there...”—he looked down at the glass tabletop, in which he could see Pierce’s reflection—“well, let me put it this way...I believe we *all* deserve to go there. Only the blood of Jesus saves anyone who accepts His sacrifice from an eternity away from God’s presence.”

“But...how can it be that *good* people go there?”

Geoff again picked up and opened the Bible. “In Psalm 14:2,3, Israel’s great King David affirmed, ‘The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.’” He laid it open on the table. “Numerous other

passages in the Bible, by different authors, state the same thing. It is clear from these passages that *no one* is innately good, as many philosophical ideals today might mislead us to believe. Each of us has an inherent, rebellious tendency to lead our own life rather than to turn it over to the One who created us. If we don't like one of His rules...we just disobey it. This is *sin*, and the Bible is clear that the wages of sin is death...*physical* for everyone, *spiritual* for anyone not protected by Jesus' shed blood."

Pierce contemplated Geoff's words. "Another root beer, bud?"

"Not now, thanks, but I might have one with dinner." Geoff wished he could read Pierce's mind. "Tell me what you're thinking."

Pierce looked upward and outward, as though viewing abstract objects that only he could see. "What if...what if hell is an 'island' within the Mind of God?" He glanced at Geoff for a reaction, but there was none. Geoff was staring at him in anticipation of what he was going to say next. "What if it's a realm that seems appealing from the outside but is pure torment inside?"

"Hmm...I've never thought about it that way before." Geoff stroked his well-trimmed beard. "You know, Second Corinthians 11:14 tells us that Satan masquerades as an angel of light. I'm sure you have heard of out-of-body or post-death experiences, after which people describe having seen a beautiful bright light. Often they say they'd felt compelled to go into it."

"Yeah, I've heard that and similar descriptions."

"Well," Geoff related, "I have heard and read many accounts of people who *went into* the light and suddenly were faced with the most horrible nightmare they could imagine. I distinctly remember a description in a book by one guy who was astral-projecting. His spirit was roaming the far reaches of a so-called 'heavenly light.' He was surrounded by an almost overwhelming luminosity, as if he were looking straight into the sun. Waves of bliss radiated through his spirit, and he was totally captivated by its power."

Pierce sat on the edge of his couch, hands folded, glued to every word.

"Suddenly," Geoff continued ominously, "another force stepped in, taking him by complete surprise. In the twinkling of an eye, he discovered that he had been taken behind the outer covering of the dazzling luminosity. There, he claimed, he saw something that left him literally shaking for a full week."

"What was it?" exclaimed Pierce, with the inquisitiveness of a boy.

"He said he saw the face of *devouring darkness*." Geoff's face contorted. "Behind the glittering facade of beauty lay a massively powerful, wildly churning face of absolute hatred and unspeakable abominations...the face of demons filled with the power of Satan. Horror filled him like a consuming fire. Then, when all seemed hopeless, a supernatural 'hand'

delivered him from the jaws of the all-encompassing darkness. He later realized that Jesus had allowed him to see this domain and then had snatched him from it”

“It sounds sorta like Luke’s encounter with ‘Pride Island.’” Pierce’s mouth remained open for a few more seconds before adding, “So...you really believe that evil spiritual forces can cause something ‘evil’ to appear ‘good’?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Geoff maintained. “Satan and his host of demons are expert counterfeiters; they can cause darkness to look as light, falsehood to seem as truth...and, as you said, evil to appear as good. You see”—Geoff picked up the Bible and turned the pages—“Ephesians 6:12 affirms, ‘Our struggle is not against flesh and blood’—that is, against other people—‘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.’ Of course, people still must be held accountable for their actions, because they *choose* to do the things they often are persuaded by external forces to do.”

Pierce scanned the room. “Do you believe demons are in *here*?”

“Yes,” replied Geoff decisively. “Evil angels and demons, as well as good angels, are all around us. They’re all around everybody. They can affect our thoughts and our actions. Of course, most people have too much *pride* to allow themselves to believe that they might be influenced by supernatural forces. Yet, indeed, they are.” Geoff paused for several moments, surmising that Pierce might have heard as much about the supernatural as he could be expected to absorb in one sitting. “So...what about that lasagna?”

Geoff’s question seemed to travel through the air like molasses. Finally, Pierce responded, “Oh...yeah...I better check it. It smells done.” Pierce took the steaming lasagna out of the oven and set it on top of two stove burners. Cutting two hefty pieces, he transferred them to plates, after which he obtained two more frosted mugs from the freezer and filled them with root beer. Serving Geoff first, he inquired, “Could you attempt to answer another question I have on my mind, unrelated to what we’ve been discussing? By the way...I usually sit on the floor to eat; I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. In fact, I do the same at my house. What’s your question?” Geoff sat down on the floor and placed his paper napkin on his lap.

Pierce got his own meal and joined Geoff. They sat on the floor, on opposite sides of the coffee table in the livingroom. “Would you agree that there are two main theories about how this universe began...either with a ‘Big Bang’ *billions* of years ago, or else via a creative miracle by God a *few thousand* years ago?”

Geoff swallowed a big bite of lasagna. “This is good! Yes, basically, I would agree with that, although there are variations of each hypothesis.”

“Well, with my scientific background,” Pierce explained, “I have a hard time accepting the idea that all of this came into being as recently as several thousand years ago. Advanced astronomical measurements seem to demonstrate conclusively that there are galaxies, quasars, and other things in the universe at distances of billions of light years away from us. If so, then it would have taken billions of years for their light to reach us.”

“I’ve seriously contemplated this myself,” admitted Geoff. “First of all, let me say that an age for the universe of billions of years does not, in itself, give credence to Darwin’s theory of evolution of one species into another one. Unlike what much of the general public believes, *not one* bona fide transition state between two species ever has been proven to exist.”

“That is true,” Pierce conceded. “So then, I presume you believe that the so-called ‘missing link’ between ape and man will never be found....”

“Because it doesn’t exist,” Geoff finished. “I believe that Adam was the first human. His body was created out of dirt, directly by God, Who then breathed His Spirit into Adam to give him life.” Geoff wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Furthermore, just within the past decade or so, scientists have discovered that there are a great many more factors, than they ever considered possible, which must be in precise balance for life to begin *spontaneously*—on its own—on any given planet....”

“Such as that planet’s distance to its sun, its axial tilt in relation to its sun, the size and color of that sun, the planet’s electromagnetic field, the location of its solar system in the galaxy, and a host of other parameters.” Pierce smiled, “I try to keep up with the latest scientific discoveries and theories.”

“Good for you. I hope you pass on these things to your students.”

Pierce nodded. “Sometimes I do, yeah.”

“Anyway,” resumed Geoff, “being that there are innumerable variables which all must exist in perfect equilibrium, it can be shown that the chance of life beginning *anywhere* in the universe, *by itself*, without an external agent...that is, an Intelligent Designer, whom I call God...is so minuscule as to be considered, essentially, impossible.”

“In other words, you’re saying that the chance that God created life here on the earth is *greater* than the chance that it began independently.”

“Precisely...immeasurably greater,” Geoff nodded. “Many scientists who are aware of these things, in my opinion, simply prefer not to acknowledge either the existence of God or His capacity to perform creative miracles. By the way...do you happen to have any hot sauce to go on this?”

Pierce chuckled. “Yeah, some generic brand.” He hopped up, dashed into the kitchen, found a bottle of *CALIENTE OLÉ!* inside the refrigerator door, and returned with it in seconds.

Dousing his food with the liquid lava, Geoff contended, “In essence, it takes a whole lot *more faith* to believe that life on earth began on its own than that God simply created it...and, in fact, *more faith* to believe that we’re not alone in the universe than that we’re the only ones. But I digress.”

Pierce smiled. “That’s OK...it’s all very fascinating.”

“Anyway, let me get back to your original question,” Geoff asserted. “As for which theory I believe concerning the beginning of the universe, my answer will surprise you. Personally, I tend to believe that *both* views are correct...at the same time.”

“*Huh?*” Pierce’s face revealed his skepticism. “How could *that* be?”

“Let me explain...right after I contain the firestorm in my mouth.” Geoff sipped a little root beer. “OK. I’m sure you’ve had enough physics to know what happens if two identical clocks—let’s say, atomic clocks—are synchronized. Then one of them is sent speeding into space, orbits the earth for a set period of time, and is brought back and compared with the other clock.”

“Yeah, of course. The clock that traveled at a high rate of speed through space will record a *lesser* passage of time than will the stationary clock.”

“Correct. So you are aware, Pierce, that it has been proven that *time* actually passes *more slowly* relative to a moving object than to a fixed one.”

“Yes...a case of Einstein’s theory of special relativity.”

Geoff splashed a little more hot sauce on his last bite of lasagna. “All right, now. What are *acceleration* and *deceleration*?”

“That’s an easy one. Each is a change in velocity over time. More?”

“Yeah, about a third again as much, please.” Geoff used his fork to scrape off of his plate all of the red sauce he could detect before sliding it over to Pierce. Then he licked his fork. “Well, I suggest that there are two ‘points of view’ when speaking about the age of the universe: God’s perspective and man’s perspective.”

“That’s interesting,” observed Pierce.

Geoff continued, “After the creation of the universe—which I *do* believe occurred with the ‘Big Bang’—matter was traveling at such a great velocity that time passed ‘slowly’ relative to that matter. Thus, from *God’s* viewpoint, *back then*, it could have taken only a handful of days, approximately as we measure them now, to reach the point when Adam was created. Incidentally, I also *do* believe that since the time of Adam, only several thousand years have passed. On the other hand....”

“Let me conjecture,” Pierce requested. “From *mankind’s* point of view *now*, when objects in the universe—like the earth, for instance—have slowed down and time relative to them has accelerated dramatically, we look back in the past and see that billions of years have gone by since the ‘Big Bang.’”

Geoff nodded. “That’s the way I see it. So...until the time when Jesus returns to settle the dispute, there will be heated arguments over the correct age of the universe...even though, I suspect, *both* major theories are true.”

“Very fascinating, Geoff. Now...when do you think Jesus will return...?”

Geoff’s beeper sounded, and he looked at the number on it. “I think this is the hospital’s number, Pierce. Could I use your phone real quick?”

“Sure thing,” obliged Pierce, pulling out the antenna and handing Geoff the cordless receiver.

Geoff called the number on his pager. A nurse answered and asked Geoff to hold while she called Dr. Cohen. After a minute or so, Geoff said, “Yes...yes...*what?*...oh no, that’s *terrible!* Was Luke hurt? Oh, that’s a relief...I’m here at Pierce Nevin’s house, and we’ll leave as soon as possible. Thanks...good bye.” Depressing the “off” button, he stared at Pierce.

“*What?*” Pierce demanded. “It sounds serious. Do we need to go to the hospital?”

“No, we need to go back to the police station. Doctor Cohen informed me that the police have apprehended someone who entered Luke’s room in the ICU...carrying a gun.”

Pierce was noticeably stunned. “*Not Darius Frey!*”

Geoff took a long, deep breath and exhaled before answering. “Yes....”

Chapter 7

“Jerry!” Pierce was surprised to see one of his star players at a police station. “What’re *you* doing here?”

Jerry stood up as Pierce and Geoff approached him. “It’s sort of a long story, Coach. How come *you’re* here?”

Pierce stepped to Jerry’s side, placing his hand on the back of his team captain’s neck. “Jerry, this is Doctor Hutton, a friend of Luke Steen...”

“Hi...I’m Geoff,” asserted the optometrist, reaching out his hand to meet Jerry’s. “Pleasure meeting you, Jerry.”

“Likewise. Uh...really sorry about your friend, by the way.” Turning toward Pierce, Jerry raised his eyebrows and spread his open hands apart, indicating his desire to understand why Pierce had come. “So, Coach...?”

“I heard that Darius was brought here a little while ago. I guess he....”

“I know, Coach. He’s being questioned now. His uncle is in there with him, but nobody else is allowed in.” Jerry sat back down on the wooden bench. “They said they may want to question me.”

“Why?” Pierce inquired. “What do *you* have to do with any of this?”

“Well...I found a note next to Dar’s truck at school this morning. It was from...Raquel.” Jerry studied Pierce’s face carefully to see what reaction these words might bring. They brought none. He continued, “She wrote something about how she and ‘Young’...I don’t know if she meant Coach Young or his wife...hadn’t told anyone about something, how a ‘plant’ of some sort would be made during lunchtime, and something about how once some guy is ‘done in’...then she and Dar could be together.” Jerry thought, *If that last part doesn’t cause a change in Coach Nevin’s expression, maybe he and Raquel don’t have anything going after all.* It did not.

Pierce posed, “There are other Raquel’s at the school, you know. How do you know the note was from Raquel Lacey?”

“Because the scent of her jasmine perfume was all over it.”

Pierce looked at Geoff. “I wonder if that ‘guy’ could be Luke.”

“Somehow, that’s what *I* thought when I read the note, Coach.” Jerry stood up again. “I couldn’t find Raquel or Dar anywhere to ask ’em, but I thought I’d better not take any chances. So I gave the note to that cop who was hangin’ around on your floor at school today. I

indicated how it *might* have been possible that Dar was the one who shot Mr. Steen. If so, maybe he...well, maybe he intended to finish what he started. Unfortunately, I guess I was right.”

Geoff strolled across the room to view the pictures on the wall, a display showing all of the officers in that precinct.

“Of course, the rumors flying around the school this morning....”

“Were...that *I* was the gunman, right?” Pierce crossed his arms and spread his feet apart.

“Well, yeah, Coach...but I didn’t believe ’em...not for a minute. I heard that...well...Raquel told some of her friends this weekend that she wouldn’t be surprised if *you* had shot the guy. She said you were acting really weird or somethin’ when she went to see you after the game to ask if she could get an extension on her science project.” Jerry looked Pierce straight in the eyes.

“Course, that’s not exactly what it looked to *me* like she was doin’.”

Pierce tilted his head slightly, squinting his eyes questioningly. “What do you mean?”

“Well, Coach...we were in my car after the game, when she said she had to go back in for a meeting with her cheerleading sponsor. She didn’t know I had followed her into the gym. I saw you two...uh, hugging...and then she went into your office.”

“*She* hugged *me*, Jerry. And then she stayed only a few minutes, because I told her I wanted to be alone,” Pierce assured him.

A husky policeman, who had been writing at a nearby desk, stood up and approached the duo. “Mr. Nevin, I overheard you indicate that Miss Raquel Lacey was in your office after the game on Friday night. Would you please relate to me what happened and what was said?”

Pierce looked back at Jerry. “Jerry, I...guess you might as well know. Raquel was...well...coming onto me in my office. She didn’t touch me after the hug. We just talked, and then I told her to go console you on your loss.”

“So you two never...‘had anything going’?”

“*No*, Jerry...not at all. That just wouldn’t happen.”

Jerry took a deep breath. “You don’t know what a relief it is to hear you say that, Coach. When I was at the foul line at the end of the game, I saw her...uh...starin’ at you. I was so confused and upset that I blew both my free throws.” Pierce placed his hand on Jerry’s shoulder.

“*Mr. Nevin*...what did Miss Lacey say to you in your office Friday night?” the officer demanded.

Pierce turned toward the cop. “Uh, let’s see...Raquel indicated that Jerry here—he’s her boyfriend—was disappointed over losing the game.”

Jerry remarked, “‘Disappointed’ wasn’t the half of it....”

“And *then?*” the officer insisted.

“Well, uhm...then she sat on my desk in her classic ‘pose.’”

Jerry nodded his head. He knew her trademark sitting posture well.

“I walked over to the door and opened it wide. Then I told her that she should go be with Jerry”—Pierce briefly compressed Jerry’s triceps in his strong hand—“to encourage him because we had lost the game....”

“I lost the game,” Jerry reprimanded himself. The massive policeman glared momentarily at Jerry.

Pierce continued, “So then Raquel slid off the desk and came over to the door. I didn’t know whether she was gonna hug me again or hit me. She didn’t do either; she just stood there for a few seconds...hoping I could change my mind, I guess. I went back to my chair behind my desk. Then she said something about my having ‘lost more than a big game.’ She also mumbled that I didn’t have time for her like I did for Andrea Young, a teacher at school. Oh, and there’s nothing going on between *us*, either. Then she left.”

“Anything else you recall about your encounter with Miss Lacey?”

“No, that’s about it.” Pierce made a quick round-trip to the water fountain a few feet away. “Say, can you tell me anything about Darius Frey?”

The cop glanced around, as though checking to make sure no one else was listening. “After Jerry here showed us the note from Raquel to Darius, we posted an officer inconspicuously in the ICU. Late this afternoon, Darius was observed suspiciously entering the ICU immediately after a nurse exited, before the doors closed. He went directly to Mr. Steen’s room. As he was apprehended, he was withdrawing a forty-five-caliber revolver—with a silencer attached—from a white plastic bag he had carried in with him.”

“So, the gun was fingerprinted,” Pierce inferred.

“Oh, yes. Darius’ thumbprint was removed from the left side of the handle. Traces of someone else’s thumbprint were detected on the right side. He’s not being very cooperative; he won’t say whose gun it is. He’ll probably be released to his uncle, pending his arraignment in a coupla days.”

“*Darius...!*” exclaimed Jerry, looking at Pierce. “What was going through that guy’s head?”

“I sure wish I knew.” Pierce sighed and then directed his next question at the policeman. “Do you need us for anything else?”

“I believe Detective Turner wants to confirm a few things with Jerry—it shouldn’t be too much longer, Jerry—but we don’t need anything more from you at the moment, Mr. Nevin.” Geoff had been sitting in a nearby chair and chose that moment to rejoin the group. “After we question the Young’s and Miss Lacey, though, we may be contacting you again.”

Geoff noted, “Then this new development pretty much takes Pierce here off of the suspect list, doesn’t it?”

“I...would think so,” agreed the officer circumspectly.

“So, can Geoff expect to receive back his bail money?” asked Pierce.

“I imagine so. You should be hearing about that tomorrow, Doctor Hutton. Let me take your work and home phone numbers right now.”



“You want some coffee?” Pierce asked as he and Geoff re-entered his living room.

“Yeah, sure, if you’re gonna make some.” Geoff picked up the plates and silverware, which they had left on the coffee table, and took them in to the kitchen sink. “While you guys were talking at the station, I was looking at the photos on the wall of the police officers. Lieutenant Müller *is* gorgeous.”

“I know,” replied Pierce. “My heart was racing and my mouth was dry the whole time I was there, because I kept thinking she was gonna walk in the room. I was afraid I’d turn into a blithering idiot if she did.”

Geoff laughed loudly. “It sounds like this charming lady has you wrapped around her little finger...and she doesn’t even know it!”

“Scary, isn’t it?” Pierce opened the freezer door. “Hey, Geoff, you want some chocolate-almond frozen yogurt...fat-free?”

“My favorite! You’re gonna have *me* wrapped around *your* little finger if you keep feeding me!” Geoff slugged Pierce lightly on the arm.

Pierce scooped out the dessert liberally into two large bowls and added the spoons. The two went back to the livingroom. Pierce sat on the floor, with his legs under the coffee table, while Geoff sat in a chair facing him. “I guess you’ll be going to the hospital after work tomorrow, huh Geoff?”

“Yeah, and I’ll be calling during the day to see how Luke’s doin’. It’s funny...I keep having this definite peace of mind about him, like everything’s gonna be OK.” Geoff picked up the bottle of hot sauce, still sitting on the table, unscrewed the cap, and turned the bottle sideways over his frozen yogurt. He squinted at Pierce, as though having taken the yogurt hostage.

“*No way*, guy!” Pierce exclaimed.

“Just kiddin’!” Geoff grinned and put the cap back on the bottle. “On the other hand, I don’t know about that Frey kid. He seems sorta lost.”

The smile disappeared from Pierce’s face. “I know. I think he’s had a pretty hard life growing up. I don’t want him to go to prison for this, because that’ll *really* harden him.”

“So, what?...you’re saying you forgive him?”

“Yeah...I...just can’t hold it against him. I *know* he’s a good kid.”

“You’ve got a very big heart, Pierce.” Geoff picked up the Bible again. “And you’re demonstrating one of the first ‘gifts of the Holy Spirit’: *mercy*. There are fifteen in all.” He read from Romans 12:6–8: “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching”—Geoff briefly glanced up at Pierce—“let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy,”—Geoff looked up again—“let him do it cheerfully.”

“You said there were more of these...‘gifts.’ Like what?”

“Well,” continued Geoff, “the rest are listed in First Corinthians 12:8–10. The gift of ‘prophecy’ is listed again here. It, along with some of the others I will mention, are, should I say, controversial.”

“In what way?”

“Remember when I told you about the day of ‘Pentecost,’ which is the same day as the Jewish *Shavuot*?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, some Christians believe that certain spiritual gifts, poured out on that day, were given *only* to the disciples and apostles of Jesus at that time. That is, when they died, the gifts died with them.”

“So...is that what you believe, Geoff?”

“No. I believe God’s Holy Spirit *can* and *does* bestow supernatural gifts upon people...even *now*. It seems like those who have not received a certain gift or gifts, typically, are the ones who claim that such gifts are not for today.” Geoff set his empty bowl on the table. “The remaining gifts may be grouped into three categories, each comprising three gifts: *Revelation*, including ‘word of wisdom,’ ‘word of knowledge,’ and ‘distinguishing among spirits’; *Power*, including ‘faith,’ ‘healing,’ and ‘working of miracles’; and *Utterance*, including ‘prophesying,’ ‘speaking in tongues,’ and ‘interpreting tongues.’”

“Have *you* received some of these gifts?” Pierce inquired. “And do you want another scoop of dessert? I’m gettin’ more for myself.”

“Yes, please.” Geoff followed Pierce into the kitchen. “Notice that ‘faith’ is a gift of God. In other words, no one can believe in God, nor in the necessity of His Son’s sacrifice to atone for our sins, unless God *gives* him or her the *faith* to do so. I believe this same faith also involves trusting God to lead one’s life better than one can lead his or her own life.”

“Like, how?”

“Well...I guess I could liken my relationship with God as similar, in many ways, to my dog, Penny’s, relationship with me. The way I wish for her to treat me is the way God wants me to treat Him, and the way she wants for me to treat her is the way I wish for God to treat me.”

“You don’t think God looks at us as....”

“Dogs? No, no...not at all,” Geoff chuckled. But I think He often uses people’s pets, and also their kids, to show them how important it is to submit to certain rules without, necessarily, an explanation as to why. For instance, I have trained Penny to be very obedient. Now, unlike all of her doggie friends, she rarely is on a leash. She doesn’t stray from me when we walk. Even if she does, she doesn’t bother anybody. So I let her have her freedom ninety-nine percent of the time.”

“Makes sense,” nodded Pierce.

If, for some reason, I abruptly need to put her on a leash—like when a mean-looking dog is coming—or I tell her not to cross the street before I do, she stops and waits patiently. I think she implicitly *trusts* and *obeys* me, because she respects me and wants to maintain a good relationship with me.”

“So you’re saying that, ideally, we should strive to adhere to God’s rules and wishes to keep a good relationship with Him.”

“Yeah. Like, for instance, one way is demonstrating ‘patience’ when we feel He is indicating, via our conscience, that He wants us to do one thing when we want to do another. Innately, I am *very* impatient, not to mention headstrong. I often do things impulsively rather than patiently wait for Him to direct what I should do.

Pierce smiled and pointed to himself, as if he were including himself in the same “boat.”

After all, He’s the *only one* who can see down the corridor of time in front of me to know what’s coming, similar to the way I can see a mean dog coming or a car approaching a block away when, often, Penny cannot. So He is the only one who is worthy of being *trusted* to show us the right things to do and paths to take. There are scores of examples I could give you demonstrating how Penny has shown me how to be more cognizant of God and His wishes. But, as I often do, I’ve branched off from whatever we were talking about...spiritual gifts, wasn’t it?”

Pierce chuckled. “Yeah, that.” They returned to the living room.

“Anyway, the gift of *faith*, I have. I also believe I have the gift of discerning, in most cases, whether a good or an evil entity—if any—is behind a certain deed or event. Luke seems to possess the talents of being able to resolve and solve everyday problems for himself and others—‘word of wisdom’—and, also, of knowing things about God and about others, like personalities, motives, and thoughts, which are not known by ordinary means—‘word of knowledge.’”

“Have you ever spoken in tongues like they did on the day of Pentecost?”

“No. Never. Nor have I healed anyone supernaturally, worked a miracle, prophesied, or interpreted someone else’s speaking in tongues. But that doesn’t mean that there are not other people, today, with these gifts.”

“Hmm...interesting.” Pierce walked over to straighten the mirror hanging in front of the safe. Looking into the mirror, he reflected aloud, “I wonder if *I* possess any of these gifts. How could I know?”

“Well, *we know* you have the gift of *faith*, because you’ve accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior. As for any others, I would say that you should pray about them. Ask God to dispense to you any gifts that He has for you, so that you can perform them...with His glory and honor in mind.” Geoff looked at his watch. “Hey, you know, I didn’t realize it was so late. Penny may have had a little ‘accident’ on my carpet by now, just to spite me! Unfortunately, she can’t trust me to look after her best interests *all* of the time, as God can be trusted to look after ours.”

Pierce carried the dishes to the kitchen and started rinsing them off. “So, what time’re you coming over tomorrow?”

Geoff walked in and stood next to Pierce, figuring he had misunderstood what his friend had said. “*Excuse* me? I don’t think I caught that.”

“Oh, sorry...I had the water running, so you probably couldn’t hear me clearly. I asked what time you would be coming over tomorrow to give me a ride to work.” Pierce smiled. “I hate to ask what you *think* I said!”

“Uh-oh...get ready for this one: It *sounded* like you said, ‘What kind of *hummingbird* does the *mumbo*?’! For a second I thought, ‘Wow, that’s the weirdest science experiment I’ve ever heard of!’”

Pierce and Geoff had a good, hearty laugh, then exchanged thank-you’s and good-bye’s. As Geoff departed, Pierce felt lucky to have a friend who had fed him *spiritually*—and Geoff a friend who had fed him *physically*.

Before retiring, Pierce got on his knees next to his bed. “Lord, thank you for Geoff’s friendship, and thank you that I no longer am a suspect in Luke’s shooting. Please cause the truth about this entire situation to be revealed, and...please heal Luke...so that he and I might become...friends. And...if you would allow me to have a spiritual gift or two, I’d like to glorify you and honor you with whatever you might give me. In the Name of Jesus, I ask these things. Amen.” Once in bed, something in Pierce’s spirit seemed to urge him to be willing to be God’s tool to help Luke. He did not understand the feeling; but he thought, *I am willing, Lord Jesus*. At that moment, a small tremor shook the room; but he was not afraid.



“So...a star’s ‘accretion disk,’ swirling around the star in a plane perpendicular to its axis of rotation, is composed of *gas* and *debris*, which congeal into...what?” Pierce called on Miss Nguyen, sitting directly behind Raquel Lacey.

“I would say...planets and moons.”

Raquel had not looked at Pierce once during the entire period. At that particular moment, she was looking at the door. Turning his head, Pierce caught a glimpse of Steven Young outside the door, as he disappeared from sight.

“Very good. Anything else?” Pierce scanned the room. “Mr. Shea?”

“How about asteroids and comets?”

“Asteroids, yes, but probably not comets. Comets most likely originate from outside of a solar system. They’re attracted by the star’s gravitational pull and sling-shot around the star at one tip of their highly elliptical orbits.”

Raquel stared at the floor. If Pierce ever had sensed contempt, it was in this young lady. *What is going through her head?* he wondered.

“Now, it might be expected that the largest planets would form close to a star, with the smallest planets forming further away from it. But, as we know, this isn’t the case in our own solar system. Interestingly, the large outer planets—Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune—attract and ‘take direct hits’ from such things as comets, many of which might otherwise crash into the small, inner planets—Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars. Recall, in July of 1994, when huge

chunks of the Shoemaker-Levy 9 Comet crashed into Jupiter.” Pierce detected a waving hand. “Yes, Mr. Hogerty?”

“It’s almost as if a ‘higher Source’ suspended the normal laws of physics so that the earth could be protected from stuff flying through space....”

The bell rang as Pierce nodded, and the classroom emptied quickly. For the rest of the morning, Pierce had a gnawing feeling in his spirit that Luke’s life or death was in his hands. After the last class of the morning, he called the hospital to get an idea of Luke’s condition. A nurse said Luke was stable. Pierce then tried to reach Geoff at work, but he had gone to lunch. He left a message with Tom, informing him that he would be going to the hospital after his first afternoon class was over and requesting that Geoff meet him there when he could.



Pierce glanced at the clock on the back wall; it was 1:23. “So a comet is a celestial body that consists of a central icy mass with a long tail of dust and gas. Orbiting the sun along a highly eccentric course, its tail points away from the sun. How many of you, in March, saw the rare, twin-tailed, Hale-Bopp Comet, along with Mars—both at their nearest points to earth—on the same night of a lunar eclipse?” About half the students raised their hands. “Does anybody know when Halley’s Comet is expected to travel by us again?”

Before Pierce had time to call upon anyone, the principal announced over the public address system, “*Attention, please! Attention, please!* Everyone must leave the building in a calm, orderly manner. This is *not a drill*; I repeat, it is *not a drill!*” According to drill procedure, Pierce had the students file to the door, row by row, and then exit the room, in single file, to the nearest staircase. Pierce turned out the lights, closed the door, and exited last.

Outside, he was told by Billy Stillinger that there had been a bomb scare and that school had been dismissed for the day. Pierce confirmed this with two other teachers. Entering his car, he happened to notice a cop standing not far away—looking straight at Pierce. Next to the officer was a student whom Pierce did not know. She was pointing at Pierce as he drove away.

As Pierce turned into the hospital parking lot, he saw the lights from more than one patrol car flashing a few blocks behind him. He parked and headed for the front door. Sirens were approaching. Inside the hospital, Pierce’s heart raced as he jogged to the ICU. He was surprised to find Geoff, sitting just outside of Luke’s room, in which numerous doctors and nurses were gathered around Luke’s bed.

As the medical staff withdrew, Geoff explained to Pierce what had happened. “They called me when Luke’s condition worsened, right after lunch.” His voice was shaky. “Almost ten minutes ago, Luke went into cardiac arrest.”

Dr. Cohen approached. “Geoff, atropine had to be injected directly into Luke’s heart to restart it. However, I must inform you that this remedy will be only temporary. In a few minutes,

Luke can be expected to arrest again.” Dr. Cohen placed his hand on Geoff’s upper arm. “As Luke’s appointed agent for medical decisions, you must give your consent, either to have Luke’s heart reactivated with atropine or to allow Luke to leave us. I’m afraid there is nothing we can do to restart his heart permanently.”

Geoff was devastated. “This is the hardest decision I’ve ever had to make.” He sat down. “I’m afraid that...barring a miracle...I’m going to have to let him go.” Interlocking the fingers of both hands together, he rested his face on them and held back the tears. Dr. Cohen said that he agreed with Geoff’s decision and gave him two forms to sign. After Geoff signed them, the doctor said that Geoff and Pierce could go to be with Luke.

The two men stood on opposite sides of Luke’s bed. Geoff held Luke’s hand; Pierce kept his hands in his pockets. Both had a difficult time accepting what was happening. Geoff finally spoke. “Luke, I hope you can hear me, pal. We’re gonna have to”—he swallowed—“let you go now.”

Pierce looked on, pursing his lips tightly.

Through his tears Geoff continued, “Pierce Nevin is here. He’s found the Lord. You know we’re all gonna be friends, Luke...forever.” Geoff sniffled once, then again. “But you’re gonna lead the way, OK buddy? And you just *wait* there for us, because you know we’ll be there eventually. I envy you, Luke, ’cause you’re...”—he took a deep breath between sobs—“gonna be with Jesus now.”

Pierce no longer could hold back the tears. Grasping Luke’s remaining hand with one of his, he expressed, “Luke, it’s Pierce. Geoff’s right. And our friendship in heaven will *more* than make up for all that we’ve missed out on here. Thanks for telling me about Jesus, Luke.” A tear rolled off of Pierce’s face and splashed onto Luke’s hand. “Your effort wasn’t wasted. I know Him now. I *really* know Him!”

A shrill alarm on the machine began to sound, as the pulse indicator on Luke’s heart monitor became erratic. Less than a minute later, it flatlined, just as Dr. Cohen and two nurses—along with three policemen—appeared at the doorway. One of the officers informed Pierce, “Mr. Nevin, I’m going to have to place you under arrest for planting a bomb in the classroom of Mrs. Andrea Young at Foothill High School.”

Geoff looked at Pierce in disbelief. Pierce let go of Luke’s hand and wiped both eyes simultaneously with his fists. He looked at Luke’s pitiful face, the useless tubes emerging from his nose and mouth. For a moment, he wondered if this sight would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Two officers moved toward Pierce, and one took out a set of handcuffs. Suddenly, the IV bottles began swaying, then clinking against their metal stands. Pierce felt like he was standing atop a rubber raft on a wavy swimming pool. *This has to be the biggest aftershock yet!* crossed his mind. A supply table on wheels jolted forward and struck the officer holding the handcuffs,

just as he was reaching for Pierce's arm. Grabbing the side of the bed, his cuffs dropped to the floor. Geoff never let go of Luke's hand.

Pierce looked up at the shifting ceiling as an inaudible "voice" spoke to his spirit: *You're my tool, Pierce. You know what to do.* Reflexively, Pierce laid both of his hands flat on Luke's motionless chest and shouted, "In the Name of *Jesus*...I insist that you will *live* and *not die!*" The shaking abated and then stopped. Luke continued to lay lifeless and still. The heart monitor exhibited no change. Geoff stared at Pierce, not at all amazed, nor even surprised, at Pierce's sudden proclamation.

The officer rebalanced himself, picked up his handcuffs, and clasped them onto Pierce's wrists, behind Pierce's back. Pierce went with the authorities, without protest or resistance, as an innocent lamb accompanies its slaughterers.

Chapter 8

Pierce sat quietly in a holding cell. His eyes were closed. Too much had happened; his mind and emotions were overloaded. Somehow, he did not feel ashamed of his “religious outburst” in Luke’s hospital room. *Lord, you’re the only one that can help me now.* He reflected sadly on Luke.

A metal door slammed shut, followed by the sound of footsteps approaching down the hallway. As Pierce looked up through the bars, his mouth almost dropped open when he observed who was walking ahead of two cops: Steven Young—handcuffed. Pierce’s and Steven’s eyes met for a couple of moments. It felt to Pierce as though he were viewing hate incarnate. *If looks could kill...! Am I actually discerning a demon?* A shiver ran up his spine.

Shortly, the same officers returned, alone, from the opposite direction and entered Pierce’s cell. They uncuffed him and escorted him to the “frontal lobotomy” room. Darius Frey and his somewhat disheveled uncle, Mr. Frey, were seated at the long table. A microphone sat directly in front of Darius, whose head was bowed forward. Without looking up, Darius conveyed, through tears, “Coach, you could never know how sorry I am. *Never.*”

Detective Turner introduced himself to Pierce, inviting him to have a seat at the end of the table near the door, opposite Darius. “Before we hear from Darius, let me begin to explain what has happened.” He took a seat in the middle of one side of the table, behind another microphone. “After the police arrived at the school this afternoon, a student told an officer that, during lunchtime, she saw you in the classroom of Mrs. Andrea Young....”

“*Not true.* After my morning classes, I phoned the hospital. Then I sat alone in the cafeteria the entire lunch hour, eating and reading *Science News*,” Pierce insisted. He recalled how, as he had been entering his car, a girl was pointing him out to a policeman. *Just how many people are in on this conspiracy against me?* he contemplated. “I have *many* witnesses.”

The detective was calm. “I don’t doubt you, Mr. Nevin. Please let me continue.” Pierce nodded. “The student claimed to have seen you placing a curious-looking object—she said, ‘maybe a bomb’—in a desk drawer.”

Looking down, Pierce shook his head but remained silent.

“When two of our officers entered the room and searched the desk, they found a crudely made, but extremely powerful, PVC bomb. It would’ve exploded *big-time* if mishandled. Upon the bomb’s discovery, three squad cars immediately were deployed to follow you. An officer and an explosives expert cautiously transported the device outside and, after carefully dusting it for fingerprints, detonated it on an isolated area of the school grounds. I went with Lieutenant Müller to the Frey residence to talk with Darius here.”

Pierce glanced at a haggard Mr. Frey, whose gaze was fixed upon him. Mr. Frey’s eyes immediately turned away. Pierce felt sorry for him.

“We told Darius that you could be in a lot of trouble and that he should talk, since he didn’t say much last night.” Detective Turner turned toward Darius. “We also told him how a janitor informed us just this morning that, as he was smoking a cigarette outside the gym late Friday night, he saw someone bolting out of a front door—wearing uniform number ‘twelve.’”

Pierce pictured a dejected Darius, a silver “12” on his chest, walking off the court after having been replaced by “the Stilt.” Inside of Pierce’s head echoed those crushing words, “spineless wimp,” yelled by an irate fan. Pierce briefly pondered, *What a firestorm that can be ignited by the spark of a careless tongue!* He had to catch himself from mumbling it out loud.

“We suggested to Darius that a judge might be more lenient on him if he disclosed what he knew. Well, he divulged a lot.” Detective Turner arose from his seat and walked over to the water cooler. Drawing a cupful, he took the cup and sat it in front of Darius. “Can you please tell Mr. Nevin what you told Lieutenant Müller and myself at your house, Darius?”

Darius would not look up; he stared at the microphone before him. He picked up the cup and sipped some water, pausing momentarily with the cup in front of his mouth before he set it down. “Uhhmm...”—he cleared his throat—“on Friday night, Raquel Lacey called me from the school about thirty minutes after the game ended. She invited me to a party...”

Detective Turner reached over and pushed the microphone closer to Darius.

Darius cleared his throat again and repeated, a little louder, “Raquel invited me to a party after the game. She said she needed a ride ’cause Jerry Wells, her boyfriend”—Darius momentarily looked up at Pierce for the first time—“was... ‘off sulking somewhere.’ I told ’er I was still in my uniform an’ that I hadn’t even showered. She told me, ‘So what?...don’t even take the time to change.’ She said she was in a big hurry, so I just split right away to go pick ’er up in front o’ the gym.”

Darius finished his water in a gulp, and Detective Turner got him some more. Pierce knew what it was like to have a dry mouth due to nervousness.

“At the party,” Darius resumed, “Raquel found us a secluded room an’ closed the door. She...she massaged my shoulders an’ told me that...well, that we would’ve won if you’d left me in the game, Coach.” Again, Darius glanced up briefly at Pierce. “She kept gettin’ me one beer after another; I musta had six or eight. I wanted to forget all about that horrible game. *Now* I’m sure we woulda lost a lot worse if you’d left me in.”

Pierce was touched at the humility and sincerity of this young man, who sobbed softly for a few seconds before regaining control.

“Raquel told me that she’d gone to see ya in your office after the game, Coach. She said ya ‘laughed hysterically’ at ’er when she told ya it’d been a mistake to take me out an’ put Billy in. She told me ya said I was...a ‘good-for-nothin’ slug who lives in a garbage dump’...an’ that ya shoulda kicked me off the team months ago.”

Pierce shook his head in disbelief.

Darius straightened up his head and, wiping his face with his sleeve, maintained eye contact with Pierce. “I shoulda *known* ya wouldn’t o’ said those things, after all the times ya’ve helped me an’ my uncle.” Mr. Frey’s careworn face remained directed down toward the tabletop.

“What else did Miss Lacey say to you, Darius?” Detective Turner urged.

“Mmm...”—Darius kept looking at Pierce—“first she cried a little. She said that, when she tried to stick up for me, ya got really mad an’ ...forced yourself on ’er.”

Pierce continued shaking his head, slowly, from side to side.

Darius paused, then continued. “She said she felt like she could never look at herself in a mirror again ’cause she felt ‘dirty.’ She also said she wished there was some way to make ya ‘pay’ for stealin’ away my moment o’ glory an’ for scarrin’ ’er for life. Then...she said she’d heard I had a gun. I was thoroughly plastered, Coach, an’ I was furious. I got up an’ I...I said I was gonna go...‘take care’ o’ you.”

The momentary mental image of a gun, pointed at him by Darius, caused Pierce involuntarily to tighten his lips into each other. Darius wept uncontrollably as Mr. Frey placed his hand on the forearm of his nephew. An officer walked over to a Kleenex dispenser and obtained two tissues, taking them to Darius and returning to his place next to the door.

“Then Raquel...well, she whimpered as she gave me a kiss,” Darius sneered. “She promised me she’d be waitin’ for me when I got back to the party. The only thing I remember about drivin’ home is that the things she said aboutcha...well, they were goin’ over an’ over in my head...almost like a ‘voice’ kept repeatin’ ’em.”

Pierce recalled the passage Geoff had read from the Bible: “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.”

“Then, I got the gun...”—he glanced at Detective Turner—“the one I took from Tom Hastings’ car...an’ went straight to your place, Coach.” Darius’ eyes refocused on Pierce. “Your car wasn’t there, so I went back to the gym. I saw your car in the lot.” Darius took a deep breath. “I cocked the hammer.”

Pierce briefly shut his eyes. *If not for the grace of God, I wouldn’t be sitting here.* Then he opened them. He did not look away from his student.

“Inside, I...I saw that your office door was wide open, so I went to the doorway an’ saw ya at your desk...asleep.” Darius blew his nose and kept the tissue in front of his face for a short time before lowering it, as though he had wanted to block out of his consciousness what had happened after that. “It was like...I dunno...like a ‘spirit o’ hate’ had total control over me. I felt...*possessed*...like *it* was gonna shoot...*not me*.”

Through Pierce's mind instantaneously flashed the deadly look in Steven Young's eyes—both a little while prior, as Steven had passed his cell, and in his dream a few nights before, when Steven seemed to fire at him from another car on the freeway. Pierce's skin crawled; he shifted in his seat.

"I...or 'it'...aimed the gun at your head...." Darius dropped his head into his hands flat on the table and, in a muffled tone, sobbed, "I can't believe I was gonna do it! God, how could I 'ave even *considered* it!"

Detective Turner walked over in back of Darius, placing his hand on the juvenile's shoulder. "It's OK, son...it's OK. Catch your breath now." The boy sat upright, and the detective returned to his seat. "Then what, Darius?"

Darius took a deep breath and wiped his eyes with another tissue. "I was about to...pull the trigger...when somebody behind me yelled, 'Hey, man!...what're you doing?' As I turned around, the guy lunged at me an' grabbed my arm. We struggled, an' then...he fell to the floor. It was like...I woke up out of a trance or somethin'. I saw 'im lyin' there, an' then saw the gun in my hand. Then I recalled that I'd just heard...like...an explosion, an' I immediately knew I'd shot 'im."

Pierce suppressed a gasp before it was released. His hands were sweating. He felt a pain in his chest, as the image of Luke's horizontal body on the floor briefly entered and exited his mind. And, as quickly as the pain had come, it disappeared. Then, in his mind's eye, Pierce saw Luke lying motionless, tubes and all, in the hospital bed. He wished Luke were alive. He fought back the tears.

Darius resumed his story. "As he lay there, barely conscious it seemed, he pulled somethin'—I think some paper—outa his shirt pocket."

Detective Turner's attention focused upon Pierce. "Did you notice if Mr. Steen had anything in his hand?"

Pierce, caught off guard, scrambled for an explanation. "Yeah, uh...it was...uh...just a piece of paper with the final score of the game written on it. It was bloody, so I threw it out. Sorry I forgot to tell you about it."

Detective Turner asked the officer standing by the door if he knew whether or not a bloody piece of paper had been retrieved during the investigation. The officer said that he knew nothing about it. The detective looked again at Pierce. "I wonder what happened to it."

It was difficult for Pierce not to look away, but he maintained eye contact. He suggested, "I don't know. Maybe, in my haste, I didn't put it in the trash can but...maybe somewhere else instead. I...just don't remember."

Alternating his fixation from one of Pierce's eyes to the other, Detective Turner replied, "Hmm...it's hard to imagine how a bloody piece of paper could just... 'disappear.'" After a few

more seconds of detecting no reaction from Pierce, he returned his attention to Darius. “OK. Go on, Darius.”

“So then...I panicked an’ ran to my truck. I drove back to the party an’ got there just as Raquel was gettin’ into Coach Young’s car.”

Pierce flinched, and he readjusted himself in his chair. A little light bulb of understanding in his head, dim at first, gradually grew brighter. *So that was them sitting in his car when I was being hauled away by the police!*

“I stopped my truck in the street next to his car so they wouldn’t leave. I got out an’ ran over to Raquel’s door an’ told ’er I had to talk to ’er. She got out an’ calmed me down. Then she told me to get into the front seat with the two of ’em, assurin’ me that Coach Young was an ‘ally’ an’ could be trusted. So I got in an’ told ’em everythin’ that’d happened after I left the party. When I finished, I couldn’t tell by the look on Raquel’s face whether she sympathized with me for shootin’ the wrong guy or else was mad at me for...for not shootin’ *you*, Coach.” Darius shook his head back and forth a couple of times, then lowered his eyes.

“What did all of you talk about after that?” the patient detective inquired.

“Uh, lemme think...Coach Young told me to get back into my truck, go home, take a hot shower, an’ get a good night’s sleep. He said one of ’em would contact me the next day. As I got outa the car, he asked me if I had the gun in my truck. When I said I did, he told me to get it an’ bring it to ’im. He said he had an idea to...get me ‘off the hook.’ So I did.”

“What else did they say to you?”

“Nothin’. That was it. I went home, showered, an’ went to bed.”

“Then, didn’t you say that Raquel called you?” the detective asked.

“Yeah, next mornin’...’bout seven-thirty or eight. Man, I had a hangover. She...she told me she really cared about me.” Again, Darius shook his head, as though he felt like a fool. “She told me she was gonna wrap the gun in a brown paper bag with the butt stickin’ out. She said that on Monday she’d slide it into your car, Coach, through one o’ the open windows, since ya usually keep ’em down a few inches. Then she said she’d tell a cop that she thought she saw a firearm while walkin’ by your car an’ wondered if, possibly, it might be the weapon used Friday night.”

The door opened, and Lt. Müller peeked in. “Excuse me, Detective Turner. I have a message for Mr. Nevin.” Her eyes met Pierce’s, and she smiled. Without her cap, her thick, blonde hair flowed outward like a model’s in a photo shoot. In a heartbeat of time, Pierce saw the two of them standing above Niagara Falls, beneath a full moon, embraced in a kiss. He smiled back. “Doctor Hutton at the hospital called and asked about you. I took the call and said that you would be in a meeting for awhile but would be free to go soon. He requested that you return to

the hospital. One of our officers will give you a ride there, or wherever else you might wish to go.”

“Thanks a lot, Van...Lieutenant Müller.” He wanted to touch her hair. “I *would* appreciate a ride back to the hospital, when I’m done here.”

“OK. I’ll relay that message to an officer at the front desk.” Each continued gazing at the other until the door closed.

The detective, having been making notes during the interruption, continued to write for a few seconds after Lt. Müller departed. Then he put down his pen. “All right, Darius. What else did Miss Lacey tell you?”

“Uh...she reminded me that if the guy I’d shot—I think his name’s Mr. Steen—recovered, he might be able to identify me. I began to feel really anxious, like a scared rabbit. But then she told me that Coach Young had a solution, if I’d just go along with it.” Darius paused, as though he were reluctant to relate what the so-called solution was.

This time, Pierce asked the question. “Darius, what did she tell you was Coach Young’s...‘solution’?”

“Raquel said that...that Coach Young had a gun with a silencer an’ that I could use it on Mr. Steen.” Darius looked back and forth between his coach and the detective. “You’ve gotta understand...I *didn’t want* to kill ’im! Sometimes things just get so...so complicated, ya know?”

“Keep going,” urged Detective Turner.

Darius composed himself. “Well, I didn’t like the whole idea, but I couldn’t see any other way out. I even got more confused when she told me she wanted me to be ’er date at the prom. I couldn’t believe it...the best-lookin’ girl at school, an’ she said she wanted to go to the prom...with *me!* O’ course, now I know it was just a lie, like everythin’ else she told me!”

The detective took a few more notes and then said, “Now, what about your next encounter with Mr. Young?”

“That was early Monday mornin’. When I got to school, he was waitin’ for me in his car...in the student parkin’ lot. He said he had to stay low, ’cause he’d called in sick. He got out briefly to give me a note on pink paper from Raquel.” Darius’ spirit seemed to drift away from the premises momentarily. “It smelled great.” Then, refocusing on the matter at hand, he continued, “I read it in my truck. Then I refolded it an’ put it into my back pocket, I guess only partway. He reminded me that, later, Raquel would put the gun in your car, Coach. He also suggested that I leave right then with ’im. He pointed out a patrol car nearby which, he said, had arrived a little earlier. That *really* spooked me, so I got outa my truck. I guess that’s when the note fell outa my back pocket. Later, at his house, I couldn’t find it.”

“What did you do at his house?” the detective interrogated further.

“Would it be OK if I used the restroom first?” requested Darius.

“Yeah, sure.” After Detective Turner motioned the officer to escort Darius to the restroom, he spent about a minute writing some notes. Then he ripped a clean sheet of paper out of his notebook, wadded it up into a ball, and placed it into Pierce’s left hand. He pointed to the garbage can by the door, approximately eight feet away, and asked Pierce if he could ‘sink a basket.’ Puzzled, Pierce said he could try. Transferring the paper ball to his right hand, he propelled it directly into the center of the miniature basketball hoop atop the can. “Great shot, Coach! Now...do you happen to know which hand is Coach Young’s dominant hand?”

Pierce recalled having seen Steven stroking his chin and also throwing a football, both with his left hand. “Yeah...I’m pretty sure it’s his left.”

As the detective wrote more in his notebook, Darius returned and took his seat. “OK, Darius...what happened at Mr. Young’s house?”

“Well...he stressed to me that I *had* to get rid o’ Mr. Steen. Otherwise, he might identify me. He said he’d called the hospital Sunday after the big quake an’ found out that Mr. Steen was in pretty bad shape an’ barely hangin’ on. His exact words were, ‘He’s suffering a lot, Dar. You’d only be doing him a favor.’ Then he showed me a loaded Colt forty-five revolver, with a silencer attachment, an’ told me it was...‘the only way.’”

Pierce marveled at the ruthlessness of Steven Young.

“He took me to Denny’s an’ bought me breakfast. As we ate, he assured me that Raquel had a crush on me an’ ‘probably would do anything’ for me. What a pack o’ lies!” Darius slammed his fist onto the tabletop, and his uncle again rested his hand on Darius’ arm. “It was all just a setup! They were just...*usin’* me...an’ I’m so stupid for lettin’ ’em!” Darius unclenched his fist.

Detective Turner allowed Darius a few seconds to recompose himself. “Where did the two of you go after breakfast, Darius?”

“He took me back to school. I got in my truck an’ split to the beach. I sat there all day, decidin’ the pros and cons o’ what he’d asked me to do. After sunset, I...went to the hospital with the gun...an’ ...” Darius put his face down onto his hands and began to sob again. “*I didn’t wanna end up in prison like my parents did! An’ now...after all this...I prob’ly will!*”

Detective Turner completed the story. “After Darius was apprehended in Mr. Steen’s hospital room last night, the gun was fingerprinted. Darius’ right thumbprint clearly showed up on the left side of the gun handle. The left thumbprint of Steven Young, who was just brought in, thanks to the testimony of Darius, has matched some partly smeared prints on the right side of the gun handle. Some of Mr. Young’s left fingerprints also matched the remnant of the prints which he apparently was not successful in wiping off of the pipe bomb.” The detective wrote another sentence in his notebook. “So...that’s about it, Mr. Nevin. Do you have any questions about anything you’ve heard here this afternoon?”

“Yeah...I was wondering if the student who said she saw me put something in Mrs. Young’s desk is in on the conspiracy against me.”

“No.” Detective Turner shook his head. “After that powerful bomb was exploded on school grounds, the girl who had pointed you out to an officer asked the officer why the man she saw planting the bomb had not yet been arrested. When she was told that the police were on your trail, she pointed to a car down the block, off of school grounds, insisting that, a short time before, she had seen you—along with a girl she thought was Raquel Lacey—entering that car. Two officers approached the car, which turned out to be Mr. Young’s, and detained Mr. Young and Miss Lacey inside. Then, a little while later, after those officers were informed of Darius’ testimony, they arrested both of ’em.”

“But why would that girl accuse *me* of planting the bomb?” Pierce pressed, his curiosity still not yet satisfied.

“Well, later, the girl related that, during the noon hour, she had gone to Mrs. Young’s classroom—room 138—to ask a question. The door was locked, so the girl peered in through the hazy windowpane.” The detective pointed to the two-way mirror with one hand and made a motion to the officer with the other. The officer left the room. “She ultimately admitted that she mistook Mr. Young for you, due both to your similar features and to the fact that each of you was wearing a blue shirt and light-colored pants. She said she hopes to be able to apologize to you the next time she sees you this week. She was very upset for having made such an error.”

For the first time, Pierce realized that his desk, in room 238, was *directly above* Andrea Young’s desk, in room 138. *If that bomb was as powerful as the detective has led me to believe it was—Pierce shuddered—it probably would have blown me up, too!*

As Detective Turner logged more information, Darius addressed Pierce humbly. “Coach...I *know* you could never forgive me for what I’ve done, so I won’t ask ya to. I don’t deserve it...but *please* don’t hate me.”

“I *do* forgive you, Dar. And, somehow, I’m certain Luke Steen does too.” Pierce visualized Luke alive in heaven. His eyes watered a bit.

Darius mustered a half-smile, as though the weight of the world suddenly had been lifted off of his shoulders. Moments later, the door opened, and the officer brought in Raquel Lacey and her parents. Sitting down across from the detective, Raquel glared spitefully first at Darius and then at Pierce.

Although Mrs. Lacey had heard Darius Frey’s testimony from the adjacent room, she reacted indignantly. “I just *can’t believe* my beautiful daughter has been arrested! Of all the twisted things!” She placed her hands on both sides of Raquel’s head and leaned over to kiss her luxuriant hair.

Mr. Lacey added, “Our sweet daughter *clearly* has been framed!” He looked sadly at Raquel, who obviously was his pride and joy. “What kind of people would do such a thing to a nice, innocent girl as this?”

The officer who had escorted them in directed Mr. and Mrs. Lacey to sit in chairs on either side of Raquel. As they did, Raquel began to “cry”—or so it seemed—exclaiming, “I *didn't* do *anything!*”

Detective Turner reminded her, “Miss Lacey, everything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law. It will be to your advantage to tell all the truth you know.”

“But, I’m telling you...*I didn't do anything wrong!*” the girl wailed, burying her face in her hands.

Raquel’s parents put their arms around her. Mrs. Lacey declared hysterically, “What’s wrong with all of you? Can’t anyone here see that this girl is an unfortunate victim of somebody’s sick conspiracy? There’s absolutely *no evidence* at all against our daughter here!” Turning and pointing at Darius, she attacked, “How can you believe this...this *murderer* here? He is plainly a liar, and”—she turned toward Pierce—“so is any other *pervert* who speaks out against our baby!”

“On the contrary,” Detective Turner countered, “there is *ample* evidence to involve Miss Lacey in the conspiracy against Mr. Nevin. Two cameras at the Bank of America Versateller machines, across the street from the faculty parking lot, photographed Raquel at twelve-fifty-two yesterday afternoon slipping something through the partially open window of Mr. Nevin’s car. It presumably was the brown paper bag containing the gun used in the shooting. Furthermore...the scent of her perfume is still on the bag.”

These words were not convincing to a skeptical Mr. Lacey. “I know for a fact that videotapes these days can be edited to show whatever anybody wants them to show! And *any* girl could use the same perfume! I guess the *cops* are in on this terrible conspiracy, not against this...this *child molester* here”—he pointed accusingly at Pierce—“but against my innocent girl!”

Detective Turner remained calm and cool. “Mr. Frey...Mr. and Mrs. Lacey...you all may go now; but you must keep Darius and Raquel at home until you are notified of their arraignments. Failure to do this will result in your immediate arrest and possible incarceration.”

Mr. and Mrs. Lacey stood up and walked briskly around the table to the detective, arguing in vain with him, adamantly continuing to affirm Raquel’s innocence. Raquel scowled at Darius and snapped, “You’ve ruined my life, you...you *scum!* You’ll never be anything but a *filthy tramp!*” The boy continued looking downward, silent. “And you...,” the accused cheerleader snarled, glaring daggers at Pierce, “you’ll *never* be *half* the man *Steven* is!”

The policeman, who had heard the venomous declarations spewing forth from Raquel, leaned over the table a few inches from her face and asserted, “There’s enough evidence to convict

your ‘man,’ Mr. Young, of the attempted murder of his wife and Mr. Nevin with that bomb. Maybe you should have thought twice before getting involved with a criminal, little girl.”

Raquel lunged at him, attempting to scratch his face with her long, sharp fingernails; but the cop pulled back just in time. She sat back down and cried some real tears, for a change. Pierce looked upon her with pity. “I’m sorry, Raquel.” Everyone was dismissed by Detective Turner.



As Pierce made his way out toward the front, he stopped at Lt. Müller’s office doorway. She was at her desk. He knocked lightly on the doorframe. Looking up, her serious expression changed immediately to a smile. “Thanks for all your help and everything you’ve done for me,” Pierce expressed. “I really appreciate it.”

Lt. Müller turned off the tape recorder into which she had been speaking. “It’s been my pleasure, Mr. Nevin...Pierce. I’m just sorry you had to endure all of what’s happened to you.”

He approached her desk, transfixed upon her arrestingly perfect green eyes. A piece of his heart melted. “You know, I’ve been curious about something.” He had Lt. Müller’s undivided attention. “At the beginning...and all along...it seems like you’ve believed that...uhm...I’ve been innocent of every charge. And, if so...uhm...I was just wondering why.”

Lt. Müller maintained her fixation upon Pierce’s face, running her tongue once across her unblemished lips before speaking. “Pierce...I’ve seen all kinds come through here, and I’ve developed sort of a ‘sixth sense’—maybe it’s just a heightened intuition—about people. But, to tell you the truth, if not for one thing, I don’t know if I could have been able to be certain about you, because...well, let’s just say, I’ve questioned some very handsome, even-tempered men like yourself who turned out to be ruthless, hardened con artists and criminals.”

Pierce was flattered, but this beautiful lady still had not answered his question. “So...what was it about me that convinced you? I mean...when you first questioned me, I’m sure I acted as nervous as I felt.”

“Well...,” continued the lieutenant, “I suppose you might call it a ‘coincidence.’ When you initially were sitting alone in that room, before I questioned you, I was in the next room—behind the two-way mirror—turning on the tape recorder at the very moment that you said, ‘Was that bullet meant for *me*?’ Presuming this was an inadvertent exclamation on your part, my initial impression was that you simply had been in the wrong place at the wrong time when Mr. Steen was shot. After that, I tended to believe you, because your explanations were plausible. And also, Pierce...I really *wanted* to believe you.” Her penetrating gaze showed him that she did.

Pierce was spellbound. “Well, I must say that, after all that’s happened to me lately, I no longer will discount a ‘coincidence’ as...merely that.”

“I agree. I believe there’s a specific reason for everything that happens.” Lt. Müller’s eyes continued to dazzle Pierce. “Anyway...call me if you have any questions about this case or if I can be of any further assistance.”

“Actually...I was wondering if...uh...if you would mind if...maybe I called you...to invite you to dinner...Vanessa.” Pierce’s mouth became dry, anticipating her rejection. *It would be a miracle if she...*

“I’d like that, Pierce.” Pierce’s solid legs felt weak, so he braced himself with his hands on the edge of her desk. Lt. Müller picked up one of her business cards and, before handing it to him, wrote her home phone number on the back of it. “Call anytime.” She smiled again.

A little bit more of his heart melted. He winked. “You can count on it.” He faced her as he slowly backed up toward the door, hoping he would not trip over anything—like his own feet. From outside the doorway, he asked, “Vanessa...do you believe in miracles?”

“Oh, yes, Pierce. And that reminds me...I think maybe you should go to the hospital as soon as possible....”

Chapter 9

As Pierce entered the ICU, Geoff could see him from inside of Luke's room. Jumping up to greet Pierce, Geoff grabbed the sides of his broad shoulders. "A miracle has happened, Pierce! A miracle! Come look!"

They entered Luke's room together. To Pierce's utter astonishment, Luke was sitting up in bed—fully conscious and disconnected from all of his tubes and lines! Pierce had had no clue as to what Lt. Müller's affirmation of her belief in miracles had meant, and he *certainly* had not considered that it could mean *this!* He had assumed that he would not see Luke again in his lifetime.

Dr. Cohen, who had been talking with Luke, turned to Pierce, exclaiming, "I don't know what you did, Mr. Nevin...but it *worked!* I haven't seen a recovery like this in over thirty years of practicing medicine!" Again he addressed Luke: "You should be able to be transported to a regular room within the hour, as soon as the results of the tests and x-rays we just took become available." On his way out, the doctor gave Pierce a pat on the back.

Pierce's mouth remained open, in utter astonishment, as Luke smiled at him across the room. Then Luke extended his hand. Pierce had a difficult time shaking the feeling that he was in a dream, but finally he forced himself to walk over to shake Luke's hand. As he did, Luke expressed, "Thanks for bringing me back...Tank. God is *proud* of you."

Pierce now looked puzzled, as well as astonished. "Why did you call me 'Tank'?"

Luke laughed. "Years ago, at the gym, before I knew your name, you reminded me of a steel 'tank' wherever you walked. You always leaned slightly forward, with marked confidence and determination, as though nothing was going to stop you from getting from 'here' to 'there.' I envisioned you, even back then, as a mighty warrior of God rolling boldly through enemy territory, scoring victory after victory for the Almighty."

Geoff laughed. Pierce grinned and commented, "I sorta like that name...'Tank.' But don't thank *me* for your recovery, Luke...thank *Jesus!*"

"Oh, I assure you, I already have, and I always will," returned a grateful Luke.

Geoff remarked, "Well, this *is* a sight to behold! I think you two guys have some interesting discussions ahead." Pierce and Luke smiled at each other, nodding. "Hey, Pierce, you haven't said what went on at the police station."

Pierce gave Geoff and Luke a full account of the proceedings, which had transpired earlier in the interrogation room at police headquarters. When he finished, he looked at Luke and stated, "It sounds like all the members of the Lacey family are unfortunate prisoners of 'Pride Island.' I'll be praying that they can escape."

“Yeah, me too,” agreed Luke. “I’m glad you indicated to Darius that I probably have forgiven him, because I do. Although he is culpable for his actions, no matter how dysfunctional and torn-apart his family is, I think he should be given another chance at life.”

Geoff knew that the forgiveness of Darius, demonstrated by his two friends, was heartfelt and genuine. “Hey Pierce...now *Luke* has an account to tell which will utterly *amaze* you.”

“Oh, yeah?” Pierce’s curiosity immediately was sparked. “What’s that?”

“Well...after my heart stopped, my spirit left my body. I observed the earth tremor, saw how you laid your hands on my chest, and watched the police arrest you. The next thing I knew, I was...well...in *heaven!*”

“You’re *kidding?*” Half-jokingly, Pierce queried, “So who met you up there...Saint Peter?”

“No...,” responded Luke, “actually, it was *Abraham*. He was a thick-barrel-chested man with a magnificent robe. He proclaimed, ‘Go with this angel; you have an appointment at the throne of the great God, Jehovah.’”

Pierce’s eyes opened wide.

“As I walked along, I did not crush the resplendent flowers in my path; my feet just...passed right through them! There were perfectly formed blossoms of radiant white, along with every possible color and hue. I recall thinking that, if I could have spent an eternity sitting in that flower garden, gazing upon the infinite spectrum of rainbow tints and inhaling the indescribably rich aromas, it would have been reward enough.

Pierce continued to stare at him, entranced with his account of heaven.

I particularly remember the roses, gardenias, and jasmines, along with the exhilarating fragrances emanating from each. All of the flowers, in concert, produced a low, musical humming sound and gently turned toward me as I passed by them. The Holy Spirit of God permeates every plant—and, in fact, *all things* in heaven—and is the *Power* which galvanizes everything to Life.”

“I think Geoff here was wondering about those jasmines!” Pierce pointed at Geoff. “Sorry, Luke...go ahead. This is pretty *astounding!*”

“Well, I lagged behind the angel and beheld rolling hills and meadows, radiating the most brilliant greens I’ve ever seen. Majestic mountains, some with snowcaps and some without, towered above wide, deep valleys. The regal peaks ranged in hue from intense purple to creamy blue, according to their distance away. The crisp, clean air enabled me to see extreme detail on their jagged sides, even on the ones appearing to be hundreds of miles away.”

“Hey, Luke, let me ask you something before I forget,” Geoff interrupted. “Did the angel who guided you have wings?”

“Yeah, two; but some angels had none,” Luke replied. “Next, my attention was captivated by the clattering of water in a rivulet, as it swirled around polished, multicolored gems. I had to stop to examine it. The rushing water sounded like...like a million tiny hands, applauding with exceedingly great joy! It was similar, on a smaller scale, to the exuberant clamor made by the trees as their branches swayed in the breeze. I *had* to dip my hands into the brook and capture some of the crystal clear water.”

Pierce was thoroughly intrigued. “What was it like?”

“This smooth, velvety fluid, passing over my tongue and down into my stomach, felt like...like *liquid ecstasy!*” Luke reached over, poured some iced water, and sipped a little. “And it was *indescribably* tastier than this! I wanted to stay awhile, but the angel urgently compelled me to continue on.”

“What else?” Pierce entreated.

“Along this enchanting journey, I heard birds chirping and singing, all in silvery, melodious concert. Animals of every imaginable variety leaped and frolicked, as though suddenly having been...‘freed from bondage’! People of all races and colors talked, laughed, sang, and danced. Children vaulted high into the air and floated down, arms uplifted, with squeals of delight.”

Pierce’s mouth was open, and for a few seconds he even felt a wave of exhilaration rushing through his stomach. “*Wow!*”

“Yeah, I know!” agreed Geoff. “But you haven’t heard *anything* yet! Go on, Luke.” In eager anticipation, Pierce drew closer to Luke.

“I remember being amazed that there were *no shadows* anywhere. I asked the tall, blond-headed angel why nothing cast a shadow. He told me, ‘God is light, in Whom there is no shadow or darkness.’” Luke held up his hand for a few seconds, seeming to observe the shadow it cast upon the white sheet covering him. “Oh, yeah...I noticed that many of the people I saw were clothed with white *gowns*, while others wore gorgeous *robes*. The robes were thicker and more luxuriant than the gowns and were covered with elegant, ornate stitching. Those wearing robes walked straight ahead, without straying, on the same path I was taking; however, those wearing gowns eventually veered off the main path, smelling flowers and leaves and playing with some of the animals.”

“What was the difference between those groups of people?” Pierce inquired.

“I asked the angel why some people had gowns and others robes. He replied, ‘*All* have appointments at the throne of the great God, Jehovah. Some receive gowns of *salvation*, others robes of *righteousness*. The former did not live to the fullest glory of God. But the great God is merciful; they will *attain*. The latter have taken on the righteousness of the Lamb and are worthy to approach the throne now.’”

Geoff suggested, “Maybe some with gowns, although saved, accepted their salvation just before death and, in effect, were ‘snatched from hell’s flames’ at the last possible moment.” Luke agreed that this could be the case. Pierce recalled the unearthly orange light—cast by hell’s unquenchable flames, he supposed—flickering amongst the black shadows of the abyss in his dream. He thanked God, silently, that he would be spared from that.

Luke continued. “Then, suddenly, people began to announce repeatedly, ‘*He’s coming! He’s coming!*’ I looked and...”—Luke gazed upward at the ceiling, as though into heaven again—“and I saw *Jesus* walking toward us!”

Pierce sat down on the side of the bed, his eyes riveted to Luke’s.

“He wore a pure white robe with a wide, golden sash around His waist. The robe looked like...it’s hard to put into words...like...a *billion sparkling diamonds* reflecting the light of a *billion suns* shining on them! As Jesus approached, I fell helplessly at His feet, like a limp rag. Through the holes in his upper feet, I could see light from the other side.

“You mean where the *nails* went through?” Pierce asked, almost incredulously.

“Yes. Then the angel put his hand on my shoulder and picked me up. I looked at Jesus’s face, and it shone like...the *sun*...and His eyes were like...individual torches of blazing fire, piercing the darkness of a black dungeon. I had to look away. Then Jesus said, ‘I brought you here to give you a message: Go tell my people *I am coming.*’ I was perplexed and replied, ‘Lord, they *know* that.’ But Jesus exhorted me sternly, yet gently, ‘*No*...they are not fully aware. *Go tell them I am coming.*’ Then numerous little children ran up to Jesus, grabbing and hugging him and singing exquisitely beautiful songs.”

Pierce was in awe. “*Wow*...I can’t believe you saw...*Jesus!* I mean...I believe you...it’s just that...”

“I know, I know! I assure you, I’m more overwhelmed than you are!”

“Tell him what happened after that,” Geoff urged.

“Then...I witnessed the most extraordinary phenomenon. I’ve always believed in the Trinity, but I never really quite understood it. I saw Jesus being *transfigured* into a mass of extremely intense energy and light! Somehow, I knew that He was becoming One, in form, with the Father. I perceived a...like a...white-hot cluster of effulgent, powerful light—*Jehovah Elohim*—shielded by smoke, alternating with an outward human, corporeal projection—*Jesus*. Jesus and the Father were *one*...yet, at the same time, *two*...and the Holy Spirit permeated their essence, completing the *Trinity*. I could not fathom the profound *Love* which I clearly perceived to exist in Their midst. I wanted to enter into this fascinating amalgamation; but I sensed that I could not exist inside of it—at least, not in my present form.”

“You know,” Geoff pointed out, “the image you just described reminds me of the transfiguration of Jesus described in Matthew 17, where Peter, James, and John saw his face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming as white as light.”

“Yes, *exactly* what I was thinking,” concurred Luke. “And do you recall, in that biblical account, when a bright cloud enveloped all of them standing there, and a voice out of the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!’?”

“Yeah, that seems to correspond very closely with what *you* saw.” Geoff smiled. “I can’t wait to get to heaven to see it for myself!”

Pierce prodded, “What else did you see, concerning God or heaven?”

“Well...while I was beholding the fullness of God, my attention was drawn to four creatures, covered with eyes in front and in back, each with six wings. The creatures flew around the throne, declaring harmoniously, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’ I knew that these creatures had been doing this continuously for untold eons of time, and it suddenly dawned on me how it could be that they never tire of making the same revolution around God, over and over again.”

“How?” quizzed Geoff.

“*Each time* they circle the infinite, multifarious God, they behold a *facet* of Him that they’ve *never seen* before! Not only do they *never* grow weary; I suspect they look forward to each orbit with even greater anticipation than the one before! As soon as I realized this, I knew that all people existing in God’s Kingdom, forever, will be *anything* but ‘bored’!”

“Funny,” remarked Pierce, “I guess I always viewed ‘heaven,’ *if* there were such a place, as one big, continual party. And, even in my younger days, I’d get enough of ‘partying’ for awhile. So, I never could see what the big deal was all about. You’ve really opened up my eyes, Luke...buddy.”

For a few moments, Luke could not believe that this person—who had rejected his friendship for years—now had saved him, twice, and was calling him “buddy.” His throat tightened, and his lacrimal glands went into action. He grabbed Pierce’s wrist tightly and reiterated, “*Thank you* for being willing to be God’s tool to save me. I appreciate it...Pierce!”

Pierce grasped the wrist of the hand holding onto his own wrist. Through a few joyous tears of his own, Pierce responded, “You’re welcome. And thank you for being so persistent...and patient...with me. I fear I would have been lost, forever, without the endeavors of you and Geoff here.” Geoff sat down on the bed and gently pounded Pierce’s shoulder a few times with his fist. Pierce continued, “I just wish I had...accepted your friendship sooner, Luke. I’m sure we’ve both missed out on a lot of good times.”

“Yeah, maybe, but at least there’s an *eternity* ahead to catch up on what you guys’ve missed,” Geoff laughed. “Hey, Luke...wasn’t there more?”

“Yeah, where was I now?” He and Pierce released their mutual grips.

“Uh...the creatures orbiting around God’s throne,” reminded Pierce.

“Oh, yeah. Then my angelic guide told me it was time to return. On the way back, I saw a family of five sitting on some grass, having a picnic. I asked the angel about them. He explained that all of them had died, at once, in a car accident. Then he said, ‘But the great God Jehovah is merciful, and all of them are here together. One of the children had not been born yet at the time she had died; now, her parents are teaching her the precepts of God.’”

Pierce never had wanted a family, always having regarded himself as “too independent” for one. Now he mused, *I wonder if I could have one...with Vanessa*. Oddly, for the first time, the thought did not spook him.

“That’s about it...well, except for what that big, robust angel told me right before I left, at the same spot our brief expedition had started. He advised me, ‘Remember this, Luke: The Blood of Jesus has not *covered* your sins; it has *removed* them. Now, go and tell His people that He is coming *soon*.’ The next thing I knew, I was lying here, with Geoff on one side and Doctor Cohen on the other. And I felt absolutely *great...still do!*”

Jerry Wells cleared his throat. Pierce stood up and turned around. “Hey, Jerry, you just get here?”

“No...”—Jerry shook his head once to each side—“actually, I heard most of his description of heaven. Pretty fascinating!”

“Jerry, you know Geoff here,”—Jerry and Geoff nodded to each other—“and this is the amazing Luke Steen.”

“Hey, Luke!” Jerry waved. Luke waved back. Then Jerry noted, “It looks like you’ve made a pretty phenomenal recovery!”

“Yeah, you might say that! How’re things goin’ with you?”

“OK, considering that my world has been turned upside down in just a few days! Hey, Coach...what’s the lowdown on Raquel and Coach Young?”

Pierce briefly related what had taken place at the police station. “So, I guess Raquel and Steven are in the same boat now—although not in the boat they ever expected to be in, I’m sure.”

Jerry disclosed, “You know, I heard today from two of Raquel’s co-cheerleaders that she and Coach Young had made plans to *elope!* I suspected for some time that she was seeing someone else besides me. Recently, I thought it was Darius. I never would’ve guessed that it was *Young!* Anyway, I’m sure I’ll get over it. There are other fish in the pond!”

Pierce approached Jerry and slapped his opposite shoulder. “That’s the right attitude, Jerry! You’re a true optimist.”

“You know, Coach...I just wanna tell you that you’ve set a good example for me ever since you came to Foothill High, and I’m not the only one who feels that way. Everybody looks up to you, because you’re a solid example of *integrity* and *persistence*, among other things. You sorta remind me of...like an armored *tank*, determined to get where you wanna go in life.”

“Thanks, Jerry. I appreciate the compliment.” Pierce squeezed Jerry’s shoulder for a couple of seconds. Then he looked over at Luke and laughed, “Now, I guess I’ll *really* have to live up to the name of *Tank!*”

Suddenly, a pale Dr. Cohen, his hands trembling, appeared at the doorway. He said nothing for a few seconds, as though trying to get a grip on reality. Then, walking over to the x-ray viewer and clipping on three film plates, he articulated, “Luke, you aren’t going to believe this. I can’t say that I myself, as yet, have accepted it.” Removing a pen from his pocket, the doctor shakily pointed to the location in each of the three x-rays of Luke’s heart where a bullet should have been—but was not. “See?...*no bullet!*”

“Could it be that these are someone else’s x-rays?” Geoff proposed.

The doctor removed the middle film and put up another one in its place. It was identical to the film on its left, except that it clearly showed a bullet imbedded in the left ventricle, plus it showed edematous tissue not present on the other x-rays. Dr. Cohen insisted, “Believe me, along with the x-ray technicians and the other doctors here, I have considered every conceivable alternative. Very simply, we no longer can detect a bullet inside of Luke!”

Luke lowered the sheet and opened his hospital gown. All that could be seen, at the spot where the bullet had entered, was a tiny, barely perceptible indentation in his skin. Everyone else present approached Luke to examine it more closely. Jerry’s mouth hung open in astonishment. Luke, repressing tears, exclaimed, “Thank you, Jesus!” Pierce and Geoff repeated Luke’s words in unison and then “high-fived” each other.

Dr. Cohen took a seat, seemingly before his legs collapsed underneath him. He related, “I am a Jewish man, and I’ve never cared to hear a word about...‘Jesus.’ But, now...I guess my curiosity has overcome me. Would anyone care to explain to me what *Jesus* has to do with any of this?”

And, on that wondrous day, among five special men, was commenced a close, personal friendship which would continue throughout eternity.

Chapter 10

In an instant, Colton grasped the entire “big picture” concerning his relationship with Hank Ward—an acquaintance at the health club and author of the story, “Pride Island.” Hank had left the story’s manuscript in Colton’s unsecured gym locker a couple of weeks before, along with an attached note.

In the note, Hank had stated that he was sorry he had disturbed Colton’s “comfort sphere” at the gym, on and off, over the years. He also had said that this was the first draft of a novel he had created and that it had been inspired by Colton. He had added that, even if it never got published, the time and energy expended to write it were worth it—if, somehow, it influenced Colton in a positive way, as Hank hoped it might. He concluded by saying that he would be moving away and that he wished Colton all the best in life.

Colton had been reluctant even to open the manuscript, much less to read it. But, about a week later, something had strongly compelled him to begin perusing it. It certainly was not the best story he had read, but it held his attention—at least enough so that he was able to complete it in a couple of days.

As he had read “Pride Island,” a few things had been clear to Colton. For one thing, he had discerned that Hank was a “composite” of both Geoff and Luke. Also, although he himself was neither a coach (though he did love basketball) nor a teacher—*nor even* part Jewish—Colton had known that he was portrayed by Pierce. He had wondered if Steven depicted his “dark side,” but he was not certain.

In any case, he suspected that Hank had used Pierce to emphasize Colton’s positive traits, attempting to show that “good” people are not worthy of heaven but, rather, those upon whom the righteousness of Jesus has been imparted—via His shed blood. And the friendship which unfolded between Pierce and Geoff was indicative of the relationship which easily could have emerged, anytime, out of Colton and Hank’s mere acquaintanceship—had both been willing to put aside their mutual *pride*.

However, it was not until *that very moment* that Colton grasped how the things Hank had communicated to him about God were true and were relevant to him: God was real, He was Colton’s Creator, and He wanted to have a close and meaningful *relationship* with Colton. Colton also became convinced that both heaven and hell existed. For the first time in his life, Colton possessed a broken, contrite spirit. His emotion might have overcome him, had these transitory thoughts not been interrupted by a higher Source.

As time crept imperceptibly forward—or else, maybe God simply had caused Colton’s thinking processes to accelerate greatly—the still, small, now-familiar “voice” returned. Colton knew it was God’s Holy Spirit inquiring of his spirit, *So, what about that nice, green-eyed, blonde girl at the party?*

Colton assumed, reasonably, that he never would see her again; yet he had an uncanny feeling that he might. He thought, *I regret that it is too late now to offer her the apology that I owe her. I was such a jerk...*

And why did you resist a friendship with Hank and disregard the things he told you about Me? the quiet “voice” continued to query.

Colton was resolute in his unspoken response: *I cannot deny that it was due to my foolish pride...and even a little fear, as well.*

Do you receive me now? the “voice” finally inquired gently, but firmly.

Yes, Father, reflected a humble Colton. *I know that Jesus rose from the dead, so that I can have eternal life; and I accept Him as both my Savior and my Lord. But...must I die in this car accident, Lord?*

The Holy Spirit answered, *The wages of sin is death. However, my mercy is great. You will do things to bring many to Me, for my glory. And I will take **great pride** in you. Go, now, and execute your first momentous task.*

To Colton’s utter astonishment and wonder, he realized that his sports car was proceeding, unimpeded, down the freeway! Moreover, he fully was in his right mind, free of the effects of the PCP he had smoked. Glancing into his rearview mirror, Colton could see the orange and black steel crane—still sitting on the overpass! It dawned on him that the drug must have caused a powerful hallucination. The crane had not fallen onto the freeway after all—or *had it?* Colton began to consider, *Did God “undo” what happened and “alter” the ensuing chain of events? Is anything beyond God’s control?*

But he had no time to contemplate any of this. The mighty quake was *real*, and it continued, unabated. *Wow, is this “the Big One”?* All four of his Corvette’s tires still felt flat. Cars, his included, were weaving on the expressway; many were pulling off to the side. Colton glimpsed the “Fairview Road” sign, the exit he took to go home. Braking, he barely made the off-ramp.

Still not in control of his car, Colton could not prevent a collision with the guard fence on the right side. His car broke through the fencing and stopped at the brink of a ravine, alongside the road. The quaking ceased as he jumped out. Dashing to the front of the car to see if his right-front tire was over the edge, he observed that another section of the fence was missing a few yards further. Someone’s car had torn through it and had rolled halfway down the grassy bank. Water from a recent storm was rushing by, about 25 feet below.

“It looks like Hank Ward’s car!” exclaimed an astounded Colton. He recalled having seen Hank at the party earlier and having ignored Hank when he had waved. *It is his car! This is too bizarre!* Colton made a flying leap, tripped when he landed, and rolled the rest of the way to Hank’s car. Hank’s motionless body was slumped over his steering wheel. A strong aftershock jolted the car yet further down the incline and closer to the torrent of water.

Colton frantically pulled Hank from the car and over to a less-sloped spot. Hank was not breathing—nor was his heart beating. Colton looked at Hank’s lifeless face for a moment and then began pounding ineffectually on Hank’s chest, shouting, “*No!...I never got to know you, Hank!*” Looking up into the night sky, illuminated by a rare, lustrous blue moon, Colton cried out, “It *can’t* end this way! Dear God, *help me!*...I don’t know how to do CPR!” He paused and added, “*C’mon, God...you’ve gotta do something!*”

The Holy Spirit impressed upon Colton, *You have embraced the Name which is above all names. Now, only believe.* Without delay, recalling Pierce’s words to Luke, Colton placed his hands on Hank’s chest and cried out again, “In the Name of *Jesus*...I claim that you will *live and not die!*” Nothing happened, and Colton’s faith quickly faltered.

Again, he looked upward. He shook his raised fists and yelled, “*No, God!...don’t take away my...my friend! Please...you can’t!*”

There still was no response from Hank. Colton, head down and all hope gone, whimpered, “Dear Lord God...I *know* you could have raised him up.”

Suddenly, Colton began to hear deep gasps for air. Gazing upon Hank’s face, he saw that his eyes partially had opened. Hank, focusing on Colton’s eyes, sputtered in seeming disbelief, “Co...Colton?...*Colton Lowe?*” He blinked a few times, as though he thought he were dreaming. “It can’t be.”

Another sharp aftershock struck, and Hank’s car tumbled down to the bottom of the ravine, upside down, and rapidly filled with water. Colton grabbed Hank’s shoulders, leaned down, and spoke into his ear: “*Hank! It’s me, and you’re gonna be OK, buddy!...thank God we’re both all right!*” After a few seconds, sensing that Hank was about to say something else, Colton drew back and peered into eyes which were as blue as his own.

“It...it really *is* you, Colton! When did pigs start to fly?”

Colton laughed. Through tears of joy, and with his trademark “killer” smile, Colton continued, “I read that book you wrote, pal...and do I ever have an amazing story to tell *you!* In fact, what happened to me since I left that party tonight is...well...*beyond incredible!*”

“Me too...*Tank!*” Hank sat up and asserted hazily, yet fervently, “Believe it or not, I just beheld *heaven*...and it’s very much like the way that guy in my novel saw it!”

Colton approved of his new nickname and, with a gleam in his blazing blue eyes, replied with a snicker, “You mean...your ‘half-buddy,’ *Luke?*”

And, with that, a permanent bond of camaraderie was formed between two human spirits. Eventually, they often would soar together over vast mountains and valleys, exploring innumerable, glorious secrets and mysteries, in the [new Creation](#) of God to come—forevermore.