

Reforming the Potter's Clay

Donald James Parker

Sword of the Spirit Publishing

This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described here are imaginary and not intended to reflect any actual person, living or dead. The story of Samuel Morris is indeed factual. You can find a wealth of information about him on the Internet. I believe five books have been written about him, the most recent by contemporary Christian author Terry Whalin. The books, movies and websites mentioned here do indeed exist.

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And much gratitude to Ian and Athena Robbins for their help. If you're looking for wonderful coffee and tea, check out their offerings at www.coffeeisland.com.

Cassiel's Lament - A poem by Dante Longo

We risk the night your darkness brings
cold formula for sorrow
We weep the death of which fate sings -
There's no hope for the morrow

A tortured shell behind red eyes
ignores angelic voices
A failing heart loathed dry denies
perception earned with choices

To bleed a rose of beauty bred
in sunlight's joyous verses;
to crush the head of flowers bled
bares bete noire wrapped in curses

Chapter 1

"I bet our dad's going to kiss your mom tonight," Esperanza, known usually as 'EJ', whispered to her brother, Pedro, and their friends Faith and Matthew.

"Let's quit talking about it and get into position to watch," Matthew said.

Brandishing a slim remote, as a wizard might a wand, Pedro pointed and hissed at the two twelve-year-olds. "We have to be quiet, or we're toast."

Pedro, fourteen and athletic from head to toe, was the ringleader of the group. Faith, a blue-eyed fourteen-year-old beauty, was Pedro's right-hand girl. Pedro beckoned with his finger, and Operation Parent Trap was launched.

Crawling like scouts taking position to survey enemy troop movements, the youngsters took cover behind a corner wall. Four heads, stacked like gumballs in a clear round tube, eavesdropped on the conversation in the next room.

"Oh, Salvador, that feels so good!" Barbara purred. "Do it some more."

The kids looked at each other with eyes as big as Tootsie Pops.

"Ohhhhhh. I'll give you just sixty years to stop that." Barbara's purring changed to moaning.

Pedro pressed a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing.

"Sorry to pop your bubble, Barbara, but my hands will give out in about sixty seconds. A back massage is a gift from Heaven, huh?"

"No doubts there."

"Maybe you could give me one in return?"

Barbara groaned. "I'd rather get one than give one."

"That would put you in the majority. That vote might even be unanimous. How would you like to get together Saturday morning for breakfast?"

"My place or yours?"

"It doesn't matter to me. I just want to spend time with you."

"That's sweet of you, Sal. Why would you want to do that?"

"Fishing for compliments, are you?"

"Season's open all year."

Sal laughed. "OK, here you go: I want to spend more time with you because you're a warm, intelligent, and attractive lady."

"Hmmm. That's not a bad start. I'm not sure it's a keeper though."

"Hey, are you casting doubts on my compliments?"

"Not exactly. I'm just casting to tempt their big brother – or maybe an uncle."

"And you're tempting me, too."

"In what way?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"You know I would, so tell me."

"No."

"Salvador Morales! Am I going to have to tickle it out of you?"

"I'm not ticklish."

"Yeah, and St. Patrick wasn't Irish either."

"I'm warning you. If you tickle me, I might say a whole lot more than you want to hear."

"Impossible. For now, though, there is one question I want answered."

"Am I supposed to guess what the question is?"

"Hold on, big boy. I'll get there. I was just wondering why you've never tried to kiss me."

The kids, choking on squeals, barely contained themselves. Pedro put a hand on each of the two younger kids to keep them from scrambling out for a view.

"Have you tried to kiss me?" Sal asked.

"Well, no, but I figure that's the man's job."

"Why? A gentleman is never sure whether the lady desires intimacy. So, if a woman wants a kiss, maybe she should make the first move."

"I usually trust your opinions. OK. Pucker up, handsome."

"Are you hinting that you're going to kiss me?"

"I'm hinting you should shut up and get those lips ready."

The kids braced themselves for face mashing.

Barbara's face was inches from Sal's when she wailed, "Wait. I can't!"

"You can't kiss me?"

"No, no, no! That's not the problem. I can't do breakfast on Saturday! That's the day the new Harry Potter book comes out. The kids and I are going to the bookstore for a party. It's like a sunrise event, and it goes on for hours. If we don't get there early enough, they might be sold out. Hey, maybe you guys could come with us?"

Sal hopped to his feet and walked away from Barbara. His footsteps indicated that he was headed directly toward the kids. It looked like they were about to be busted. The four kids froze in place like they were playing statues. Their breathing stopped just before the footsteps did. Sal paused, sighed, and walked back to Barbara.

Faith sagged against a wall, looked up and lipped a silent 'Thank you.' Matthew knelt and softly beat his pale forehead on the carpet. Pedro made the sign of the cross.

Esperanza whispered, "I gotta go potty."

"Wow! I thought you were a Christian, Barbara."

"You thought right. Who says I'm not?"

"I'm not saying you're not a Christian because you're a Harry Potter fan. What I'm saying is, because you are a Christian, you should avoid Harry."

"Why? They're just innocent books for kids where good triumphs over evil."

"They contain witchcraft. Since when is witchcraft good?"

"I can't believe we're having this conversation!"

"Me either. I can't believe I have to warn you about the evils of witchcraft."

"What about Walt Disney movies?" She marched over to his entertainment center and pointed to his movie collection. "*Snow White*. There's a witch in there."

"You're right, but the witch is a bad guy – the villain. In Harry Potter, witches are heroes. It's not a problem for God if we talk about devils or witches, but Scripture warns us against pursuing the occult."

"Didn't you ever watch *Bewitched*? Samantha was the good guy."

"Yeah, when I was a kid."

The two adults became more agitated, and louder, as the conversation progressed. The kids, embarrassed by their parents' argument, could have eavesdropped from the street. Pedro thought about leading the kids back to the recreation room, but he was rooted by the spectacle.

Barbara let out an audible gasp. "I thought I knew you! You didn't seem to be a narrow-minded, judgmental fanatic."

"I thought I knew you, too. If someone who wants to be true to God is narrow-minded, then I plead guilty."

"Maybe you should plead insanity. We have a promising relationship, and you want to jeopardize it by standing on a soapbox and preaching at me."

"I don't want to, Barbara. I have to."

"Fine. I don't have to stand here and listen."

"Then sit down."

"I'll sit down – in my car before I drive it home."

Footsteps came their way again, and Barbara yelled. "Faith! Matthew! Come on, we're going home." She swung around the corner just as the kids scrambled to get to their feet. "Oh, there you are. Get your stuff. We're so out of here!"

The two Nelson children grabbed their backpacks. They looked over at Pedro and EJ, who stood in stunned silence, blown away by the sudden turn of events. Barbara hustled the children out the door before they could even say goodbye.

Sal, muttering, hurried around the corner toward the kitchen. His children, side by side and arms linked, blocked his path.

"What?" he yelled.

"Nice maneuver, Hoover," Pedro said. "Blew a relationship with a beautiful woman and our friendship with her kids – and for what?"

"OK, hold on. Take off your judge's robes, come on into the living room, and sit on the couch. We're going to have one of those old-fashioned, heart-to-heart, father-child discussions."

They both moaned. "Do we have to?" EJ asked.

"Only if you want to eat tomorrow."

"That's blackmail," Pedro said.

"Whatever! Do you call it blackmail if a policeman threatens to take you to jail if you break the law?"

Pedro shook his head and closed his eyes. "Fine. Have it your way. Come on, EJ, let's get it over with."

They settled onto the couch, crossing their arms like a synchronized pouting team and glaring at their dad.

"First of all, how much did you guys hear of our conversation?"

"Pretty much all of it, Dad. I mean...it's not like you guys were whispering," Pedro said.

"That's true. You know, kids, we've had this discussion about Harry Potter in the past. You know how I feel."

"But why, *Padre mio*? Have you read even one of the books?" EJ asked.

"No. I don't need to read them. The pastor told us enough in church for me to make an intelligent decision."

"You always tell us to be our own person. To make our own decisions and not to take other people's word for things," Pedro said.

"Well, yeah, but...."

"But what, Dad?"

"Yeah, what's good for the goose is good for the duck," Esperanza said.

Sal laughed. "That's not exactly the right phrase, *mi corazón*, but I get what you mean. Look, I don't have to get hit by a truck to know that it hurts. Nor am I going to doubt someone who tells me it does. Pastor Williams has never steered us wrong. But, I'll tell you what – we'll read a Harry Potter book. We'll find out, together, why Pastor warns against J. K. Rowling's writing."

"Yippee!" Esperanza jumped up and down. "We're going to get some Harry Potter. Get book three. That's my favorite."

"That's your what?"

"Uhh...I heard it's really good."

"Miss EJ Morales! Out with the truth! I told you kids not to read Harry."

"I kind of read over Faith's shoulder when I was at her house."

"And I'm going to kind of paddle your butt," Sal stated as he walked towards her.

She stiffened and watched his approach, fear written on her face. He sat down beside her, reached over and put his arm around her small shoulders. "Honey, you know when I tell you not to do something, I'm doing it for your own protection. It might not make sense to you, but please remember I love you and I want only what's best for your life."

"You've told me this before, Daddy."

"Yes, I have, but it looks like you need to hear it again. Remember when you were five and had just gotten tall enough to reach the toaster? I told you not to touch it because it was hot. You didn't trust me, and what happened?"

"I got burned."

"Exactly, but you did learn that toasters really are hot, and that Dad knew what he was talking about. In this case, the danger is more difficult to grasp. And the pain it can cause is much worse than a toaster burn. Am I making any sense here, kiddo?"

"Kinda. I just have to trust you on this stuff, right?"

"Yep. By the way, we're not going to buy a Harry Potter book. We'll borrow one from the library, starting with the first one. And we'll study it together to see what it contains. OK?"

Esperanza nodded. Dad looked over at Pedro. "Does that work for you, son?"

"Whatever. You're calling the shots here."

"You seem to be a little beyond mad, *mi hijo*. What's up with

that?"

EJ grinned. "He's upset because you caused his girlfriend to go home. He's got a crush on Faith."

"Do not!"

"Do too!"

"Don't either."

"Pedro's got a *novia*. Neener neener neener!"

Pedro rolled up his hand into a fist. "Shut your face!"

Sal put a hand on each of the kids' shoulders. "That's enough of that discussion, and that kind of language. Any more outbursts like that and I'll have you doing imitations of the Karate Kid. Understand?"

"You mean we'll be learning martial arts?" EJ asked.

"No. You'll be doing the wax-on, wax-off routine as you wash and wax the car. Maybe a Tom Sawyer imitation would be next. That fence out front is getting a little faded."

"Daddy, you wouldn't!" EJ moaned.

"Try me. You won't like the results. Do you get my point?"

EJ rolled her eyes at the ceiling. Pedro just nodded.

Sal checked his watch. "There's still time to hit the library tonight before they close. Time to do some detective work."

"Can we get some ice cream on the way back?" EJ pleaded.

"I thought you had ice cream while you were watching the movie."

"But that wasn't Baskin and Robbins."

"No, and I didn't have to borrow money from the bank to pay for it either! Did you realize for the price on one B&R cone, I can buy a half gallon of ice cream at the grocery store?"

EJ pouted again. "I should. You've delivered that sermon more times than Baskin and Robbins has flavors."

"Dad, I have one question."

"Shoot, Pedro."

"If you find that there's nothing bad in Harry Potter, are you going to make up with Barbara?"

Sal grinned. "In the words of a famous teenage philosopher, 'DUH!'"

Chapter 2

Pedro rode shotgun on the way to the library. EJ would have the privilege on the way home. That was the arrangement set up to keep them from fighting over who got to sit up front with their dad. It had been a year since he first allowed them to ride next to him. It was hard to let someone take the spot their mother had occupied for fifteen years of his life. The brain aneurysm that had snuffed out her young life had almost taken Salvador out as well. The need to stay strong and focused for the kids' sake and his faith that God still had the whole world in his hands were all that got him through.

As they drove past the former Jenkins' home, EJ gasped. "Look! Someone's moving into Sarah's old house."

Sal slowed the car, and they all stared at the moving van and the frantic activity of people in the yard, obviously trying to finish the unloading before dark. They didn't have time to see much, but one thing stood out; a young girl about EJ's age waved to them as they drove by.

"Looks like you're getting a replacement for Sarah," Sal said.

"Nobody could ever take Sarah's place. I don't know why her dad had to take that job in Arizona."

"I think there were about eighty thousand reasons why he accepted that job."

"What does that mean?"

"That's about how much money he's getting a year at his new job. That was a fifteen-thousand-dollar-a-year raise."

Pedro whistled. "I think I'd move for fifteen K a year."

"What do you know about money?" EJ piped up from the back seat.

Pedro turned around and glared at her. "Listen, twerp, I know a lot more than you do."

"Do not!"

"Most certainly do!"

"In your dreams!"

Sal slapped his hand against the dashboard, producing a noise that made EJ jump. "Order in the car! How many times do I have to tell you kids to stop arguing? What do I have to do to get the point across?" Neither child attempted to answer. "OK. I'm

going to put the blame where it belongs if I can. If you guys start an argument in front of me and I can determine who started it, the guilty party is going to be assigned the chores of the other one for a week. So you better engage your brain before you open your mouth, unless you enjoy the vision of your brother or sister sitting on the couch grinning and watching you do their work."

"That's fine with me because she's always the one starting the argument."

"Hold on, Pedro! That is exactly the type of statement that gets a fight going. If you want to make a statement like that, don't say it to EJ. If you have a complaint, you come tell me the story. If I think you have a valid case, I'll be the one to bring it up with her. And the same goes for you, EJ. That's how law works."

"Dad, look out!" EJ screamed.

Sal looked up at the road and saw he was over the line and in the lane of oncoming traffic. The horn of a truck blared out a warning just as Sal swerved back into his own lane.

Sal let out a big sigh. "Thank you, Lord. You too, EJ."

"Aren't you supposed to keep your eye on the road, Dad?" Pedro asked.

"Excellent point. I could make an excuse and say that it's all your fault for distracting me with your silly arguments and my need to give you a lecture. Unfortunately, that excuse isn't going to fly with the judge. This is exactly the idea I'm trying to get drilled into your heads. When people make mistakes, they or other people may die or have their lives destroyed. We need to be careful. I was being negligent looking at you guys instead of watching the road."

"You said it, Dad. When you said 'hold on', I didn't realize you meant it literally."

"Yes, I'm guilty, and I'm a big enough man to admit it. It takes a special person to be able to admit when they're wrong. I want you guys to grow up to be like that. Take responsibility for your actions and the consequences. Dare to be different in this world without coloring your hair purple or getting your tongue or some other body part pierced. Be different by being responsible, kind, and forgiving."

"Just like Jesus taught," EJ said.

"Exactly. Follow the way of the Master, and you will be very different than most of the world, especially in our modern rat-race society."

"Being good is boring. Nobody pays attention to you when you're behaving – unless you're a super jock or super cool," Pedro

said.

"That leaves you out of—" EJ's comment broke off when her father turned and flashed her a mean look.

"Of course people are paying attention. You just might not know it. The problem is maybe they aren't the people you want paying attention. I hope you realize that any friends you make by being squirrely and doing and saying stupid, hurtful, or dangerous things are not really your friends. The way life is supposed to work is that as you grow up, you learn lots of valuable lessons about the way to live. Now that I have kids, I share that wisdom to help you have a better life. And, if we're lucky, you'll avoid some of the dumb things I did because you learned the lesson without having to actually go through the experience."

Pedro's face brightened. "I've been trying to do that with EJ. I've told her some things to watch out for in middle school, so she doesn't make a fool of herself."

"That's good, Pedro! How does she take your advice?"

"She doesn't listen. She's going to be sorry when school starts."

"That sounds familiar. I don't think you guys are listening to me, either. What if EJ hadn't noticed that I drifted over into the other lane a few minutes ago? Or what if I ignored her? We could have had an accident that would have impacted all of us for life. You have to remember that the decisions you make today will determine what problems and other decisions you face tomorrow."

"So, you think Harry Potter is causing people to drift into the wrong lane?" Pedro asked.

"That's my take. We'll find out more when we study, but that's my story, and I might be sticking with it."

* * *

The Morales family arrived at the library, found the first two Potter books, and headed home. When they approached Sarah's old house, Sal slowed the car again. The moving truck was gone, and the girl who had waved to them earlier was jumping rope on the sidewalk. A man and boy played catch with a football on the lawn. Sal pulled the car over to the curb and stopped.

"Why you stopping here, Dad?" EJ asked.

"I thought it would be nice of us to welcome the new family to the neighborhood. Perhaps you can make yourself a new friend. Looks like the son is about Pedro's age as well."

"But, Dad, didn't you notice? They're black," EJ said.

"So, what's your point?"

"I don't have any friends that are black."

"In that case, there's no time like the present."

"But I don't know what to say. I don't know how to act."

"Just be yourself. If she doesn't like you the way you are, that's her problem – as long as you're being nice. Come on."

Pedro turned and looked at EJ. "Are you prejudiced?"

"No, I'm not prejudiced. Just a little scared."

"Remember, she waved at us. She has to be friendly to do that," Sal said. He opened the car door, got out, and stood waiting for his children to join him. They walked across the street and up the driveway of the new family. When they reached the sidewalk, EJ stopped and the others continued.

"Hi, I'm Esperanza Morales, but everyone calls me EJ."

The new girl stopped jumping rope and held out her hand. "Hi. I'm Tamela, and my friends call me Tammy, at least they did where I came from back in Detroit."

"Well, in that case, I'll call you Tammy. I'm going to be in sixth grade this year. How about you?"

"Me too!"

"Cool. Maybe we'll be in the same class."

Tammy's eyes lit up. "I'd like that. Wait, don't you have a middle school here, so you have different classes?"

"Here in Paradise the sixth graders all stay in the same rooms and the teachers move around. It cuts down on confusion and traffic in the halls. Next year we get to travel to different rooms."

"That makes sense. Is that your dad and your brother?"

"Yep. We just came back from the library. We checked out a couple of Harry Potter books."

The smile vanished from Tammy's face. "We're not allowed to read Harry Potter."

"Neither am I, but we're going to study them together to make sure there really is something bad in the books."

"Oh."

There was an awkward silence. Finally EJ broke it. "Want to meet my family?"

"Sure."

The two girls walked onto the grass where the males of the two families stood.

"So what brings you to Paradise?" Sal asked.

"My church transferred me here to pastor the Assembly of God church in town."

"Ah. I've heard good things about that church."

"So are you are a churchgoing man, Sal?"

"I am. We attend the Bible Fellowship church."

EJ pulled on her dad's sleeve. "Dad, I want you to meet Tamela" She turned to Tammy. "What's your last name?"

"Barnet."

"Tamela Barnet. She's in my grade."

"What a pretty name! Nice to meet you," Sal said.

The two boys broke off from the group and started playing catch with the football.

Tamela smiled. "Same here. I suppose you already met my brother."

"Yes, we've met. Adam's in the same grade as Pedro."

"Are you going to introduce me to your dad?" EJ asked, a small pout on her face.

"Oops. Sorry. Esperanza Morales meet Frank Barnet, and vice versa."

"Nice to make your acquaintance, young lady."

EJ made a small curtsy.

"Adam looks like a pretty good athlete," Sal said.

"Starting quarterback last year," Frank said.

"Oh-oh."

"What's the matter?" Frank asked.

"Pedro was starting quarterback for his team last year. I assume your kids are going to public school here."

"Yes, they are. Oh, I see the problem, now. I hope the boys can be friends even though it looks like they'll be competing for the same position."

"Me too, Frank. Me too. Well, I better get going. I have a special project to start tonight."

"I should get in the house and help my wife unpack. We just needed to relax a little after all the hard work of moving."

"I hear you. It was nice meeting you, and I hope to see you around soon. Take care."

"Bye, Sal."

"Are you kids going to come home with me or do you want to play for a while and walk home?"

EJ looked at Tammy. "I can show you my room," her new friend said.

"I'm staying, Dad."

"Me too," said Pedro, zipping another pass toward Adam, who made the catch look easy.

"OK. Make sure you come home together and be home before dark." Sal walked back to his car. He watched Pedro and Adam zinging the ball at each other. "Looks like the competition has begun." The sound of breaking glass went under his radar as he

cranked up the stereo and started toward home.

* * *

When Sal arrived home, he took care of all the busywork around the house that needed his attention and sank into the couch. He had just made himself comfortable and started reading the back cover of *The Sorcerer's Stone* when the phone rang. *Should I answer that? Could be the kids.* He got up from his relaxed position and grabbed the phone just before it went to the answering machine. "Hello."

"Sal?"

"Speaking. Barbara?"

"I'm sorry that I blew up. I miss you."

It's only been two hours. "Yeah, me too."

"I was thinking about Saturday. Brunch would work for us if we do it late."

"After the Harry Potter orgy?"

"Well, yeah. I thought you could come over here, and I'll whip up some waffles with strawberries and whipped-cream and Mexican omelets."

"That sounds tantalizing."

"And I could give you a back rub after we eat."

"Now, you're tempting me big time, woman!"

"So, just say yes. Go on, make my day, Sal."

The front door closed hard enough to grab Sal's attention. He looked up to see his kids filing in. "Tell you what, I'll give you a call tomorrow, and we'll arrive at a decision then. Does that work for you?"

"Don't forget me."

"No worries. You'll be second on my priority list."

"Second?"

"I'll tell you about it later. Gotta go."

"OK. I can take a hint as well as the best of them. Bye."

"Adios."

Sal sighed as he hung up the phone and stared at it.

"Earth to Dad," EJ spoke in a robotic voice. "Who was that?"

"Ahh...a friend."

"Anyone we know?"

"What's it to you? Are you writing a book or something?"

"Yeah."

"Then leave that chapter out."

"Dad!"

"OK, kiddos. We've got about an hour until bedtime. Let's read!"

"How are we going to read with three of us and only one book?" Pedro asked.

"Good point. I guess one of us has to read it out loud while the other two listen. Perhaps EJ wants to read over my shoulder. Seems she's pretty good at that."

EJ blushed. "I never should have squealed on myself."

"Duh!" her brother said. "Oh, Dad, speaking of ratting on oneself, I have a little confession."

"Now what? Are you going to tell me you read all the Potter books on the school bus by accidentally using your x-ray vision to see through other people's book covers?"

"Not even warm. I had a little boo-boo over at Adam's house. The football kind of slipped out of my hand and redecorated the window in their garage."

"Redecorated it?"

"He means he put a hole in it," EJ said. "I think Pedro is going to install air-conditioning when he grows up."

Pedro took two steps towards his sister. "Would you shut up? This is a man-to-man talk. We don't need any contributions from the peanut gallery."

"Excuse me for breathing."

Pedro shook his head. "Anyway, I'm going to need to make a withdrawal from my piggybank to pay for the window. I just hope I have enough. The window might not be the only thing that's busted."

"Accidents happen, Pedro. I'll float you a loan if you come up short. Now, let's forget about footballs and windows and start reading about witches and black cats. Who wants to start?"

"You do it. EJ is too slow. I'll be a high school graduate before we finish if you have her read it."

"I am not slow! I can read faster than you can."

"Give me a break."

"I'd like to break something."

"Kids! Doggone it. Quit fighting! I'll read."

Sal began reading about the Dursley family. Before he had finished two pages, they had all laughed out loud three times. When they reached the end of chapter two, he put a marker in the book and closed it. "Time for bed, kids."

"Ahh. Do we have to?"

"Yep. Tomorrow's another day. We'll pick up the reading tomorrow night after supper. So, brush your teeth and say your prayers first."

"We know the routine, Dad. Been doing it for many years,"

Pedro said.

* * *

The next night Sal read until he was hoarse. Pedro took over for an hour, but he got so tired of it that he consented to let EJ read for a while. When the four-hour 'Potterthon' ended, Sal sent the kids off to bed. He picked up the phone and dialed.

"It's your dime; start talking," the voice on the other end said.

"Hello, this is Sergeant Joseph Monday from the FBI."

"Joseph Monday, huh? Sounds a bit like the name Joe Friday. Funny, it doesn't sound Hispanic, Señor Morales."

"How'd you know it was me?"

"Come on, Sal. It's the 21st century. Maybe you should join the technological revolution named caller-ID."

"Well, I'm relieved to hear that it's not called ESP."

"Don't get started on sermon number two. Are we on for brunch or not?"

"Aren't you worried I'll get up on my pulpit again?"

"A little, but I'll just saw the legs off it."

"You're a feisty one."

"Thank you, thank you very much. I think it comes from dating someone better looking than I am. It's compensation for my inferiority complex."

"If it helps any, toots, I'd rather look at your face in the mirror than mine any day."

"Well, in that case, I'll keep a mirror handy on Saturday."

Sal grinned. "Oh, you got something going on Saturday?"

"Besides the Harry Potter party you mean?"

"Oh, we mustn't forget Harry. Red letter day on the calendar."

"Watch out where you take this conversation. You don't want to step on that attractive tongue of yours."

Sal laughed. "You're right; it is hard to brush the footprints off it."

"Anyway, yeah. I had something else special planned for Saturday. I was hoping to do some redecorating."

"Oh? What are you going to decorate?"

"Your face with lipstick – should you choose to come over."

"Wow! That sounds like an offer that's hard to refuse. I haven't had the joy of washing lipstick off my face for a long time."

"Just egg, huh?"

"You're funny, but looks aren't everything."

"Flattery ain't gonna move this mountain, buster. Are you coming or aren't you?"

"What time?"

"How about ten? That'll give us a few hours to celebrate the arrival of the new Rowling baby and get back here to prepare a feast fit for a prince."

"Or a frog?"

"That too. But after the lipstick works its magic, the frog will evolve into a prince."

"You had to put evolution and magic into the same sentence, huh?"

"What?" Barbara asked.

"Never mind. No sense entering where angels fear to tread."

"You're talking in riddles."

"I get that a lot from blonds."

"Hold on, buddy. You better quit while you still have an invitation."

"OK. Time for me to hit the sack anyway. We'll see you Saturday. Oh, just to make sure, the kids are invited too, right?"

"Yes, of course, silly. Faith would have a fit if I invited you over without Pedro."

"Really?"

"That's a discussion for another day. Good night, Sal."

"Good night, Barbara. Sweet dreams." *Of me, perhaps.*

* * *

On Friday night, the Morales gathered in the living room after supper and resumed reading *The Sorcerer's Stone*. Sal continued until reaching the end shortly before the kids' bedtime.

"OK, gang, let's review. What bad things did we find in this book?" Sal asked.

"Dudley, the Malfoys, Voldemort, Uncle Vernon, and Professor Quirrell," EJ said.

"And Professor Snape and vomit-flavored beans," Pedro added.

"Wait. Those are the bad guys...except for the beans. Any interesting book is going to have bad and good guys."

"Right," EJ said. "So Harry and his friends are the good guys. They were fighting against evil. The magic they used was for good and not to hurt good people."

"Exactly. It's like God defeating Satan. Why is the pastor upset about that?" Pedro asked.

"Well, to be truthful, I don't see much of anything here that is really objectionable. Let's withhold judgment until we read the next one. Maybe things get worse there."

"Can we start tomorrow morning?" EJ asked. "We can read instead of watching cartoons."

"Don't forget. Tomorrow we're going to the Nelsons' for brunch," Pedro said.

"Oh, that's right," EJ said. "I'm sure there was no danger of you forgetting your big chance to see Faith again."

"Don't go there, EJ!"

"Don't either of you get started!" Sal commanded. "Where you're both going is to bed. If we all get up early enough, we could start book two before brunch. So give me a hug and off you go."

On the way up the stairs, EJ whispered to Pedro. "I'm interested to see who's going to win the race."

"What race?"

"The race to see who is going to get kissed first by a Nelson female, you or Dad."

Pedro raised his hand quickly, causing EJ to flinch. He then calmly sank it into his hair and started scratching. A smile erupted, and he began to do a bobble-head doll imitation.

Chapter 3

The Morales family closed *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* after reading two chapters and climbed into their car. Sal was convinced his empty stomach made more noise than the engine of their Toyota.

"By the way, Dad, what happened with the problem between you and Barbara?" Pedro asked. "I thought you didn't like her addiction to Harry Potter."

"Sometimes people's emotions get control of them and they make stupid decisions."

"So who was being stupid the day you had the fight, you or her?" EJ asked.

"Probably both of us."

"Why do adults fight so much?" she asked.

"Hold on, kiddo. You kids are fighting constantly. And I'm supposed to explain to you why adults fight? Maybe it's because adults are often just kids who have gotten older, but not wiser."

"God doesn't like fighting, does he?" EJ asked.

"Hmm. That's a complex question. God doesn't like us fighting against each other as people. It seems that fighting is part of his plan though. We are supposed to fight against Satan and evil."

"How do we know exactly what's evil and what isn't? You know, like in the situation of Harry Potter. Some people say it's evil, and other people say it's good. Can it be both good and evil?" Pedro asked.

"You guys are asking awfully grown-up questions today. Whatever happened to the kid stuff questions like why does a balloon fly through the air if you blow it up and then let it go?"

"Kids grow up faster these days than when you were one," EJ said.

"No kiddin'! Some days I think you're eleven going on thirty."

"Ewww! Dad! No need for you to cut me down like that. Thirty? Gross!"

"Excuse me for being insensitive. Believe me, there'll come a day when thirty will sound downright wonderful."

"Yeah, when I get real old, like you."

"Isn't this a fun topic? Can't we talk about something more uplifting like cold toilet seats?"

"What? Toilet seats?" Pedro asked.

"You know uplifting...lift up the toilet seat?"

EJ groaned. "That's a really bad joke, Dad."

"I can see it's going to be one of those days. I'm sure glad to see you guys fulfilling the role of children."

"What's that?" Pedro asked.

"Keeping your parents humble."

Pedro chuckled. "In our case, that's not hard at all."

They drove by Tamela's house and saw her jumping rope. EJ waved vigorously. "Hey, Dad. Could we visit Tamela's church tomorrow?"

"Sure. I've always been curious about that church. Might as well get to know our new friends even better."

* * *

After finishing a delicious breakfast, Sal and Barbara walked into the living room where the kids were watching TV.

"I have an idea," Barbara said. "Why don't you kids go down to the family room and let us have the living room? Maybe you can play a game or something?"

As they filed down the stairs, EJ said, "I bet they're just trying to get rid of us so they can get back to the romantic stuff."

Matthew giggled. "We should have planted hidden cameras up there to catch the action. I could have done a play by play."

"Grow up, twerp!" Faith said. "Mom's never going to get married again if you don't quit messing things up."

"Maybe I don't want her to get married again, unless it's to Dad."

"That isn't going to happen so quit hoping for it. You're just going to get hurt. And don't sabotage Mom's attempts to find a new husband, or I'll be the one hurting you."

"Oh, I'm scared. NOT."

Faith shook her head and turned to Pedro. "How long have your parents been divorced?" Pedro looked down at the floor. "They're not. My mom died three years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Faith said. "I just assumed they were divorced, like everyone else in the world seems to be."

"Our dad moved out of a town a couple of weeks ago to take a new job," Matthew said. "We won't get to see him again until Christmas. Next summer we'll be with him for a couple of months."

"Wow. That's tough. I can't imagine being away from my dad for that long. Life is just tough all over, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess," Faith replied. "Hey, I have an idea. Let's play with the Ouija Board."

"What's that?" EJ asked.

"You don't know what a Ouija Board is?" Matthew asked. "I thought you were smart."

"I am smart, but I don't know everything in the world. Neither do you."

"I do when I have the Ouija Board."

"What do you mean? Is it like a big Encyclopedia?"

"Not even close. Come on, we'll show you. You're not going to believe this game. It's going to blow your socks off."

"Yeah, right," Pedro said.

Matthew went into a closet and returned carrying a box. He opened it and took out a board and an innocent-looking piece of plastic shaped somewhat like a spade from a deck of cards. Grinning from ear to ear, Matthew placed the plastic pointer in the middle of the board and sat down on one side of it. "Are you ready, EJ?"

"For what? How do you play?"

"Just sit down opposite me and put your hands lightly on the planchette like this." He reached over and draped his fingertips very gently on the edge of the plastic.

"Gee, EJ," said Pedro. "That sounds like something even you can do."

"Hey, Matthew, can we make it easier so even Pedro can play?" EJ asked.

Matthew laughed. "One point for EJ."

EJ made the sign of the YES as she mouthed the word.

Pedro shook his head. "Makes no difference. She's so far behind, she'll never catch up."

EJ shrugged her shoulders. "Whatever, Mr. Scorekeeper." She sat down on the other side of the board and put her fingers on the plastic as directed.

Matthew looked up from the board. "Now, we need to ask Mr. Ouija a question. Faith, do you want to ask the questions?"

"Sure." She took a notebook and pen out of the box and handed it to Pedro. "Here, you can be our clerk and record the answers."

"What answers?" Pedro asked.

"Just wait and you'll see. Ouija Board, is Mom going to kiss Sal today?" The planchette started moving.

"What the heck?" EJ exclaimed. "How's it doing that? You're moving that thing, Matthew!"

"Not me. Maybe you are."

"I ain't doing anything. I swear."

The pointer moved directly over to the word 'YES' inscribed on the board and halted.

"That's crazy," Pedro said. "Is this supposed to be something special? I mean, how hard would it be for Matthew to push it to the YES or the NO?"

Matthew removed his fingers from the board and stood up. Be my guest. He pointed at the board. Pedro handed the notebook and pen to Matthew and sat down across from EJ. He gingerly put his hands on the pointer.

"Don't press down," Faith said. "Just let them sit there." Pedro made an adjustment and nodded that he was ready. "Ouija Board, where does Pedro go to school?"

The pointer started moving. "EJ, stop moving that thing!" Pedro demanded.

"I'm not! You must be."

"This is insane. That stupid piece of plastic can't move on its own."

It stopped at the letter 'L'. Then it moved to the 'I', 'N', 'C', 'O', 'L', and 'N' in succession.

Pedro took his fingers off. "You guys rigged this up with EJ to drive me wacko, didn't you?"

Matthew started giggling. "I wish I'd thought of something so cool, but it never occurred to me."

EJ stomped her foot. "I told you, Pedro, that I didn't move it. Why won't you believe me?"

Pedro looked around the room. "Maybe we're doing it subconsciously. Wait a second. I have an idea. Faith, you and Matthew sit down. I'll ask a question you don't know the answer to."

Matthew traded places with EJ and Pedro with Faith. Pedro whispered something in EJ's ear, and she shook her head. Pedro smiled and folded his arms. "Now we'll see how smart the board is. Ouija Board, I have a new friend. What is his sister's name?"

Nothing happened. Pedro was just about to start laughing when the plastic started towards the line of letters. It halted over the 'T' and then moved to the 'A'. Pedro felt his eyebrows going up without being able to do anything about it. When the pointer landed on the 'M' and then the 'E', he could feel a bead of sweat tickling his forehead. 'L' was the next resting place for the pointer. He watched in horror as it landed on the 'A' and stopped. He looked at his sister. Her face was contorted by the same bewilderment he felt. Pedro glanced down at his feet to make sure his socks were still on.

"Tell us how it works," EJ demanded.

"We don't know," Faith said.

"Yes, we do," Mathew insisted. "It's done by dead people."

"What?" EJ asked with her mouth wide open.

"It's just a game," Faith said.

"You ever see the pieces on a checkerboard move themselves?" Matthew asked.

"By dead people, do you mean ghosts?" Pedro asked.

Matthew rubbed his hands together and made a silly face.

"The term I like is disembodied spirits."

* * *

On the way home, Sal asked, "Did you kids have fun today?"

"Ahhh...we didn't do anything special," EJ said quickly.

"That wasn't my question. Did you have fun not doing anything special?"

"You know, Dad. How fun can board games be?"

"Board games for bored kids was my parents' mantra. I always enjoyed playing Monopoly and Scrabble and stuff. Which one did you guys play?"

"It was a funny name. I don't quite remember it," EJ said. "I don't quite remember how the game works either, so don't bother asking me that question."

"Me either," Pedro said. "Dad, do you believe in ghosts?"

"I believe in the Holy Ghost. Then there's Casper."

"No, Dad. Pedro means real ghosts, like disemboweled spirits."

"You mean disembodied?"

"Oh, yeah," EJ said.

"Where did you learn a term like that?"

"Matthew."

"I should have guessed. Maybe it's just me, but I think that kid is a little strange."

"He's definitely different," Pedro said.

"What's up with the talk about ghosts?"

"We were just wondering. Matthew says there really are ghosts," EJ said. "Funny thing is that when we read about ghosts in Harry Potter, they're so harmless...even funny. But Matthew talks about them like they're real; it gives me the creeps."

"Then don't talk about them."

"Tell Matthew that."

"EJ, I can't do that. You have to learn to deal with your friends by yourself. If you can't persuade them to stop doing something annoying, you have to find new friends or have it stop bothering

you."

"Like you did with Barbara?" Pedro asked, covering up a smirk with his hand.

"I still think Barbara is getting carried away by this Potter mania, but I think she'll grow out of it. After all, we haven't found anything in Harry that would cause us to break up relationships."

"Whatever, Dad. I just want to make sure you don't preach one thing to us and practice the opposite."

"Keep my feet to the fire, son. If I get out of line, call me on it."

"There's one promise I'll be glad to keep."

Sal turned and gave him a cheesy grin.

"Remember, Dad, keep your eyes on the road at all times. The life you save might be mine."

"You're going to milk this one for all you can, aren't you?"

"Dad, I have no clue what you're talking about," Pedro protested.

"I'm not buying that one."

This time Pedro flashed the cheesy grin.

* * *

When the Morales family arrived home, the kids went upstairs to be alone.

"What are we going to do about this Ouija Board thing?" EJ asked. "I'm not sure we can hide it from Dad forever."

"Maybe we don't need to. And maybe we don't want to. Let's find out. I don't put a lot of faith in what comes out of Matthew's mouth. Let's surf the net and see what info's available."

"Yeah. Let's do it now."

Ducking into their dad's office, Pedro fired up the family computer. "Dad said we'll read Harry at three p.m. sharp. We have fifteen minutes. Close the door, just in case."

With a few keystrokes and mouse clicks, Pedro pulled up a list of links dealing with Ouija Boards. "My gosh," he said. "We could spend our entire childhood researching this topic."

"As slow as you read, maybe you're right."

"Remember, little sister. We're a team here. No dissing team members. I'm going to choose this article." He clicked on the link for a site called AllAboutTheOccult.org and they began to read.

"Unbelievable! Matthew wasn't making it up. This says that the board opens up communications with the spirit world."

"Yeah. It also says that these are not really spirits but demons from Satan's team who try to lure people into their control." She read aloud, "'1 Peter 5:8 warns us, Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for

someone to devour. The Ouija Board may be advertised as just as game, and that is exactly what Satan wants us to believe."

"And the Bible says that consulting spirits is detestable to God. We're supposed to go to him for advice and answers."

"OK. That's one article from a Christian site. Maybe they're exaggerating the danger. Let's look at some more info."

They found a pagan website with a forum. One of the posts stated that the Ouija Board was fake and just a game. In reading responses they discovered that even the pagans were frightened by the Ouija Board and warned people against using it. One girl said that she tried to throw the board away and each time they did a calamity fell on a member of the family. Another girl said they heard screams when they burned their board.

"This is totally wild. Have you seen enough yet?"

"Let's try one more," EJ said.

Pedro pulled up an article from About.com and began reading aloud, "There are stories of strange events taking place during and sometimes immediately following Ouija sessions."

"Now I'm really creeped out!" EJ said. "I felt something strange over at Matthew's house. Now I see why."

"My gosh! What about that quote from the ghost hunter saying that spirits who reside close to humans were often involved in a violent death and are dangerous?"

"And what about the part about opening a door to the spirit world if you ask them to show themselves to you?" EJ shivered. "I don't want to read any more. It's going to be hard to sleep tonight."

"OK. Why does Matthew and Faith's mother let them play with that thing? Why do they even have one in their house?"

"Great question. She is a blond, you know."

"There's no proof that blonds are dizzy. That's just a stereotype from television shows and movies."

"Maybe so, but she often acts like that typical blond."

"I won't argue that point. I think we need to talk to somebody about this stuff. Not Dad though. Someone who won't get mad at us."

"How about Adam? We're going to his church tomorrow."

"And his dad's a pastor. That could be perfect. Good thinking, EJ."

"Hey, kids!" Sal yelled from downstairs. "Are you ready to read some more?"

They bounded down the stairs for another dose of Harry.

Chapter 4

The next morning the Morales family strolled into First Assembly of God fifteen minutes before the service was scheduled to start. The kids saw Adam and Tamela in the front pew.

"Dad, we're going to talk with Adam and his sister for a few minutes," Pedro said.

"Fine. I'll be sitting in the middle along the aisle."

"OK. Back in a few."

The two kids hurried to the side of their new friends. "We've got to talk with you guys," Pedro said.

"Go ahead," Adam said.

"No, in private. We can't let anyone overhear us."

Adam looked at the clock. "We have over ten minutes. Let's go outside."

All four youngsters walked up the aisle and out of the church to a big elm tree, which shaded the kids from the heat that was starting to build.

"What in the world is so secret that you have to talk to us in private?" Adam asked.

"Do you know anything about Ouija Boards?"

Adam looked at his sister and then back at Pedro. "You've been messing with one?"

"We didn't know any better! Nobody ever warned us against them."

"Someone should have. They're trouble."

"Yeah, we kind of picked up on that – after the fact."

"We only played with it one time," EJ said.

"Playing is not exactly the word to use."

EJ shrugged. "Yeah, OK. Whatever. All I know is I had nightmares last night."

"We need to pray with you."

"Maybe your dad should do it," EJ suggested.

"Why? Because he's a pastor? Because he's a grownup? You know God's word is carried out through any of his believers, not just pastors and adults. Joel 2:28 says, 'And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall

dream dreams, your young men shall see visions."

Pedro looked at EJ. "I think it's OK. Let's do it."

Adam nodded to Tamela. She placed her hands on EJ's head as Adam did the same with Pedro. Both prayed aloud.

When they finished, Pedro asked. "Why did you pray to cover us with the blood of Jesus?"

"Do you know what Passover is?"

"I've heard of it, but I'm not sure what it is."

"It's the time when God caused the firstborn of every family in Egypt to die. The Jewish families were not affected as long as they brushed the blood of a sacrificial lamb above their door and stayed inside their home."

"And Jesus is the Lamb of God who sacrificed himself for us," Tammy said.

"Satan won't mess with people covered by the blood," Adam added.

"You act like you've done this before," Pedro said.

"We had plenty of opportunity in Detroit. Now, it's time to get back to church. Why don't you come over this afternoon? We can throw the football around again and talk some more."

"Good idea, bro," Tammy said. "EJ, I want you to come over, too."

"Yeah, sure, if Dad will let us. He might want to read some more from Harry Potter this afternoon. We might be able to finish book two today."

Tammy looked at her brother, her eyes narrowing. "I think you guys need to come over."

The four filed back into church. The Morales kids joined their dad, and the Barnets continued walking to the first row where their mother was sitting.

"Dad, can Pedro and I go over to the Barnets this afternoon?"

"I thought we were going to read some more?"

"We can do that tonight."

"That's true. OK. That's cool as long as you're back by six."

"Thanks, Dad."

* * *

After a lunch of pizza and Mountain Dew, Pedro and EJ rode their bikes to the Barnett house. The four gathered in a circle beneath a gnarled apple tree in the backyard.

Adam held a piece of paper in his hand. "I printed this off the Internet. These are all the different aspects of the occult that you need to look out for. By the way, the word 'occult' comes from the Latin word for hidden. It seems that these things are no longer

hidden but are making their way into mainstream society."

"Are you going to tell us what's on the list?" EJ asked.

"Actually, you can take this home with you. I just wanted to read it to you first, and then we can talk about these things. Number one: Fortune telling – of any kind, such as palm reading, crystal ball gazing, numerology, or seeing psychics."

"I see advertisements for psychics on television," EJ said.

"Yep. Number 2: Tarot Cards. Three: Ouija Boards."

"We're busted," EJ said.

"Four: Séances and any involvement with mediums or spiritualists. Five: Astrology and any form of horoscopes."

"Are you kidding me? My dad reads the horoscope in the newspaper," Pedro said.

"Exactly. Lots of people do. My dad says it's so crazy because the predictions for every sign of the zodiac will pretty much fit any person from the other groups. Number six: New-Age Movement techniques and activities. Seven: Hypnotism. Eight: Transcendental Meditation or any type of Far Eastern Meditation."

"I'm familiar with those last two," Pedro said.

"Nine: Crystals. Ten: Witchcraft."

"Harry Potter makes the list here, for sure," Tammy said.

"Eleven: Satanism. Twelve: Voodoo."

"Is that where they put the pins in dolls?" EJ asked.

"Bingo. Thirteen: Channeling."

"What's channeling?"

"That's having a spirit speak through you. Fourteen: reincarnation. Fifteen: astral projection."

"I don't know what astral projection is," EJ said, wriggling her toes in the warm grass.

"That's like having 'out of body' experiences. It's kind of complicated, but it's sorta like beaming your spirit up out of your body to travel to other places in time and space. Sixteen: ESP, or extra sensory perception."

"I knew you were going to say that one," EJ said. Nobody said anything. "Hello-o, I just told a joke."

"That's your opinion, EJ," Pedro said. "It wasn't funny."

She stuck her tongue out at her brother.

"And last, but not least, we have Dungeons and Dragons – role-playing games."

"Wow. I know a bunch of guys who play that game," Pedro said.

"It's very widespread. Also, many video games make use of the occult. Our society is being hammered by this stuff from every

direction."

"So why are you sharing this with us?" Pedro asked.

"You didn't know about Ouija Boards. I wanted to make sure you knew about the other stuff. My dad uses an expression that applies here: 'forewarned is forearmed.'"

"Thanks, Adam. Esperanza is the curious type. Now I know what to keep her away from." Two pink sandal-shaped missiles flew past Pedro's chest as he successfully dodged.

"Good reflexes, Pedro. This list should help you avoid the traps."

"Traps?"

Adam nodded. "Exactly. We're just like mice. Satan and his gang members set out the cheese, and humans walk into live traps. Most people are so fooled, they don't know even know they're in prison. The hardest prison to break out of is one you don't know you're in."

"Harder than even Azkaban?" EJ asked.

"What's that?" Tammy said.

"That's the prison in Harry Potter book three where the bad guy escapes from."

"There's one big difference here, EJ," Adam said. "Azkaban is a make-believe place. The prison that the devil puts us in is very real."

"Actually, Adam, I don't think Satan can put us in his jail. We put ourselves in," Tammy said.

"You're right. And if we don't break out, we'll be spending an eternity wondering why we couldn't see the light."

"Now I have to put you on the spot, Adam. Why shouldn't we read Harry Potter?" Pedro asked.

"I didn't say you shouldn't read them."

"But you just said—"

"I just listed occult practices. I didn't say you shouldn't read about them. These are things that you shouldn't practice, but it's important that you read or talk about them. How else will you understand what the dangers are and be able to intelligently inform others?"

"Have you read any of the Harry books?" EJ asked.

"We read the first one with our parents," Tammy said. "We found out all we wanted in that one."

"Actually, Harry hardly ever does any magic himself," EJ said. "The students aren't allowed to practice it outside of school. So, mostly it's the teachers performing the spells."

"We didn't find anything really bad in the first book or so far in

the second one either," Pedro said.

"If you're looking for blatant recruitment or teaching of witchcraft – the x's and o's, if I can use sports talk, of how to conjure up a spell, you won't find it," Adam said. "Some real witches actually find the Potter books a joke, although most are thankful for positive exposure and free advertising."

"How do you know that?" Pedro asked.

"I did some research. There are a lot of people from the occult issuing comments about the Potter books. We've come a long way since the Salem witch trials. Now the witches have their own websites. This is part of the whole craziness with Harry Potter. The hidden practices have come out of the closet, and they're getting respect from the world."

"But Harry isn't a witch; he's a wizard," EJ said.

"True, but there is no real difference in the eyes of the Lord. Let me read you something." Adam picked up a Bible at his feet and opened it. "Deuteronomy 18:10-12 'There shall not be found among you any one that makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or that uses divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee.'"

"Wow. There's one that wasn't on your other list," EJ said. "The one about fire."

"That's true, EJ," Pedro said. "I know some cultures practice walking through fire as a way of proving manhood. I saw an episode of *Everwood* where a Native America boy went to see the doctor because of burns on his feet from practicing for the ritual."

Adam nodded. "That's performed in lots of primitive societies. Getting back to Harry Potter, the problem is not so much with instructions on how to be a witch or wizard but attitude."

"What do you mean?" EJ asked.

"What do they call people who don't practice magic in the books?"

EJ's face lit up like a Christmas tree. "Muggles."

"What is the attitude toward the Muggles?"

EJ made a face. "They're scumbags, turkeys, dorks, morons, nerds...."

"Exactly. So what is the message?"

"If you're not a magical person, you're inferior," Pedro said. "You're not cool. You're not hot. You're not in."

"And on the other hand, witchcraft rocks," EJ added.

"You guys are right on. Let me add another word 'acceptable'. Witchcraft doesn't have to be given an exalted status in order to win here. It just has to be accepted as an OK thing. Once the foot's in the door, then the real attack can begin and people won't even fight against it."

"Dad uses the frog in hot water story to describe it," Tammy said. "If you throw a frog into a pot of boiling water, it'll jump out. If you put it into cold water and gradually heat up the water, he'll stay in there until he's cooked because he got used to the temperature change little by little."

"She's right," her brother added. "Start out with some innocent-looking things like cartoon characters or beautiful TV witches and then gradually introduce more serious aspects as people become more and more accustomed to it until the water is boiling and the cooking is done."

"So where does Harry come into the picture. Is the water still cold, lukewarm, hot, or boiling?" Pedro asked.

"I don't know for sure," Adam said. "Definitely not boiling yet, but I don't know how hot the water is. It seems to be in the middle stages perhaps. People are still getting used to the idea of witches being an OK thing. However, the way things are going, it is not beyond belief to think that witches may be more acceptable to society than Christians in the near future."

"That sounds crazy," EJ said. "How do we know that this whole debate isn't making a mountain out of an ant hill? Can't Harry simply be just a cute story about mythical creatures? And what about *The Chronicles of Narnia*? They have magic in them, don't they? Why is that magic OK, but the magic in Harry is wrong?"

"That's two questions. Let me deal with magic first. What is magic? To a native in the Amazon jungle, an airplane or cell phone would be considered magic. It's simply the overcoming of natural laws or apparent natural laws. When we learn the secrets of physics, we can put those laws to work for us. Real magic might be a way of bypassing the laws of physics."

"You're losing me here," EJ said.

"Sorry. I'm trying to keep this simple. Take a gun for example. They put gunpowder into a shell and put the shell into the long barrel of a rifle. When the hammer strikes the shell, the gunpowder explodes forcing the bullet out of the rifle. Invisible death from thunder sticks. Magic...to those who are ignorant. Now, if a person could fire a bullet at something without a gun, by

simply thinking or speaking to cause it to fly through the air, we have an unexplainable situation. We have no law of physics to explain the bullet."

"So that is magic?"

"To us. We know God can suspend the laws of the nature that he created. He can do whatever he wants since he made the rules. We don't call that magic but rather a miracle. The result is the same overcoming of a natural law. Maybe if witches really can do magical things, the cause is actually demons who hear the incantations and pull the necessary strings to make things happen."

"I think I get it," Pedro said. "Like this movie I saw where a guy used his finger like a gun. He'd say 'bang' and people would get shot. The real shooter was hiding, so the guy thought he was really plunking people with his finger."

"That a good example. So humans don't really do magic, demons do. And on our side, humans don't perform miracles, God does. We lay hands on someone and pray to God for healing. He is the one who causes the cancer to disappear or the blind to see. The person praying just says the words asking for God's help."

"Let me answer the question about Harry just being a cute story," Tammy said.

"Go for it, Sis."

"What do grownups usually say about a book starring twelve-year-olds?"

"That's kids' stuff," EJ said.

"Exactly. It's like having the brains of a kid is a shameful thing. No grownup wants to be accused of being a kid or thinking like a kid. So, take some of the popular young peoples' books of the past. *The Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew*, *Pippi Longstocking*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*... How many grownups read that stuff and admit it?"

"None that I know except maybe teachers. And how many show up at bookstores to stand in line to buy them?" EJ asked.

"But look at Harry Potter. They were supposedly written for kids our age. Instead, the adults of the world are going crazy over them. What's up with that?"

EJ looked at her brother. "Yeah, what is up with that? I never stopped to think about that before. I mean, why do even the high school kids get into these books? They win prizes for children's literature. How many high school students want to be thought of as children?"

"Good point, EJ," Pedro said. "On top of that, I've heard

parents say they couldn't get their kids to read anything, but the kids got hooked on Harry Potter books. How do you explain that? The books are OK, but I don't see anything that special about them. Nothing to cause the world to go ape. And some of them are thicker than the New York City phone book."

"Does make you wonder, huh?" Adam asked.

"You're not suggesting that somehow people have been put under a spell or something, are you?" Pedro asked. "Like witchcraft is causing people to read about witchcraft?"

"I'm not going to claim that. It sounds pretty far out. Remember, witchcraft is surface stuff that uses demonic activity. It makes more sense to say that Satan is blinding people and whispering in their ear to get them to read the stuff. Another reasonable explanation is human nature. We're drawn to things we should stay away from, like a moth to the flame that toasts him."

"I can understand that one. Now what about the Narnia question?" EJ asked.

"I need help for that one. Hang on a second. I'll be right back." They watched Adam walk through the sliding glass door of the patio. A short time later, he walked back and handed Pedro a book called *Harry Potter, Narnia, and Lord of the Rings*.

"What's this?" Pedro asked.

"This is a book that explains the differences between reading things like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Harry Potter. It explores a lot of the objections to letting kids read Rowling's books. This is something that all parents should read."

"I don't think my dad wants to have his bubble popped right now. He's gotten into Harry. So what's so good about this book?"

"Maybe I'm wrong, but I think emotional attacks with no reasoning behind them turn people off. People rant and rave about how dangerous Harry Potter is, and their goal of convincing people to agree with them backfires. The guy who wrote this book calmly points out the problem areas. He even states he's against book banning and burning. He figures each parent needs to decide how to handle this. But in order to do that, they need to have the facts. That's what he presents here, a calm logical explanation of the details."

"What are his main points about Potter?"

"There are three full chapters on that subject. In a nutshell, the main things to remember are that Harry teaches kids that revenge is sweet and that kids have power and need to learn how to use it. Those ideas are both contradicted by the Bible. And then he has

the usual references to the occult and response of the Wiccans or witches concerning Potter."

The kids sat there in silence for a moment, Pedro skimming through the book in his hands and the others thinking about what they had been discussing. EJ broke the silence. "Seems to me that life is like a big detective story God arranged. We need to get all the clues and figure out the answer to the mystery."

"Perfect analogy!" Tammy said. "I think it's exciting to uncover all the truths that God provided for us to figure out who dunnit."

EJ smiled broadly. "And in the end, the answer is not the butler, but the devil."

"We think so, EJ. Or it could be God, depending on which mystery you're solving. It's been easier for us to avoid the snares because of Adam's gifts."

The two Morales kids glanced over at Adam. He was rolling his eyes skyward.

"Gifts? What do you mean by gifts?" EJ asked.

Chapter 5

"Hey, enough serious stuff," Adam said. "Let's toss the football around."

"Wait a second. You gotta tell us about the gifts," EJ said.

"No, I don't. I don't have to do anything except die."

"That's not true! You have to pay income tax."

"Nope. Lots of people don't pay tax. They might go to jail because they don't."

"You have to eat."

"Why?"

"To stay alive."

"Exactly my point. I don't have to eat, but if I don't, I'll die."

"You have to breathe."

"No, I don't. If I don't breathe, what happens?"

"You die."

"Bingo. Everything we do in life is a choice, except death, which isn't optional. Spiritual death, on the other hand, is a choice. We can choose God and eternal life, or we can choose the alternative."

EJ pressed the pigskin into Pedro's armpit. "Why don't you guys go play ball?"

Pedro grunted, jumped to his feet, and tossed the ball to Adam. Pumping his arm, Adam yelled, "Go long!"

"Don't you want to know about Adam's gifts?" Tammy asked. "You gave up pretty easy."

"That's because I could see it'd be easier to find out from you than from him. And if he continued to stand here, you weren't going to tell me, so I persuaded them to go away."

"He wanted to get away so you couldn't ask him any more questions."

"It's more fun to think that I pulled the strings. Anyway, about these gifts...."

"I don't think I should tell you. Adam doesn't like to have it discussed."

"No kidding. He acts like it's top secret. It's probably nothing more than imagination."

"That's not true! It's very real."

"What is?"

"Wait a second. You're trying to trick me into telling you."

"Trick is such a strong word. Hey, I just noticed something."

"What?" Tamela asked.

"The palm of your hand is almost white."

"So?"

"I didn't realize that."

"Haven't you ever met a black person before?"

"Well, not really. There aren't many black people in Paradise, Wisconsin."

"Probably not many Latinos either."

"That's true. Anyway, you're the first black friend I've ever had. We are friends, right, Tammy?"

"Sure. There's still a lot of getting to know either other, but we're friends."

"What's it like to be black?"

"That's kind of a dumb question. As compared to what? I've never been white or Hispanic or Oriental or anything else. Besides I don't think of myself as black so much as I do as a Christian. The Bible says that there is no more Jew or Gentile, free or slave, male or female because all are one in Christ. That means that there's no more black and white or red and brown, also. My identity is not in the color of my skin, but in the Savior of my soul."

"You and your brother have a lot in common. And I thought pastor's kids were supposed to be the biggest troublemakers and funnest people to be around."

"Sorry to disappoint you, EJ."

"Oh, no. I'm not disappointed. It's great to see someone who's excited about God. It's just a little hard to adjust to being with kids who carry their Bible in their hand – and their heart."

"That's cool because I'm not going to change who I am just so you'll like me. What you see is what you get. Anyway, Adam has been studying resurrections. He said there have been several people raised from the dead in the last few years, especially in India."

EJ's jaw dropped. "Wow. If he raised a corpse to life, I'd have to vote that the coolest thing I've ever seen."

"He's waiting for God to give him the command; he doesn't do things like that just because it would be cool."

* * *

"Knowing my sister, she's over there pumping Tammy to find out all about your 'gifts'," Pedro said.

"I guess my sister will put up a brave front and refuse to talk. Then she'll accidentally spill the story, like she just did in mentioning the gifts in the first place."

"After EJ finds out about it, the whole world will know."

Adam threw a pass to Pedro. Just before the ball got there, Pedro started dancing and waving his arms. The ball narrowly missed his face.

Adam laughed and yelled. "It's hard to catch a football when you're dancing, if you call that dancing."

Pedro yelled and sank to his knees.

"Come on, dude. No time for prayer."

EJ sprinted toward Pedro. Adam, realizing something might be wrong, did the same.

"What's the matter?" Adam asked.

"Stung by a bee," Pedro gasped.

"Oh, no! Pedro's allergic to bee stings!" EJ shouted. "We have to get emergency help."

Pedro lifted his arm and showed the others where he had been stung. His skin was puffing up rapidly. "I can already feel my throat swelling, and I'm having trouble breathing."

Adam put his hand on Pedro's head. He said some things in a foreign language and finished by saying, "In the name of Jesus."

"Adam! We don't need prayer. We need to call 911!" EJ demanded.

"Actually, Sis...I think I'm OK," Pedro said.

EJ twirled to look at Pedro. "What?"

"Look at my arm. My breathing is normal, too."

The swelling and redness that had been evident a minute before were now completely gone.

EJ looked at Adam in disbelief.

"Remember, Adam, that I never told," Tammy said. "You gave this one away yourself."

"Do you mean this is his gift? Healing?" EJ asked.

"One of them," Tammy answered.

Both EJ and Pedro turned to stare at Adam again.

"How did you do that?" EJ asked.

"I didn't. God did it. I'm just a conductor of his power, like a wire is a conductor of electricity."

"What else can you do? I mean, what else does God do through you?"

"It's no big deal."

"God has also given him the gift of prophecy and word of knowledge," Tammy said.

"You mean you tell people's fortunes?" EJ asked.

"No. I'm not a Godly astrologer or diviner. Sometimes God gives me visions of things. It's not something I can turn on at will, so please don't ask me to predict the outcome of the Super Bowl or a horse race. I never know when one will occur."

"Are you like a saint?" EJ asked.

"Every one of God's children is a saint. I have no idea why God chose me for these gifts. I just pray that I use them wisely and not for my own glory. That's why I try not to tell people about them. And why I ask other people not talk about them." He coughed and looked at his sister.

"Sorry," Tammy said and hung her head.

"It's OK, sis. I guess Pedro and EJ need to know if they're going to be our friends." He lifted her chin gently and smiled at her. She smiled back as Pedro got back to his feet.

"Are you sure you're OK, bro?" EJ asked.

"Positive. Never felt better in my life. Pedro reached down and picked up the football. Now you go deep, Adam!"

"Shouldn't we call the newspaper or radio station or somebody and tell them about this miracle?" EJ asked.

Tammy shook her head. "My dad says that the media doesn't want to print stories about what God's doing on the Earth. They print everything that comes from the mouths of scientists concerning evolution, but God's miracles are ignored. You remember that bridge in Minnesota that collapsed a while back?"

"Yeah. That was pretty scary. I was afraid to go across bridges for a while after that."

"Well, did you hear about the man who had a vision of the bridge collapsing, so he stopped his car right in the middle of the road and blocked the lane? People were honking and yelling at him to get moving. Then the bridge collapsed, and the people who yelled at him thanked him for saving their lives. You won't find that in the newspapers. How about stories of people being resurrected from the dead?"

"How many miracles like that happen?"

"I have no clue. Somebody should start a website for reporting miracles so we could see what God's doing. Most of the miracles don't even happen in America. Miracles seem to happen more often in places where faith is strong. In America, Christ has to compete with comfort."

"Where do you come up with ideas like that?"

"I don't fall asleep during my dad's sermons. He even talks about stuff like that at the dinner table."

"That makes sense. Are people always healed when Adam prays over them?"

"No. He never knows for sure that it's going to be effective. All he does is step out in faith."

"It just seems weird to me. Almost like he's similar to Harry Potter, and we're Muggles."

"What Adam does isn't magic. There's a big difference between miracles and magic. And he doesn't look down on you because you don't produce miracles."

"Yeah. I guess you're right. Still, it seems a little bit strange to think about being so close to someone who can do such things."

"But—"

"OK... I meant who God does things through."

Tammy nodded. "There you go, EJ. And, yes, it is a little bizarre sometimes."

* * *

Adam walked the ball over to Pedro. "How you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Really, I am. Like nothing happened."

"That's cool. So, do you have a girlfriend?"

"Me? Well, no. I'm not very smooth around girls. My tongue seems to develop paralysis if I'm around a female I like."

"You gotta have faith."

Pedro's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"You gotta have faith."

"I heard you the first time."

Adam shrugged. "Then why did you ask me what I said?"

"Because...I...I kind of like this girl named Faith. I couldn't believe you were telling me I had to have 'faith'."

Adam looked at Pedro and exploded into laughter. Both boys fell to the ground laughing. Adam, rubbing his stomach muscles, said, "That's too funny. I bet you thought I was using mind-reading powers or something."

"I was starting to wonder. It's a little hard getting used to being around someone with your...gifts."

"I know. There are some days that I wish I was just a normal boy, but then I think of how much the Lord can do through me...if I let him."

"What are you guys laughing about?" EJ asked.

Pedro looked up and saw the girls had rejoined them. "Noneya."

"Is that Spanish?" Tammy asked.

This time, Pedro and EJ laughed together. "I'm sorry, Tammy," EJ said. "'Noneya' is just an English abbreviation we use

to say it's none of your business."

"Oh. I get it now. So you boys are trying to keep something secret from us?"

"Are you jealous because boys can actually keep a secret?" Pedro said and grinned at Adam.

"Don't even start with the male superiority jokes. I'm too old for fairy tales," EJ said.

"Yeah, don't go there, Pedro," Tammy said. "I don't want you to give Adam ideas."

"*Nunca*."

"Is that another abbreviation?" Tammy asked.

Pedro grinned. "No, this time it is Spanish. *Nunca* means never." He looked at Adam, who stood with his eyes closed. "Adam, are you with us?"

Adam didn't look up immediately. The other three stood there waiting for some type of response. He re-opened his eyes and looked at them. "This is probably going to sound crazy to you."

"What is?" EJ asked.

"I just felt the Lord telling me I need to walk through the neighborhood."

"Walk? What for?" Pedro inquired.

"I don't know. It seems that he'll tell me that when I need to know. For now, I just need to obey." He walked toward the front yard.

Pedro and EJ stood gawking at Adam's retreating figure. EJ turned to Tammy and said, "Does he do this kind of thing often?"

"Not really. When he does, he usually ends up helping people. Adam has a way of smelling trouble. I mean God has a way of revealing trouble to Adam, so he can be a blessing to someone."

Pedro looked at Adam again. "See you around, girls. I'm going with." He jogged after Adam.

EJ pouted. "They're not going to get rid of us that easily, are they? I want in on this action."

"Me too. Let's go!"

The two girls sprinted past a surprised Pedro and caught up with Adam before he reached the sidewalk.

Pedro joined them seconds later. "Which way are you going, Adam?"

"I don't know yet. It's not clear to me yet which way God wants me to go." He closed his eyes and bent his head toward the ground. After a few seconds he straightened. "To the right." They began to walk slowly down the sidewalk.

For the first block no one said anything. EJ broke the silence

midway down the second block. "How far are we going?"

"I have no clue," Adam responded. "When I get to where God wants to work, I'll know. I hope."

"Me too. These aren't exactly walking shoes I have on today."

Tammy leaned over and whispered to EJ, "We shouldn't talk and mess up his concentration."

EJ nodded.

Seventy steps later, Adam pulled up to a stop. "This is the place." The others looked up to the house that he was eyeballing.

"OK. So this is the place. What do you do? Or what does God do?" EJ asked.

Before Adam could answer, the door to the house opened and two kids dressed in black from fat-soled knee-high Doc Martens to raised trench coat collars, bulled down the sidewalk toward them. From twenty-five feet, opaque white make-up appeared to be at battle with blackened hair and blood-red eye shadow.

"Goths. Or refugees from a kabuki theatre," Pedro said quietly.

The newcomers were close enough for Adam's group to see the facial piercings on the larger of the two. "Are you guys looking for something or somebody?" the girl asked.

"As a matter of fact, I was looking for you."

"Me?"

"Actually, both of you."

"Why? I don't know you from Adam."

Adam smiled. "I have a message for you from somebody who loves you very much."

"Yeah, right. Listen, whatever your name is, nobody loves me and that's just fine. Got it?"

"My name is Adam, by the way, and I see where you're coming from. Jesus Christ wanted me to drop by and tell you that suicide isn't the answer. He loves you. Knock, and the door shall be opened."

The girl who had been doing the talking broke into laughter. Her companion tried to echo, but it sounded forced and hollow.

"I should have known. Christians! Why don't you just keep your nose out of other people's business?"

Adam shrugged and tried to look the girl in the eye, but she evaded his gaze. "I'm just doing what God asked me to do. If you don't like being told that you're loved, that's your problem."

"Yeah, you're right. It's my problem and my business and my yard, so scram."

Adam turned to make the requested exit.

EJ peered at the smaller of the girls, who had not said anything. "Amy? Is that you?"

"Hi, EJ."

"Goodbye, EJ," Amy's friend said.

EJ looked back once as she turned to follow her friends. Adam kept going down the sidewalk away from his home.

"How come we're still going this way?" Pedro asked. "I thought once you found who you were supposed to help, we'd go back to your house."

"We're not done yet. God is laying it on my heart to keep going. Do you know that girl, EJ?"

"I know Amy, but I have no clue who the other girl is. Amy and I hung out a little bit in fifth grade. She certainly didn't look like that though. I wonder what got into her."

"Looks like her friend might have," Adam said. "She seemed hardcore, but Amy seemed like she was only wearing the uniform. It's tough being a kid in a big lonely world. We want to feel loved, and we want to feel special. So sometimes we do weird and even dangerous things just to try to be noticed."

"And by 'special' you mean different maybe. They certainly qualified as different," Pedro said.

"If they want to be different, why don't they choose to love and follow the Lord?" Tammy asked. "That would certainly make them stand out in our culture today."

"That's true," Adam said. "Not only that, they'll feel truly special when they become a child of the King. Somebody has to let them know about God. That's where we come in. Kids like us need to spread the word to other kids."

EJ stopped walking. "You gotta be kidding. You expect us to open our big mouths and have kids cram our own feet down our throats, making fun of us, and thinking we're dorks."

Adam stopped too, causing the others to halt. "No, EJ, I don't expect you to. God does. There's a verse in the Bible that says people loved the praises of other people more than they loved the praises of God. My dad says in the past being a good Christian was considered an admirable thing in the eyes of the world. Now that isn't the case. If you stand up for God and his word, you can be sure you're going to be somebody's target. You're going to have to choose who you wish to please, God or man."

"But I'm just a kid. Can't I just be a kid? Can't I choose later?"

"Maybe. But the way the world is going, there might not be a later."

EJ sighed and began walking again. "Do you really think they

were talking about suicide?"

"That's what God put into my head. I feel we need to pray for both Amy and her friend because I sense a real struggle for life going on there."

EJ jumped over a crack in the sidewalk. "I don't get it...I mean this suicide thing. What's up with that?"

Adam put his hand on EJ's shoulder. "Along with the other stuff going on in kids' lives, suicide rates have mushroomed. More kids die from suicide than from cancer, HIV, and heart disease combined."

"Yeah, I know there's a lot of it going on, but why would kids want to kill themselves? They have their whole life in front of them."

"There are probably lots of reasons for it. People get depressed and angry. They do stupid things on the spur of the moment. Have you ever gotten mad and punched something?"

EJ grinned. "I got mad, once, and threw a plate in the sink. Does that count?"

"What happened?"

"The plate broke, and then it was Dad's turn to be mad."

"And afterward?"

"I felt sorry and stupid and learned a lesson."

"That's the way life works. But with suicide, there's no lesson learned. You can't take it back after it happens or feel sorry and make sure it doesn't happen again. It's the end of the ballgame."

"I think it's the ultimate form of quitting," Pedro said. "Like the kid who gets mad during a game and says he's going home. They just don't have the guts and the courage to keep on trying."

"That's part of it," Adam said. "But we can't ignore the spiritual aspect of this thing. Satan encourages suicide. He'll whisper the suggestion in people's ears whenever possible."

"Why do people listen?" Pedro asked. "Science tells us that our number-one instinct is to survive. Why would people ever go against the fear of death and the instinct to stay alive?"

"Excellent question. Maybe science is wrong. There might be things more powerful than instincts."

"Like God and Satan," EJ said.

"Bingo." Adam stopped and his face showed concern as he looked at another house to their right.

"Now what?" EJ asked.

"I sense danger from this house." Adam said.

"Danger for who?"

"You mean for 'whom'," Pedro said.

"What difference does it make? Adam knew what I meant."

"Yeah, I understood. There's intense hatred pouring out of that house that spells danger for many people. I'm going to have to pray about this one." He started walking again.

In the yard next door, an Oriental boy was entertaining himself by throwing a tennis ball up in the air and catching it. He looked up at the sight of four kids passing his house.

Adam lifted his throwing arm and motioned with the football. "Are you open?"

A smile lit the face of the boy as he held out his hands like a basket. Adam tossed the ball to him and he caught it. He ran the ball over to Adam and handed it to him.

"Nice throw, dude."

"Nice catch. My name's Adam Barnett. This is my sister Tammy, the black one, and Pedro and Esperanza Morales." Tammy and EJ giggled.

"Chung Park is my name."

"What nationality are you?" EJ asked.

"EJ!" Pedro said. "That's not a polite question to ask!"

"It's perfectly fine. People ask me all the time. I'm Korean...well my parents are Korean. I was born in America, which I believe, qualifies me for the name Korean-American."

"Have you lived here long?"

"About a month."

"We just moved in a few days ago. My dad's the new pastor at the Assembly of God church."

"Totally awesome. My family is Christian, too. We haven't found a place to worship here yet. I'll tell my parents about your church."

"Cool. Have you gotten to know your neighbors over there?" Adam pointed to the house he had labeled dangerous.

"Not really. They don't seem to want to get to know us. It's a couple of young guys – probably in their twenties. They look like they might come from one of the Arabic countries, and I've heard them talking in a foreign language."

Adam frowned as he studied the house again. He nodded his understanding of Chung's explanation. "So what grade are you in, Chung?"

"Eighth."

"Awesome, awesome! Same as Pedro and me. Or should I say Pedro and I?" He looked over at Pedro.

"Don't look at me. I'm not an English teacher. And even if I was, this is summer vacation. You can speak any way you want

to."

"Why'd you correct me then?" EJ asked. "It's summer vacation for me too."

"You're my sister. You don't get a vacation from me."

EJ rolled her eyes. She turned to Tammy and said quietly, "Do you see what I have to put up with?"

"Have you made lots of friends in Paradise?" Pedro asked.

"Are you kidding? I don't have any. Why do you think I'm out here playing catch by myself? I was feeling pretty lonely just now and asked the Lord to send me someone to be friends with. As you can see, you're an answer to prayer."

"Yes, we are. You've got four friends now," Adam said.

"Are you going to play football on the school team?" Pedro asked.

"I'm going to try."

"Adam and I will be there."

"Super. At least I'll know somebody at practice."

"We're on a walk through the neighborhood. I felt God leading me to do this. You're the third stop we've made as a result. I feel there are still more in his plan so we're going to continue. If you want to join us, you're more than welcome."

"Let me ask my mom. Be right back." Chung sprinted to the house as if he was afraid they would leave him behind if he took too long.

"So what do you think about the situation next door? You looked worried," Pedro said.

Before Adam could answer, a ratty-looking Ford Pinto, belching a trailing cloud of black fumes from a swinging tailpipe, pulled into the driveway of the house next door. Two muscular young men in gray trousers and black shirts exited their vehicle and started toward the house. They glared at Adam's crew with faces that screamed anger. Adam calmly stared back. Unwilling to maintain eye contact, the newcomers continued up the sidewalk. After peering back to the left over their shoulders, they slipped through the front door.

"I thought the car looked bad, but those dudes make the vehicle look pleasant. Do you think they might be terrorists?"

"I don't know, Pedro. All I know for sure is that I don't think God put this burden on my heart because their car is polluting the environment. I'm going to do some fervent praying."

Chung ran out of the house and sprinted back to the kids. "I can go."

"Cool. Let's bounce," Adam said and resumed walking down

the sidewalk.

Pedro looked back at the house next door. He was sure he saw a pair of eyes looking out through a small opening in the Venetian blinds and shivered despite the warm temperature before running to catch up with his friends.

"So exactly what are you looking for?" Chung asked.

"We have no clue," EJ answered. "We're just following Adam to wherever God takes him."

"So in other words, Chung, I'm following the Holy Spirit," Adam explained.

"Gotcha."

They walked another block. Adam stopped again and looked at a house where a dark-skinned boy sat on the step watching Adam and his group.

"I know that kid," Pedro said. "That's Timmy Red Feather."

"Native American?" Adam asked.

"Yep. He's in our grade too."

"You girls stay here. Let's go talk to Timmy."

The boys strolled up the sidewalk toward the steps. "What's up, Pedro?" Timmy said as he stood up.

"Hey, Timmy. How's your summer going?"

"Boring. I'm ready for some football."

"I hear you. Timmy, this is Adam Barnet. He might be the new quarterback this year. And Chung Park is the other new kid in town."

Timmy's eyebrows went up, and he held out his fist. Adam bumped it with his own. Then Chung took his turn greeting Timmy.

Timmy pointed to the rest of the group near the street. "So, are you guys selling Girl Scout cookies or something?"

"Not selling anything. You might have trouble believing this, but I felt God asked me to stop and talk to you." Adam waved at the girls to join them.

"Why would I find that weird? God does that to me every once in while."

"I suspected as much. God sent me out on this trip to find people who need help and others who can give help. I believe he's putting together a group of kids to do battle for the kingdom. It looks like he wants you on our team."

"Wow. Something like the God Squad?" Timmy asked.

Pedro shrugged. "Works for me. They could call us the Magnificent Seven, except there would only be six of us – if you want to join."

"I'd be jazzed to be on your team. What do I do?"

Adam scratched his head. "I don't know yet. Wait, I do know one thing. Maybe you can hang out with Chung, and you can keep an eye on his next-door neighbors. I think they're up to something. But be careful. I think those guys are dangerous."

"No problem, man. Remember, I'm Shoshone. I can walk through the forest without snapping a twig and sneak up on a deer and blow in its ear."

"That's funny, Timmy. You won't want to blow in these guys' ears. I'm serious here. It seems the Lord is really impressing upon me that there's trouble in that house. If I call the police right now, they'd laugh at me. We need some kind of evidence that might interest the police enough to investigate."

Chung's face brightened into a smile. "My bedroom looks right out on their house. I can peek at them through my blinds without them knowing that they're being watched."

"You mean we, don't you?" Timmy asked.

"Sure. It would be great to share the fun."

"Cool," Adam said. "I just got an idea. We have a video at home I want to show you guys. Actually, it is more for Pedro and EJ, but you guys might get a lot out of it too."

"Let me ask my mom if I can go," Timmy said.

"Good idea. And I need to ask my parents if it's OK if we do this. Maybe I can use your phone?"

"Sure, come on in."

The two boys ran to the house, leaving the other four kids standing on the lawn.

Pedro looked into Tammy's face. "Is your brother like the Tasmanian angel or something?"

"Tasmanian angel? What do you mean?"

"You know that character in the cartoons, the Tasmanian devil, that's always a whirlwind of activity?"

"Yeah."

"He reminds me of that, but I didn't think it would be appropriate to call Adam a devil."

Tammy grinned. "Now I get it. Adam's not always like this, but he doesn't let grass grow on the bottoms of his shoes. And you're right; using the word devil might get him riled up."

"Any idea what video he is talking about?"

"Not a clue. Wait, I take that back. We have this movie about witchcraft and Harry Potter. It's a documentary, so we only watched it once and put it away. It's called...ahh...*Witchcraft Repackaged* or something like that. I think Adam forgot we had it."

"Documentary?" EJ asked. "That sounds boring – like a

school assignment."

Pedro moaned. "Ooh. That's really bad. My sister's trying to give her brain a vacation this summer."

"Quit making fun of me, Pedro. I like to learn, but it's more fun learning something through a story instead of a lecture."

"You mean like Harry Potter?"

"I'm the same way," Tammy said. "I like a story better, too, with romance and action and all that stuff. And you're right, Pedro. J. K. Rowling has used a story to capture the hearts and imaginations of millions of people. A documentary is never going to have that kind of impact."

They heard a door slam. Adam and Timmy jogged towards them.

Adam gave a thumbs-up signal. "Come on, God Squad. Time for our first activity together."

Chapter 6

Ten minutes later, the group was strewn about the Barnett family room. Tammy and EJ shared an oversized leather recliner, Timmy and Chung sat on either end of a sofa-sleeper, and Pedro sat on the carpet with his legs crossed. Adam put the VHS tape into the machine but didn't start the movie. "Let's pray before we start. Can we make a prayer circle and hold hands?"

With a bit of hesitation the group lined up in a jagged circle. After more hesitation, the girls took the hand of the boy next to them.

Adam cleared his throat and looked around the circle. "You know, guys, we have to learn to trust each other. We have a lot of work to do here, and if we're going to get weird because we're holding hands with another human being, male or female, nothing is going to get accomplished."

"It's a little embarrassing," EJ said.

Adam pointed to a picture of Jesus mounted on a cross which was hung on the wall. "If you want to be a soldier in the army of Christ, you have to be ready to suffer a lot more than embarrassment. Many people have given their lives to follow the Master. Holding hands with strangers is probably the least unpleasant experience that you'll run into."

EJ stared at the picture for a second. "You're right. If he could suffer what he did for me, I can suffer a little bit of embarrassment. Sorry."

Adam nodded and smiled. "Father in Heaven. We give you thanks this day for the love you have for your children. We praise you for the work you're about to perform on Earth through us. With humble hearts and minds we seek your will. Please accept this living sacrifice that we offer to you in the form of our time and efforts. Help us to bring your message to the world. Give us the power to make a difference in other people's lives. Bring us close together and bond us into a unit. Protect us from all harm as we engage the enemy of our souls in this battle we are undertaking. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen."

The group echoed the 'amen' and returned to their seats. Adam hit the play button on the machine, and the movie opened with an advertisement for the film company who produced the

movie. Pedro looked over at EJ, who was rolling her eyes.

The advertisement ended and a group of people, dressed in gowns, danced in a circle while holding hands. Pedro couldn't help but think of the prayer circle he and his friends had just broken out of.

The narrator explained how witchcraft, known as Wicca, was the fastest growing religion in America. Images of books and TV shows and movies and websites flowed across the screen as the speaker explained how the public presence of witchcraft was exploding as kids turned to 'magick' to pass school exams, win the heart of a boy or girl, and get rich.

After the introduction, a clip from the first Harry Potter movie appeared on the screen. Pedro checked out EJ's interest level. She was obviously absorbed in the film at this point. Quotations from representatives of the world of witchcraft testified of the impact of Harry Potter on occult website activities and membership numbers. Kids, by the hundreds of thousands, enthralled by the possibilities of learning magick, were seeking more information about witchcraft as a result of reading and watching Harry Potter in action.

When the tape ended, Adam hit the stop button and turned off the machine. He pulled a notebook from the bookshelf nearby. "Let me read this one quotation to sum up exactly why this stuff is dangerous. This is from a middle-aged guy from Canada who has been a practicing witch for over twenty years. 'Harry Potter has cast a spell over young readers the world over. He has modern-day witches enchanted too. For once, the witches aren't ugly old hags. For once they're the heroes rather than the villains.'" He closed his notebook. "Let me also stress the secondary title of this movie: *Making Evil Look Innocent*. Who can think of a passage from the Bible that deals with that?"

Everyone shook their heads except Tammy. "Since none of you want to guess, I'll tell you. It's the story of the wolf in sheep's clothing found in Matthew 7:16."

Adam grinned. "Close! 7:15 to be exact. So imagine a wolf dressing in sheep's clothing and walking right into the flock and mingling with them."

EJ shook her head. "Hold on. Once the wolf eats one sheep, won't all the rest of the sheep realize the danger and run away?"

"Good question, EJ. Anyone have an answer?"

Pedro laughed. "That's easy. There's more than one flock of sheep. So the wolf eats a sheep, and then he finds a new flock to join or infiltrate. Then he repeats the cycle over and over."

"But what if the sheep that saw the wolf tell all the rest of the sheep?" EJ asked.

Pedro shook his head. "Number one: they wouldn't have access to all the flocks in the world. And there's no guarantee the other flocks would listen to them anyway."

"Wow. You hit on an important truth there, Pedro," Adam said. "I did?"

"Yep. We'll come back to that in a moment. Any other ideas on how the wolf could continue to fool the sheep?"

Timmy raised his hand.

"Timmy, this isn't school. You don't have to raise your hand. Just talk."

"OK. Well, seems to me if a wolf grabs just one sheep, he's not very effective. It would be better if he became a leader of the flock, so he could lead the sheep into a trap and eat them all with no witnesses to squeal to others."

"Excellent answer! Any other suggestions?"

Chung stood up. "Maybe I'm being dumb here, but what if the wolf just leads one sheep away from the flock, has dinner, and then comes back. The rest of the flock won't know what happened. He could tell a story about how a big bad wolf came along and got his friend – you know, like the joke about not having to outrun the wolf but just outrun the other sheep."

"Good thinking, Chung. Seems there are lots of ways for that wolf to succeed. What chance do the sheep have to survive?"

"Doesn't sound like much chance at all," Pedro said.

"Hold on!" EJ demanded. "Where's the wolf going to get a sheep costume? And how does he hide the wolf smell under the costume? And how does he speak sheep language – baaaaah – instead of ararwooo?"

"Nice animal imitations, EJ, and excellent questions. We've got our thinking caps on today. Maybe it's time to leave the sheep analogy behind and apply this to the real world. Suppose that Harry Potter is really a wolf. How can you dress up evil to make it look like good? How can the author of the book get him through security?"

Nobody answered.

"You guys will have to dig deep on this one. Come on. Somebody can do it."

"It's not the same!" EJ blurted.

"What's not the same?"

"Sheep aren't people. Sheep are stupid, but they do know enough to fear their predators. Sometimes, people let the world

tell them there's no danger when there is. Like bad friends who say there's nothing wrong with kids using drugs or having sex. Peer pressure, I think they call it."

"It's like that one commercial with the tennis player," Chung said. "'Image is everything.' People don't look at what's real but rather at what things look like on the outside. In other words: security is lax – like it used to be at airports before 9/11."

"It's like there's an outside force that causes people to seek out dangerous things, like a moth being drawn to the flame of a candle," Pedro added. "Danger is considered cool."

"Good. Give me concrete examples dealing with Harry Potter, please. How do those things apply?"

"That's easy," EJ said. "People say that Harry is just a kids' book about fantasy, and anyone who has a problem with that theory is a nutcase. So the sheep which are yelling 'wolf' look like bad guys or fruitcakes."

"For a while anyway, until the truth comes out," Adam said. "That takes us back to what Pedro said. If other sheep won't listen when the warning is given, what good was that knowledge about the wolf?"

"Worthless as an umbrella in a hurricane," Chung said.

"We want to be the whistle blowers here. We want to shout out a warning to the world that there are wolves in the flock. Where is that going to get us?"

"Made fun of," EJ said.

Pedro nodded vigorously. "We'll be big losers. Ostrich-sized."

"What?" EJ asked.

"That's supposed to be a joke. I forgot there are twelve-years-olds present who might not know the word ostracized."

"But you said ostrich-sized."

"I know what I said. That's the joke."

"Well, I don't get it. What does ostra... whatever mean?"

"It means shunned, left out, treated like leopards."

A frown contorted Adam's face. "Do you mean lepers?"

Pedro grinned. "That too."

Adam paced the carpet. "So, what positive things do we get out of trying to show people the truth?"

"We won't have to use deodorant since everyone will keep their distance from us, anyway," Pedro said, trying to get somebody to laugh, but without success.

"Not everybody, brother dear. At least have enough decency to clean up for your fellow soldiers."

"You're no soldier. Maybe we'll let you be the little drummer

girl."

EJ pouted. "Hey, that's not fair!"

"Are you putting me on drums too, General Pedro?" Tammy asked.

"Pedro, we don't have many bodies in our army," Adam said. "We need everyone who's willing to fight, even girls."

Pedro rolled his eyes. "No doubt the enemy is shaking in his boots at the thought of EJ comin' after him."

"About as much as you scare him."

"Hold on!" Adam said, his voice rising in pitch. "This is exactly how Satan wins some of the time. He gets Christians to fight each other instead of the real enemy. In order for our plan to work, we have to be aware of the things that Satan is going to do to us to try to make us harmless."

"I'm afraid we're already harmless," Pedro said. "We're just a bunch of kids. There's a ton of adults trying to fight this battle against Harry Potter, and they don't seem to be getting very far. To make matters worse, there are a bunch of Christian adults, even leaders, who seem to be standing up for Harry. What can we accomplish?"

"I don't know. I don't think we can accomplish much on our own, but with the power and Spirit of God, we'll see what he will do through us. But we have to be in one accord."

"Or one Lincoln Towncar if the Accord isn't big enough," Pedro said. Everyone stared at him. "Sorry, I've always wanted to use that joke."

EJ rolled her eyes. "So what's our plan of attack? If we're an army, we have to have a battle plan."

Everyone looked at Adam. "Ahhh. I'm not sure. God hasn't given it to me yet. But one thing I do know, there will be trouble ahead for us. Whether we stand and continue to fight or run away is the big question. We'll be attempting to disrupt the plans of Satan. You can bet he'll be trying to repay the favor."

* * *

On their way home from the Barnet house, EJ asked, "What do you think about all that happened this afternoon?"

"Gosh. Where do I start? It was a pretty full afternoon."

"You got that right. How about the movie? Let's start there."

"The movie was pretty powerful. They made good arguments against reading Harry. Good enough that I'm not interested in continuing the books," Pedro said.

"What are we going to tell Dad?"

"I don't know. The truth, I guess."

"The whole truth? Are we going to tell him about Adam and his gifts?"

"I hadn't thought about that. What would he think? Maybe that we're crazy – or that Adam is."

"Maybe both. This is so weird. The other day we're at Barbara's sitting at the Ouija Board having questions answered by spirits or something. Today, I watched Adam heal an allergic reaction that could have killed you. All of a sudden our normal lives have entered the Twilight Zone. Both experiences kind of freak me out, but we're running away from one of them and grabbing onto the other one. Maybe we should think this one out more."

"Are you saying you don't want to be part of the God Squad?" Pedro asked.

"I'm not saying that, yet. I just have some doubts and questions. First of all, let's talk about the movie. Even a twelve-year-old understands that something shown on the screen has a powerful influence over the way people think. Just because that movie was impressive and got us fired up to join the anti-Harry Potter crusade, that doesn't mean it's true."

"You've got a point. We probably should do more research to find out what's true and what isn't – if we can. Sometimes it's not always possible to know what truth is, and you just have to make a choice one way or another."

"Or you could choose not to make a choice."

"But EJ, not making a choice is making a choice. If Harry really is something used by Satan to pull people away from God, deciding not to get involved is the same as deciding that Pottermania is not a problem. If we're really on God's team, we should want to get on the playing field. When we're in Heaven, we can talk with all the others who played the game. The guys that sit on the bench won't have much to discuss except the splinters in their rear ends they got watching other people do something."

"Why does every discussion with you lead to a football comparison?"

A loud engine behind them caused the kids to pull their bikes over next to the curb. They watched a familiar Pinto drive by. EJ started coughing. "If those guys are half as dangerous as their car, Adam is right about them."

"Maybe this is a new tactic by al-Qaeda. They're going to kill off all Americans with pollution."

"I don't think it's fair to think those guys are terrorists just because they look the part. Not everyone from Saudi Arabia and

Iran and those other countries is out to kill us."

"I know that, EJ. Unfortunately, some are. We have to be on the lookout."

"Just like some innocent-looking things of this world are traps by Satan to bring us down. We just have to be careful, huh?"

"Looks that way. Kinda funny. Most people seem to be bored with their lives because there's no excitement. They have no clue that they are involved in a mystery every minute of their lives."

* * *

After hoisting his and EJ's bikes onto hooks against the back garage wall, Pedro said, "EJ, let's keep Dad in the dark, at least for now. In a way, I'd rather keep this a kids' crusade. If we bring adults into it, they might mess it up."

"OK," EJ shrugged her shoulders, and pushed the garage door button. With outstretched arms, she wiggled her fingers as if levitating a massive wall into position.

They marched to the kitchen to find out what was for supper. Pedro held the door open as EJ danced into the kitchen, "Hi, Dad!"

"Hey, kids. How was your visit with the Barnets?"

Pedro looked at EJ. She nodded before answering. "Ahh...I can safely say that we had a very interesting afternoon."

"Yeah. To say the least," Pedro said.

EJ opened up the oven and promptly closed it. "Tuna casserole! Again! Dad, you've got to do something about the menu around here. We have the same stuff over and over. Either you need to get a wife or get some recipe books and watch some cooking shows on TV."

"Or hire a cook," Pedro said.

"Well, hiring a cook is out of the question. We can't afford it. Getting married just so you guys can eat like royalty is as high on my wish list as getting a root canal. I've got another idea. Maybe you can start assuming some of the food preparation responsibilities, EJ. You're getting old enough to contribute."

"You know, Dad, I heard tuna is really good for you. And with some garlic salt and pepper, it tastes pretty darn good."

"Yeah. I thought so."

Pedro picked up the newspaper and started glancing through it. "So, when will it be ready?"

Sal looked at the timer on the stove. "Fifteen more minutes. I've got some garlic bread to go with it too."

"I love garlic bread. Don't you, Pedro?"

Pedro didn't answer.

"Don't you, Pedro?" There was no reaction. "Earth to Pedro!"

Still no answer. EJ walked over to her brother ready to kick him in the shins for ignoring her. Her eyes fell upon some headlines, and she stood behind Pedro, reading over his shoulder.

"What are you guys reading about?" Sal asked.

Neither responded.

"Must be fascinating stuff."

Still no answer. He walked over and stood behind Pedro's other shoulder. "So, what's so interesting?"

EJ pouted. "Dad, you're interrupting my train of thought."

"Well, excuuuuusssse me! I didn't realize there were train tracks laid through our kitchen."

"Sh!" EJ went back to her reading.

"Unreal!" Pedro said. "Tammy and Adam were right. Operation Frog Legs is going to the next level."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing, Dad. Just a little theory the Barnet kids have. We better wash our hands for supper. Come on, EJ."

The two left the kitchen, leaving their father scanning the newspaper to see what had fascinated them and talking to himself. "This is strange. Since when does Pedro volunteer to wash his hands? And not only that, but ask for EJ's company too. There's something going on here. I don't see any articles about frog legs here."

EJ turned on the faucet and rinsed her hands. "I thought you said we weren't going to talk to Dad about this?"

"Sorry. I just wasn't thinking for a minute."

"Nothing new."

"Hold on. You gotta quit beating me over the head because I made a mistake. Besides, Dad doesn't know what I was talking about."

"Maybe not, but the wheels are turning in his head right now, and he'll start looking for answers sooner or later."

"I know. I know. We both need to be careful. What's done is done, so get off my back on that. We need to talk about what was in the article. Can you believe it? Movies showing kids how they can get their own personal demon!"

EJ nodded. "It's just like Tammy said. The water just got a little hotter and the frogs are not jumping out of the pot."

"Seems like the reverse is happening. Frogs are jumping into the hot water now and not even noticing they're what's for dinner."

"Wait a second!"

"What for?"

"We read one article about this movie, *The Golden Compass*. We have to remember that this is just one person's information and opinion."

"You think they're lying?" Pedro asked.

"Maybe, but more likely exaggerating – blowing things out of proportion. People get kind of goofy sometimes. You remember the story about Chicken Little?"

"Of course. Are you saying this author is saying the sky is falling when it's not?"

"I'm not sure, but I do know that it's possible. We need to find out more about this before we make up our minds. It's stupid to hear one side of an argument and not look at the facts themselves to decide what's true. That sounds like something an adult would do."

Pedro grinned. "Exactly. Maybe I'm off base here, but I think it's important that if we want to be whistleblowers that we only sound the alarm when there really is danger. Otherwise people are going to start tuning us out – like the little boy who cried wolf."

"I'm afraid people already tune us out because we're just kids," EJ said.

"True. Somehow we have to change that, but I'm not sure how. I've come to the conclusion that people don't like to be warned about stuff when it involves something they want."

"Me, too. Like that report I did in school last year on aspartame, the sweetener they put in diet soft drinks. I tried to share it with Aunt Rosario to show her how that stuff causes cancer and other health problems. She didn't want to listen because she loves her diet coke. She even got mad at me for trying to tell her."

"I hear you. We're not only fighting against Satan and his plans, but we have to fight human nature itself. People don't want to be nagged, and I think they want to believe that everything is OK, even if it isn't."

"Pedro, I don't think we can win this fight."

"Odds aren't good, but if we don't fight, we lose for sure."

"I can't argue with that one."

"Cool. I finally said something my sister can't argue with. Will miracles never cease?"

"Speaking of miracles, wouldn't it be cool to have Adam's gifts?"

"I was thinking about that. It seems to me that kids really get into stuff like this, and magick too, because they have so little real power in life. Everyone tells them what to do, and nobody listens

to their opinions. If you can perform supernatural feats, you stand out in a crowd. I have a suspicion there's a lot of responsibility that goes with having gifts like Adam's. I'm not sure I'd want that on my back."

"Yeah, maybe so. By the way, did you see that in the end of *The Golden Compass*, the kids want to kill God?"

"I saw that. That's pretty sick."

The two kids dried their hands and returned to the kitchen. Pedro picked up the paper again and glanced at the page he had been reading.

"So guys, what had you glued to the newspaper?" their dad asked.

"It was the story of how the Chinese aren't going to allow Bibles at the Olympics next year," Pedro replied.

"What does that have to with frog legs?"

"Umm...I think Tammy was talking about a...Bible smuggling operation called Operation Frog Legs."

"Hmmm. That's a strange name. Maybe they were going to hop right in to deposit the books and hop back out again."

"Yeah, Dad. Something like that."

EJ glanced at her dad and saw he had his back turned. She widened her eyes, rolled them at Pedro and shook her head.

"So, Dad, why are the Chinese afraid of the Bible and Christianity?" Pedro asked, hoping the subject of frog legs would be left behind.

"I'm not sure. It's quite ironic though. There are something like forty million Christians in China, despite the persecution. Those people have to risk imprisonment, or worse, just to believe in Jesus."

"That's not fair!" EJ said. "Why can't people be allowed to believe what they want?"

"I guess because the government is afraid. Their power might be in jeopardy if they allow something to unify the people against them."

"They're scared of people who are taught to love their enemies?"

"Looks like it, EJ. Sounds weird, doesn't it?"

"Big time!"

"I think Satan does a good job of making the world think that Christians are dangerous, while at the same time making lots of people believe that he doesn't exist or that his schemes against the world are harmless."

"Like Harry Potter?"

"I'm not so sure about Harry anymore. We didn't really find anything in those books that I considered to be dangerous. We do have to be careful because Satan gets credit or blame, depending how you look at it, for lots of things that are trouble. There was some wacko guy back in the 1950's who thought everyone was a Communist. People were looking under their beds looking for hidden Communists."

"Like looking for the boogeyman?" EJ asked.

"Pretty much. Those alarmists looked pretty foolish. If Christians see Satan in everything, then they might look pretty foolish too. But the opposite is not good either. God expects us to be vigilant."

"What's that mean?"

"Come on, Dad," Pedro said. "Keep your vocabulary level down to twelve-year-old level. One syllable words are best."

EJ stuck her tongue out at him.

"Hold on, Pedro. This is the perfect way to learn new words. How else does someone build their vocabulary if they don't learn new words? Why don't you show off your vocabulary skills and explain the word 'vigilant' to EJ?"

"Fine. Vigilant means...like watchful. Like people keeping a lookout for trouble such as the watchmen on a tower of a fort or castle."

"Very good, *mi hijo*!"

"I get it. Like Timmy and Chung are going to be."

Pedro flashed EJ a signal to shut up.

"Who are Timmy and Chung, and what are they going to be vigilant about?" Sal asked.

"Ahhh. Just a couple of kids we met today. They'll be watching what they need to do to make the football coach happy when school starts."

"Oh. Some new teammates, huh?"

"Yeah. They'll have to learn how to fit in." Pedro looked over at EJ and winked.

"I'm glad you're making new friends. You can help them fit in. So, do you guys want to visit the Nelsons for a while?"

"Sure, why not?" Pedro said.

"OK, I'll give Barbara a call and see if they're doing anything."

The kids wandered into the living room while their dad made his phone call.

"What are you doing telling Dad so many lies?" EJ asked.

"I'm trying to keep him in the dark. You're not helping any."

"But lying is a sin. It's one of the Ten Commandments."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is."

"Not either. I'll prove it to you."

Pedro grabbed a Bible off the bookstand. It took him a couple of minutes to locate what he was looking for. "Ah, here we go. Exodus 20:16. 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.'"

"So, that's lying. I win."

"Hold on. It is a form of lying but that doesn't mean that all lies fall in this same category. For example, what if Aunt Rosario says 'how do you like my new dress?' And you hate the dress, but you don't want to hurt her feelings, so you lie and say you like it. You think that's sinful?" Pedro asked.

"Not really."

"Duh. You're actually showing love by not telling the truth. The Bible says it's a sin to lie when you testify in court or even when you spread false gossip about somebody to others. For example, if you went around telling everyone that Mr. Jenkins next door is an ex-convict and he's not, that would be bearing false witness against him. Do you see the difference between that and Aunt Rosario's dress?"

"I'm not stupid, Pedro. A little slow sometimes, but I get it eventually. So you think telling Dad lies about frog legs and football is OK?"

"It is if it keeps Dad from some kind of pain."

"I don't know. It still smacks of something wrong to me. Maybe we should just always tell him the truth if he asks. We just won't volunteer information if he doesn't ask," EJ suggested.

"Definitely, we won't volunteer. The less Dad knows about what we're up to, the less he'll have to worry. Now, please, quit talking about our adventures so Dad won't ask any more questions and force me to tell lies. OK, squirt?"

"Fine! And quit calling me squirt!"

"OK, squirt."

Sal entered the room, interrupting a growl that was starting to form in EJ's throat. "Get ready, kids. We leave in five minutes."

* * *

"Hey, Faith," Pedro said. "Want to take a walk? I'd like to talk about something special."

Faith looked over at Matthew and EJ, who were locked in a duel on the ping-pong table. "Sure. Let's ditch the kiddie section."

The two strolled along the sidewalk for a while in silence. "You said you wanted to discuss something special?" Faith asked.

"Yeah. It's kind of hard for me to start though. I'm not sure how you're going to react to it."

"Oh. Maybe I can help you. I think I'll react favorably."

Pedro stopped walking. Faith had to turn to face him. "You don't have a clue what I'm going to talk about it. How could you think you'll accept what I have to say?"

"Well, maybe I had an idea of what you wanted to talk about. I guess I was just doing some wishful thinking."

Pedro's forehead wrinkled up in thought. "I'm not sure what you mean, but here's what I want to talk about. I kinda joined a group today."

"A group? You mean like a club?"

"Not really. I don't know what word to use. The name we chose was the 'God Squad'. I wanted to use the Magnificent Seven."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because there are only six of us. That's where you come in."

"Me? Ahhh. You want me to become the seventh member so you can change the name?"

"Yeah. No! I don't think we'll change the name anyway because, really, God Squad is more appropriate. I wanted you to join because...I...wanted...you to join."

Now Faith's face contorted in bewilderment. "Pedro, that last statement made no sense. You said the same thing twice, which in reality meant nothing at all."

Pedro put his finger in his mouth and bit on it.

"Why'd you do that?" Faith asked.

"To stop from saying something I don't want to say."

"What? You're really acting weird, Pedro. I hope you know that."

Pedro began walking again and Faith fell in beside him. "I guess I am. How about this answer? You know the song *Jesus Loves the Little Children*."

"Duh!"

"Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight."

"What's your point?"

"Well, we have red and yellow and black and brown in our group, but we don't have white. If you joined, we'd have all the colors of the human rainbow represented."

Faith frowned. "You're joking, I hope. It's kind of sad to be wanted or unwanted because of skin color."

"Yeah. I know. It wasn't a joke, totally. It would be nice to have

a...."

"Caucasian?"

"Bingo."

"Well, I can tell you right now I'm not going to join your team just because you need a token whitey."

"That's not what I meant."

"Well, then tell me exactly what you mean, and I won't have to make bad guesses."

"Fine! I want you to join because I want you...with us."

"Pedro. You're right back where we started, talking without saying anything."

"Wait a second. I didn't say the same thing as before. Let me try one more time. I want you to join because I want you with me."

"Oh, come on, Pedro. You keep saying the same thing...."

Pedro shook his head. "You're not listening, or you would have noticed the difference."

"Say it again."

"I want you with ME."

Faith's face turned red. "Oh. Gosh. From the burning feeling in my face, I probably don't qualify as white anymore."

Pedro studied the girl's face. "You're right, but you gotta remember that's not the reason I wanted your participation. It's not because you're white, it's because you're...."

"I'm what?"

"Umm. Nice."

"Nice? Is that all?"

"Funny."

"Is that all?"

"Pretty."

Faith stepped right in front of Pedro and turned to face him. "Ahh. You think I'm pretty?"

Pedro looked down at the ground and shook his head.

"So, you don't think I'm pretty?"

"Well, yeah, but...."

"But what? And quit looking at the ground. My face is up here, above my neck."

Pedro raised his head. His chocolate-colored eyes met the blue ones that were intently probing him. "No, I don't think you're pretty...I think you're...beautiful."

A large smile decorated Faith's countenance, making her even more attractive to Pedro. "Was that so hard to say?"

"Yeah. Even harder."

Faith laughed. "Boys are so...."

"So what?"

"So...clumsy."

"Thanks for noticing." Pedro turned around and started walking back to Faith's house.

"Hold on, tiger. What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm trying to maintain my clumsy sense of balance long enough to walk back to your house."

"Why?"

"I wouldn't want to step on your toes as a result of my clumsiness."

"Hold on!"

Pedro stopped and Faith caught up to him. "I wasn't trying to cut you down or anything when I used the word clumsy. In fact, maybe I was changing the subject a little."

"For what?"

"Maybe I was displaying a little clumsiness myself. I didn't quite know how to respond to that compliment. So to avoid some embarrassment I threw the ball back into your court."

"I'm sorry I embarrassed you."

"Wait, you didn't embarrass me. It was the thought of what I wanted to say to you that embarrassed me," Faith said.

"What did you want to say?"

"Sheesh. You're not going to let me slide out of this with my white face intact, are you?"

"Are you going to blush again?"

"I will if I tell you what I want to say."

"That bad, huh?"

"Not bad at all."

"Then what's so difficult about saying it?"

Faith looked up at the clouds sailing past. "This is weird. A minute ago you were having difficulty saying what you wanted to say, and now I have that problem. Maybe boys aren't clumsy. Maybe people in general are, including me."

"You're probably right about that. I think it's easy to talk to people you know about safe subjects, but if you wander off on a topic that poses risk to one's safety, it gets hard in a hurry. Sometimes even safe subjects are hard to talk about with someone new. I think maybe that's why boys don't talk as much as girls. We're afraid we'll look like idiots by saying something stupid."

"Hello-o, Pedro! Girls have the same problem. Sometimes I say something, and in my mind I look up to see how the judges rated my statement. Believe me, the judges on American Idol are merciful compared to the judgmental attitude of middle school

girls."

"What's up with that anyway?"

"I don't know, Pedro. I don't like it, but I find myself getting caught up in the same stupid game sometimes."

"It's not easy being a teenager."

"Nope. I have an idea that it isn't much easier being an adult either."

"Maybe."

Faith reached out and wrapped her hand around Pedro's. "Come on. Let's finish our walk."

Pedro felt himself pulled along. He looked down at the white hand melting into his brown one. "Why are you holding my hand?"

"You don't want me to?"

"I didn't say that. I just wondered why."

"I figured that when you told me I was beautiful, you were really saying more than that. I interpreted it to mean that you wanted me to be your girlfriend. Maybe I was way out of line. Anyway, my hand in yours is my answer, in case you're asking the question. Did you want to correct my interpretation?"

Pedro looked down at the hand again. He examined the feeling of energy flowing through him. It was mind-boggling how he had arrived at this situation, but he had enough presence of mind to throw back an answer. "No thanks."

Faith smiled again, and Pedro grinned back. "Now, about your God Squad. I don't know about becoming a member. I'm not a very spiritual Christian."

"I don't think I was either. But Adam makes me want to be."

"Exactly what do you mean by spiritual? I think it has different meanings to different people."

"Adam explained it so even I could understand it. Our person is made up of a body, a soul, and a spirit. God's Spirit talks to our spirit to give us instructions and stuff. If we listen and obey, then we're spiritual. If we follow the body or our soul, which would be our mind, we're not being spiritual."

"I'm looking forward to meeting this Adam. I think I'd like to be spiritual too if we can do it together." She squeezed Pedro's hand.

He looked up and their eyes locked. Without any fear or embarrassment, Pedro let all the feeling in his heart pour forth from his eyes as he searched hers for a similar reaction. Maybe it was his imagination, but he thought he saw it. "That would be totally cool."

"What about Matthew? Do you want another twelve-year-old on the team?"

Pedro grimaced.

"Does that look on your face mean no?"

"Faith, I don't know how to say this either."

"Spit it out. I'm not going to bite you."

"Are you sure?"

"I might if you don't tell me what you're thinking. My curiosity meter is going through the ceiling."

"OK. I wonder if Matthew is already playing on the other team."

"What other team?"

"In the world of spiritual matter, there are two loud voices. I'm trying to listen to God's voice. Matthew, on the other hand, seems to prefer God's rival."

"You mean the devil?"

"Bingo."

"He's just a kid. He doesn't even know what he's doing."

"Maybe so, but I think we need to pray for him. In the meantime, I'd prefer to not tell him about the God Squad. OK?"

"If that's what you want."

"Yep. And another thing I'd like is to use your computer when we get back to do some research on the movie *The Golden Compass*. I want to get your feedback on that information."

"You care about my opinion?"

"Very much."

"Thank you for your vote of confidence. Let's go do it now."

"Works for me."

The pair turned around and headed toward the Nelson house. When they got close, Pedro let go of Faith's hand. He didn't want EJ, or his dad, to see him showing affection for Faith. One more secret for him to keep.

When the two new sweethearts entered the room where Matthew and EJ were still playing, Matthew was just preparing to serve. He stopped his paddle in midair. "Hey, Faith. You missed it! There was a commercial on the TV for a new movie coming out that looks great!"

"Yeah? What's the name?"

"*The Golden Compass*."

Faith whirled around and locked eyes with Pedro. He nodded.

"Wanna go?" Matthew asked.

"I don't know, Matthew. Not yet anyway. Come on, Pedro, let's go do our thing."

Matthew frowned. "Cinderella dressed in yella went upstairs to kiss her fella."

"Why don't you go back to playing ping-pong, you little monster?"

"It's more fun bugging you."

Faith shook her head and reached out to grab Pedro's hand. He dodged her, and started walking toward the computer room. Faith recovered from the rebuff and followed closely behind.

When they got into the room, Faith asked quietly, "Are you ashamed to have someone know that you like me and vice versa?"

"No. I'm not ashamed in the least. In fact, I'd love to shout it to the mountaintops."

"There are no mountains in Wisconsin."

"Minor detail. What I'm trying to say is that I just want to keep this under the covers for a while. Look at our situation. Your mom is dating my dad, Matthew is a little pill, and EJ has the capability of being another pain in the rear end. Taking into account all those factors, I think it's better if we stay low-key for now. If that's OK with you?"

"I guess it's fine – for now. Do you know how hard it will be not to tell my friends?"

"I can imagine. I'll make it up to you later."

"Hmm. I like the sound of that."

"I thought you might. Now let's get to work."

Faith led Pedro to the computer. Two chairs sat in front of it.

"You can drive, Pedro, since you know where we're going."

Faith pointed to the chair immediately in front of the computer and then sat in a chair to Pedro's right. He shrugged and sat in front of the monitor. He browsed to Google and then typed in 'the golden compass' and hit the 'search' button. "Ahh. Only 260,000 entries to choose from."

"Is that good?"

"Better than 260 million. We won't be hitting all of them in either case."

"Not tonight anyway."

"Not any night. I'm not planning on devoting my life to the study of this movie. Just looking for some other information to know if this is something that's dangerous."

"Gotcha."

Pedro chose one of the articles and they read a summary of the contents of the story. He let out a low whistle. "I don't think we need to go much deeper here. This is not a propaganda article with someone spouting off their opinion that this is dangerous or harmless. This is a review from the publisher. It gives us the story

without having to read the whole book."

"You think this is bad?"

"Well, look at it this way, demon influence is one of the most feared phenomena in the Christian world. In this story the bad guys are the Church because they are trying to separate the kids from their personal daemons via 'intercision', a made-up word that looks a bit like exorcism to me."

"So, I think I get it. The good guys are the ones with daemons, so removing them is a bad thing?"

"Exactly."

"Do you believe in real demons?"

"Jesus cast demons out of people in the Bible. Obviously if Jesus is actually the son of God, demons are for real."

"I guess you're right. How do they, you know...like...get into a person?"

"I'm certainly not an expert on the subject. Adam and I talked about it some. He used the comparison of bacteria. Zillions of bacteria are hanging on our bodies, just waiting for a chance to get inside. If we cut ourselves somehow, we create an opening to our bodies. In the spiritual realm, we can cut ourselves by getting involved in the occult."

"You mean worshipping Satan?"

"I think if you reach that point, you're already gone. More like the seemingly innocent little things like astrology and Ouija Boards and fortune telling. Stuff like that. The bacteria are invisible, but we know what power they have once they get inside. The occult things aren't invisible, but the damage they can do is hidden – at least to some people."

"Are you saying my playing with the Ouija Board was exposing myself to demons?"

Pedro made a funny face. "I wish I could tell you no, but I'm afraid I can't."

"So how far gone am I?"

"What?"

"How much am I possessed?"

"I didn't say you were possessed. In fact, very few people are ever possessed. Most of the time it only opens you up to influence, causing you perhaps to listen to the wrong voices in your head. God talks to us, and the devil talks to us, and we talk to ourselves. Sorting out those voices and knowing which one is the right one to listen to is the trick."

Faith frowned. "Jesus said that his sheep will recognize his voice."

"You're right. Anyway, back to the compass that isn't so golden after all, did you see that one of the people who helps the eleven-year-old heroine is a witch? Why does that not surprise me?"

"Hmm. A Harry Potter-like connection."

"Bingo. Let's check out a few more articles."

He hit the 'back' button and returned to the search results screen. After hitting the 'next' link to get a new list, Pedro chose another article.

"OK. This one is opinion. The author says the movie is being watered down to remove the most objectionable elements, but the movie is being used to sell the books and atheism to kids."

"How much does it cost?" Faith asked.

"What?"

"Atheism?"

"Is this a blond joke?"

"Kinda."

"I think the answer is that it could cost some people a chance to live with God forever."

Faith frowned. "In that case my joke isn't very funny, huh?"

"Definitely. Ahh! Here's that part about killing God."

"It's not really God, but someone who pretends to be God."

"You're right, Faith. OK, I'm ready for one more."

"Me, too."

Pedro chose another link. This time they ended up on a forum where a member had left a post complaining about the condemnation of *The Golden Compass* by religious groups.

"Unbelievable! Check this out!" Pedro said.

"What?"

"This person says she's so mad about this email which was sent as a warning about this new movie, that she felt like going on a killing spree."

"That's a bit radical."

"No kidding. That's way over the top. And the next poster refers to 'the right-winged Christian nuts'. I'm sorry but how can someone mention killing spree and have someone else join the rant instead of telling them to chill out."

"Right-winged? I thought only angels had wings."

"That doesn't refer to actual wings. I think it has something to do with politics."

"Oh. Does the God Squad get involved in politics?"

"I don't know. All I'm sure of is that we will be following the Holy Spirit. If he leads us into politics, I guess that's where we'll

go."

"Didn't the girl in this book use a golden compass to help her find truth?"

"Yeah. So what's your point?"

"Would you say that the Holy Spirit is the compass everyone should be using?"

Pedro scratched his head. "That's true. Good observation."

"Pretty good for a blond, anyway."

"Pretty good analogy, period."

Faith blushed. "Glad you like it."

"So, I guess we got our answer. The golden compass is really pointing south, in this case, and that's where they're trying to send people. I need to report this to Adam."

"It's kind of weird how some people put down other people who try to sound the alarm about something like this. I mean, even to the point of mentioning murder."

"Not weird at all. In football we call people like that blockers. They get in the way of the tacklers, so the ball carrier can get into the end zone."

"I get the picture. Who's carrying the ball?" Faith asked.

"The devil."

"Wow! That's pretty radical. I don't feel comfortable talking about Satan."

"Why not?"

Faith looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "I'm not sure. Maybe because the concept of some supernatural thing trying to make people do bad things kind of sounds crazy."

"I won't argue with that. It's not exactly easy for me to discuss this stuff, either. Adam has opened me up in this regard. He talks about the spiritual realm as if he sees right into it...well, almost."

"Are you sure that Adam isn't a bit...."

"Crazy?"

Faith nodded.

"The thought crossed my mind at one point. What I see doesn't support that theory though. He talks about Heavenly warfare like a couple of sports announcers discussing an upcoming game between Wisconsin and Ohio State."

"With Ohio State being the devil in this case."

Pedro laughed. "Obviously. Anyway, spiritual warfare is taking place on a daily basis. We humans can choose to be on God's side, or we can choose to be on Satan's side."

"What if a person wants to stay neutral?"

"Maybe I'm wrong, but it seems to me that if a person doesn't

pick sides, they're probably helping the devil, whether they want to or not. If I continue my football comparison, those people are not actively blocking, but by being on the field they can simply get in the way of someone trying to make the tackle. Like the referees sometimes do."

"Wow! All this is a bit overwhelming for me. My head is getting tired from the new information passing through, so maybe we can lighten up and take a break?"

Pedro nodded. "I have an idea. How would it be if I pray over you? Adam taught me how to lay hands on people, but I've never done it."

"And you want me to be your guinea pig?"

Pedro laughed. "I wasn't looking at it in those terms. Adam says that the power of God's people should testify to the nations of his existence. It would be cool if I could experience some of that power, for your gain instead of mine."

"Give it a shot, Professor."

Pedro's grin disappeared as he put on his all-business face. He placed his right hand on top of Faith's head. A desire to stroke the silky strands of gold tempted him, but he fought through to continue his mission. "Father in Heaven. Right now I plead the blood of Jesus over Faith. Protect her from all harm: physical, emotional, or spiritual. Prepare her to receive your words and your love. When she comes to a crossroads in life, show her the way to go. Be her compass. Allow her mind to process all the information about your kingdom without getting tired. Equip her with the weapons she needs to participate in this fight against the devil. Please undo any harm that playing with the Ouija Board has caused. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen."

"That was beautiful. Where did you learn to pray like that?"

"Adam says that in the Bible we're taught that sometimes we don't know how to pray. We're supposed to let our spirits do the praying, not our minds. I was trying to just let the words come out without thinking about what I wanted to say. I want to pray what God wants me to."

"The way I feel right now, I think you did. The fog in my head is gone. Tell me more about what Adam is teaching you."

The two moved over to a comfortable couch and started a conversation that caused them to lose all track of time. Their concentration was broken at ten when Sal informed Pedro it was time to leave. He then left the room, giving Faith and Pedro a chance for a fitting goodbye.

"I'm going to miss you, Pedro."

"Me, too."

"You're going to miss yourself?"

"No, Blondie, I'm going to miss you."

"That's really sweet of you."

"I wish I had a friendship ring to give you."

"I'll remember you, Pedro. In fact I'll look at my empty finger and imagine what it is going to look like someday to be wearing a ring from you."

"Cool beans! Gotta go." On impulse he leaned over, kissed Faith on the cheek and walked away before he got choked up.

She put her hand on her cheek, which was still slightly damp from his lips. After wiping the faint trace of moisture with her index finger, she put her finger to her lips and kissed it.

Chapter 7

The next two weeks flew by, bringing the summer vacation to an end. EJ and Pedro stood at the bus stop waiting for their ride on the opening day of school. This was the first time in three years they had gone to the same school and ridden the same bus.

"Sixth graders ride in the front of the bus," Pedro said.

"Who says?"

"It's an unwritten rule. The big kids get to sit farther away from the bus driver."

"So they can get away with stuff?"

"Not me. Some of the other kids do things like kiss or punch people, but I just read a book."

"Then it seems to me you ought to ride up in front so people don't bother you. It's hard enough to read without distractions."

"This year I'll have Adam to talk to so I won't be doing much reading. And Timmy and Chung will be on this bus too. If Faith was on this bus, the whole God Squad could ride to school together."

"If Faith was here, you probably wouldn't talk to the rest of the GS," EJ said.

"What's GS?"

"God Squad. Gosh, you're dense sometimes."

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

The bus pulled up, ending their conversation. EJ got in first. Fighting off the temptation to take a seat in the back, she found a bench that was empty, threw her backpack into the window seat and sat down in the aisle seat. Pedro surveyed the back. There was at least one person in every seat. Since he wanted to sit with Adam, he plopped his backside in a middle bench that was vacant.

A few minutes later the bus pulled up at the corner near the Barnet house. Tammy and Adam were among the group of newcomers who entered the vehicle. EJ verbally got Tammy's attention, and her new friend excitedly took the saved place. Pedro beckoned to Adam with his hand. When Adam arrived at his rival quarterback's side, Pedro slid into the window seat.

"Morning," Adam said.

"What's up?"

"I am. Kind of hard getting up so early, but I made it today."

"Yeah. I get used to sleeping in during the summer, and it's hard to get back into the routine."

"Are you ready for some football?"

"You know it. I can't wait."

The bus stopped again, right in front of the mystery house, and Timmy and Chung got on. Pedro looked over at the house they had targeted for observation. He thought of a novel they had read in the class the year before, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The thing that stood out in his mind about that book was the next-door neighbor who seemed to pose danger to the kids in the story, but ended up being a hero. *Maybe Adam is wrong about these guys. Maybe they just look dangerous.*

The bus arrived at school before the doors were unlocked. Early birds had to kill time on the campus waiting for the first bell that indicated the school was open. The six members of the God Squad that rode Pedro's bus all congregated together. Within a few moments, Faith walked up to the group. Matthew tagged along behind her.

"Hey, EJ. Come on and play with me," the young Nelson boy cried.

EJ looked over at her friends. When she turned back to Matthew, she said, "Sorry, Matthew. I've got more important things to do than playing."

"Like what?"

"Like...noneya."

"Noneya?"

"None of your beeswax."

"Would you speak English, please?"

"Gosh. I thought I was. That simply means it is none of your business."

Matthew pouted. "Keeping secrets from me? It won't work. I find out everything, eventually."

"Not really a secret. Just grown-up stuff."

"Grown-up stuff? You're the same age I am, EJ."

"In years I am, but I'm mature for my age."

"Mature, manure. Are you saying you're more grown-up than me?"

"Doesn't take much," Faith said.

"Who asked you, sister, dear? Why don't you stay out of this?"

Neither EJ or Faith answered. Matthew glanced at all their faces. "Whatever. If you guys are interested in it, it's probably too boring for me anyway. I'm bouncin'." He made good on his

promise, and the others watched him go.

"Who was that?" Adam asked.

"That's my little brother, Matthew."

"I picked up on that, but who are you?"

"Oh, gosh. I'm sorry!" Pedro said. "I haven't introduced you yet. Adam, this is Faith and vice versa. Faith, this is Adam's little sister Tammy, Chung, and Timmy."

"Hi," all the new kids said in unison as if it had been rehearsed.

Faith laughed. "Ahh. This is the Adam I've heard so much about."

"That's a scary opening. I'm sure I'll have trouble living up to whatever you heard, whether it's good or bad."

"Oh, it's all good. Yeah, you probably won't be able to live up to the legend of Adam as told by Pedro Morales. He almost had me believing you have special walking shoes for water."

Adam turned to Pedro. "Thanks a lot, buddy."

"Hey. I just call it like I see it."

"Maybe you need glasses. Have you thought of being a referee when you grow up?"

"Funny. In my defense, however, you always are saying it's God doing the work. You're just a vessel, so it's God who I've been talking up, not you."

"That works for me just fine! Hey, if we're going to pray, we better get started. I think school is going to start pretty soon."

"You're right," Pedro said holding out his hand to Faith. She took it as Pedro reached out his other hand to Adam. The rest of the group formed a circle around the flagpole. "You do the honors, Pastor Barnet."

Adam nodded. "Father in Heaven, we ask for a blessing upon this school. We ask that you place a protective hedge of thorns around this building to keep out anyone who might try to cause harm to any of the students or staff here. Please pour your spirit out on us that we might show your love and mercy for those who don't know you. Bond the students of this school together with love and respect. Help those who are suffering from physical ills or mistreatment by their fellow students. Help us all to learn the material we need for our futures. And in all, let your name be glorified. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen."

They all echoed the 'amen.'

"What's going on here?"

The members of the prayer circle dropped hands and turned to see who was speaking to them.

"Oh, hi, Mr. Darwin. Nothing much," Pedro said.

"Sure looked and sounded like you guys were praying."

Adam made eye contact with the science teacher, who was obviously stuck doing playground duty today. "We were praying."

"You know that's against school regulations. Separation of church and state, you know."

"Excuse me, but I think you mean it is against school regulations to have sanctioned prayer in the school. This is a private party, and we're not even in the building. Freedom of speech, you know."

"We'll see about that. I'll be having a little talk with Principal Dawkins."

The bell rang and everyone started moving toward the classroom.

"Have a nice day, Mr. Darwin," Pedro said.

"Don't even try to suck up to me, son. This isn't over yet." The teacher quickened his pace and left the children behind with his long strides.

"Are all the teachers here like that?" Tammy asked. "Please tell me no."

"Don't worry," Faith said. "They're worse."

EJ's eyes bugged out.

"Just kidding, EJ. Take it easy. Actually most of the teachers are pretty nice once you get to know them. I don't know what Darwin's problem is."

"Morales, what's up, dude?" A lanky boy with hair falling into his eyes came up and bumped fists with Pedro.

"Hey, Haskell! How was your summer?"

"Awesome. Hey, did you hear the news about the football coach?"

"No. What news?"

"He took a job in Madison."

"So who's going to coach us this year?"

"Mr. Darwin."

Pedro let out a long moan.

* * *

On the bus ride home that afternoon, EJ sat across from her friend Amy, who still dressed in the black garb they had seen her in the last time. She stared into the seat in front of her, paying no attention to anything going on around her.

"Amy, are you all right?"

Amy didn't look up. EJ looked over at Tammy and shook her head.

Tammy whispered, "Introduce me."

"Amy, I want you to meet a friend of mine."

"Hi," Amy said without looking up.

"This is Tammy. Tammy, this is Amy."

"Hi, Amy. Nice to meet you."

"No, it's not."

EJ looked back at Tammy. Now Tammy had her head down and her eyes closed. When EJ saw folded hands, she realized Tammy was praying. She waited until Tammy opened her eyes again and whispered, "What are you praying about?"

"Amy needs help big time."

"How do you know?"

"I'm not sure. Women's intuition."

"You're not a woman yet. Maybe you've got some of Adam's gifts."

"Maybe. I just felt that she's in trouble, almost as if I heard a voice tell me that."

EJ glanced over at Amy again. This time she found Amy looking at them. Her face seemed almost devoid of life. Her eyes were dull and her face was emotionless.

"EJ. I need to talk to you."

"OK. Talk."

"Not here. In private."

"Ahhh. Can Tammy be there?"

Amy looked at Tammy. "Doesn't matter. I just don't want to talk in front of the whole bus."

"OK. Can you come to my house?"

"Works for me."

The girls were silent until they reached EJ's bus stop.

"This is where we get off, Amy," EJ said. She let Amy go in front of them down the aisle of the bus.

They walked slowly to EJ's house. Twice Amy broke into tears, but she didn't volunteer any information. EJ fished the key to the front door out of her purse and unlocked it. Tammy pulled the door open and held it for the other two girls. The hostess directed Amy to the couch where she helped her sit down, after giving her a big hug. Tammy sat down on one side of the distraught girl with EJ on the other.

"OK, Amy. It's safe to talk now," EJ said.

"She wants us to die!"

"Who does?" EJ asked.

"My friend, Roberta. Wait, she doesn't want you to die. She wants me and her to kill ourselves."

"Suicide?"

"Yeah. She wants me to sign a suicide pact with her."

"Why?"

"She hears voices saying that she needs to do this."

"Do you hear those voices?"

Amy shook her head. "I don't want to die. And I don't want her to die either. She said if I won't do it with her, she won't be my friend anymore."

"Amy, I'm not trying to be funny here, but if you do commit suicide, she won't be your friend anymore either. You'll both be gone."

"That's true. She says we'll be friends in hell."

EJ looked over at Tammy, whose face showed the shock that was going through her system. EJ mouthed the word 'help.'

"Amy, we'll be your friends," Tammy said.

"I don't want your pity. I want people to be my friend because they like me, not because they feel sorry for me."

"I like you, Amy," EJ said.

"You mean you liked me before I went weird."

"I never said that."

"No, but you were thinking it."

"How do you know what I was thinking?"

"Well, I thought...with you being a straight-arrow Christian that you wouldn't like my Goth lifestyle."

"To be perfectly honest, Amy, I don't like the Goth look or the Goth attitude. But that doesn't mean that I don't like you. Kids do all kinds of things to get people's attention and their friendship. That doesn't mean that's who they are. That simply shows what they're doing at the time."

"She's right, Amy," Tammy said. "We all go through stages as we grow up. Some of us have different stages than others. But we usually grow out of them. That's what growing up is all about."

"You don't grow out of it if you're dead!" Amy started to sob again.

EJ grabbed Amy and hugged her tightly until the crying stopped. Tammy handed her some tissues and she wiped the liquid emotion from her face as she let out a big sigh.

"Boy, I made a big fool out of myself there."

"No, you didn't. Sometimes we need a good cry. Looks like you were overdue," EJ said.

"Duh!"

"It's kind of funny," Tammy said. "Sometimes we need somebody to be there when we cry. They act as a support. On the

other hand, the support person also receives a blessing because the fact the person will cry in front of them shows a special trust. I'm complimented that you would feel comfortable enough around me to cry."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No way. Goths are just one of many groups that puts on the tough-guy image that nothing bothers them, they don't give a rip, and they're not gonna cry. That's not who we are as human beings and especially as twelve-year-old girls. You're being real with us and I appreciate it."

"I think Christians sometimes aren't real," Amy said.

"You're absolutely right. In fact, Christians may be the worst offenders as pretenders to be defenders of their faith."

"That's kind of like a poem."

"Yeah, kind of. I can't take credit for thinking that up. It just came out like that."

Amy laughed.

EJ grinned. "It's nice to hear you laugh."

"It's nice to laugh. I'd almost forgotten what it's like."

"So, tell us the story about Roberta. Why does she want to commit suicide?" EJ asked.

"I told you about the voices. Also, she gets made fun of at high school all the time. Her life is hell at school and not much better at home."

"Wow. That's tough. Kids can be so cruel sometimes," Tammy said.

"You guys have been great!"

"That's because we follow the golden rule. If you don't want people to tease you, don't make fun of others."

"Roberta was teaching me that the golden rule is really 'do unto others before they do unto you.' I like yours better."

"Me, too," Tammy said. "Can we pray with you?"

Amy's face scrunched up and her eyebrows almost bounced off the ceiling. "Say what?"

"Can we pray for you – and Roberta?"

"Whatever. I guess it can't hurt."

"Wait a second. I gotta call my mom and tell her that I'll be a little late today. Be right back. OK if I use your phone, EJ?"

"No problem. It's right over there on the wall."

Tammy walked to the phone and carried out her mission.

"Amy, do you need to let your mom know you'll be late?" EJ asked.

"Are you kidding? My mom doesn't care. She's not home most

of the time when I get there. I could probably be missing for three days before she noticed."

"Oh." EJ didn't know what else to say. Her own mother used to wait at the bus stop every day for her. If she hadn't shown up on time, there would have been a panic attack. Tammy returned to the couch and rescued her from the dilemma.

"Good thing I called. She saw the school bus unload and was worrying about me. Now, let's pray."

Tammy and EJ spent the next five minutes asking for a blessing and guidance for Amy's life. A prayer for Roberta followed.

After the 'amens' were uttered, EJ asked, "Are you feeling any better right now?"

"As a matter of fact, I do feel better."

"Great. Wanna play some ping-pong?"

"Sure. I feel obliged to tell you that I'm gonna kick your butt."

EJ grinned. "We'll see about that. Let's have a challenge. Winner stays on and loser sits and watches. I'll sit out the first game."

Within a short period of time Amy was laughing and enjoying herself thoroughly. Ninety minutes after they started, Tammy broke up the party by announcing she had to go home.

"Amy and I can both walk you home, and then I'll walk Amy home," EJ said.

"Who's going to walk you home?" Tammy asked.

"I'll just walk back by myself."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"This isn't Detroit. It'll still be light outside, you know."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll be fine. Come on. Don't want you to be late."

The three girls exited the house and started down the sidewalk.

"I really had a good time today," Amy said.

EJ smiled. "That makes me glad."

"I've never had anyone pray over me like that before. Do you think God was really listening?"

"Of course."

"My parents used to bus me off to Sunday school when I was little. They never went to church, but for some reason they thought I should. When I reached the age of eight, I told them I wasn't going anymore if they didn't go too. That was the end of my church attendance."

"My dad's a pastor," Tammy said. "I've gone every Sunday of

my entire life, unless I was sicker than a giraffe with the mumps."

"Are you bragging or complaining?" Amy asked.

"A little of both, maybe, but mostly just being grateful. It's been great most of the time."

"Maybe I could come visit your church."

"That would be totally awesome."

"EJ, do you go there, too?"

"Not yet. We visited once, and we liked it. I might talk my dad into changing churches. But I can certainly go the day you want to visit."

Amy smiled. "Cool. Let's do it next Sunday then."

"You're on."

The girls began to skip. EJ tripped and fell into the grass, but she jumped up laughing despite a grass stain on her knee. They resumed their journey at a safer speed. The conversation turned to boys, and they arrived at Tammy's house hardly aware that any time had passed.

"See you guys, tomorrow," Tammy said and ran up the sidewalk to her house.

When the other two girls arrived at Amy's doorstep, they got a surprise. Roberta was plopped down on the stoop, leaning back against the door.

"It's about time you got home! Where you been?"

"At EJ's house."

"What were you doing there?"

"Just playing around."

"I don't like it."

"Sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it. I've been sitting here for over an hour. I've got sores on my rear end from sitting on the cement for so long."

"I didn't know—"

"You know now. Come on. We've got some plans to make. Say goodbye, EJ."

EJ looked into the face of her friend. The carefree look present a minute ago had vanished.

"I gotta go, EJ."

"Are you sure you'll be—"

"She'll be just fine. I'm here to take care of her."

That's what I'm worried about. "Yeah, OK. See you tomorrow, Amy."

Amy didn't answer. EJ slowly walked toward home, deep in thought trying to figure out how to rescue her friend from the

situation she found herself in. A loud bang startled her out of her trance. She thought at first it was a gunshot and looked back at Amy's house with fear etched into her face.

Smoke was billowing into the street, but not from Amy's house. It came from a Ford Pinto that came toward her. She turned and began to walk away again. The car pulled alongside of her.

"Need a ride home, cutie?"

EJ looked over and saw one of Chung's next-door neighbors hanging out of the car window.

"No thanks. I'm home right now." She walked up the sidewalk toward the nearest house. When the ratty Ford drove away, she retraced her steps and started running for home.

EJ arrived home just as Pedro stepped off the activity bus. She stood in front of their house, her hands on bent knees and trying to catch her breath.

"How far did you run?" Pedro asked.

"All the way from over by Chung's house."

"You going out for the cross-country team or something?"

EJ shook her head. "No thanks."

"Why'd you run that far then?"

"I was scared."

"Of what?"

"Chung's neighbors tried to pick me up."

"They tried to carry you?"

"No, I mean they tried to get me to take a ride in their car."

"Ahh. They wanted you to ride their horse."

"No, ride in their car."

"Their car is a Pinto, and that's a horse."

"Their horse is a piece of junk and that's not a joke."

"You got that right. So, they asked you if you wanted a ride, and you just took off running?"

"I'm not quite that dumb. I made them think I was at home already and just walked up to some house. Luckily, they drove away before I got to the door. I'm not sure what I would have done otherwise. Try to sell the residents some Girl Scout cookies maybe."

"But you're not a Girl Scout."

"Listen, dude. I'm a girl, and I was scouting for a way to get away from the bad guys, so you might say I was a Girl Scout. You're not the only one in the family allowed to tell bad jokes."

"You're right, EJ. If Dad is allowed to do it, you should be too."

EJ rolled her eyes. Her breathing was back to normal, and she

headed for the front door. Pedro caught up with her.

"Are you going to tell Dad about this incident?"

"I don't know. It's probably nothing. Maybe they were just hitting on me, thinking that I was older than I am."

"Yeah. And maybe they're slave traders out looking for merchandise. Or maybe they're serial killers looking for an easy score," Pedro said.

"Enough already! No sense telling Dad, but I think we should tell Adam. Maybe he'll do something about it."

"Yeah, maybe it's time we step up surveillance."

EJ threw up her hands. "Maybe we should quit watching them and just get into the house to see what they've got in there."

"Are you suggesting we break in?"

"I didn't say anything about breaking in. I just mentioned going in. How you guys manage to get around locked doors is your business."

"Listen, Sister Commando, if anybody is going in there, it will be the police. We're just keeping an eye on them in case we can find evidence that could justify a search warrant."

"Wimps."

Pedro's mouth dropped open. "What? You want us to break the law?"

"Is it against the law to look? You're not going to take anything. As far as breaking in, I bet they leave windows open because of the heat. Going through an open windows is really not *breaking* and entering, is it?"

"Nah. It's just the entering part."

"So you'd only get half as long to rot in jail."

"Thanks for worrying about me, sis."

"No problem. You know, the good news is that you'd have plenty of time to escape. You'd hear their car from a mile away."

"That's true. They're not going to sneak up on anybody with that version of chitty-chitty bang-bang."

EJ laughed. The sound of a car drew their attention away from their conversation. They turned and watched their dad maneuver up the driveway.

"That early alert system ain't gonna work with Dad's stealth car. I never heard him until he hit the driveway. Good thing you and me never do anything that we have to hide. Or maybe I should speak for myself."

"Excuse me, brother dear, but it seems to me we're hiding plenty from Dad right now."

Pedro whispered the next sentence. "Yeah, but that's different

than actually doing something we're not supposed to – like watching MTV or something."

The sound of the car door opening diverted their conversation and they looked toward their father.

"Hey, kids! What's going on? Lock yourselves out of the house?"

"Nope," EJ said.

"Oh. Waiting for your dear old dad to come home so you can greet him, huh?"

"If you want to think that, go for it. Actually, Pedro and I were just having a conversation."

"About what?"

"Oh...life."

"That's good. I love that you guys can talk without fighting. In fact, you guys seem to be getting along a lot better, lately. What's up with that? Are you finally listening to me?"

"Again, I wouldn't get a swelled-up head, Father dear. I think meeting Tammy and Adam has changed both of us quite a bit. And speaking of them, can we go to church there again this week?"

"Sure. Barbara was telling me that she isn't happy at her church. She wanted to try the Barnet's church sometime and see how she liked it. Now, I'm really in favor of family conversations, but let's take this one inside so we can get some dinner. I'm starving."

"Me too! I had football practice today."

"Me three! I ran...a lot."

"Well, let's go. I want to hear all about football practice while I cook."

* * *

The next day the God Squad reconvened at the flagpole. Two girls came up to them, one of whom Pedro recognized but had never spoken to.

"Hi," one of the girls said. "We heard you guys were praying out here yesterday."

"Yes, we were," Adam responded. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Just the opposite. We wanted to join you."

"You know what they say: the more the scarier," Timmy said.

"That's merrier," EJ said.

"I know that. But scarier also works. The bigger our prayer circle, the more people like Mr. Darwin will freak out."

EJ and Chung burst into laughter.

"Good observation," Adam said. "Speaking of Mr. Darwin, there he is, right on cue. Let's get our prayer said before the SWAT team arrives."

They all joined hands and Adam offered up his blessing for the day. When they opened their eyes again, they discovered Mr. Darwin standing next to them.

"I thought I told you not to pray."

"What's the matter with us praying here?" Tammy asked.

"This isn't a church. This is land owned by the government."

"Maybe. The way I look at it, all land belongs to God. He just lets us use it," Timmy said.

Mr. Darwin studied the speaker for a minute. "There is no God. Why don't you kids face reality? Science explains all, and God is not part of the discovery."

"Science doesn't even begin to explain all," Adam said. "Every week some scientist proves that something taught in the past is wrong."

"So? That's the process of self-correction. That means that science is written with a pencil, so it can be erased and rewritten when a new discovery is made."

"Exactly. Makes you feel real comfortable about all the stuff we get taught. Here today gone tomorrow," Chung said.

Mr. Darwin lightly cuffed his forehead. "Oh. I'm supposed to be comfortable with religious fairy tales told by a group of people that can't agree on exactly what their myth really says? Not to mention the fact they tell us we're not supposed to do certain things, but then do them themselves. Give me a break."

"You're overlooking one powerful fact," Adam said.

"What's that?"

"There's more than one supernatural character in this so-called fairy tale. It's the sworn mission of the father of lies to persuade men to disobey their creator. Why is it surprising that he occasionally succeeds?"

"Occasionally! It seems like I read a story every day about some pastor having an extramarital affair or living high off the hog with donor dollars or something like that."

"First of all, it doesn't happen every day. And secondly, isn't it funny how those stories are big news? How often have you read a story of a murderer or a drug addict or a prostitute who totally changes their life to follow Jesus?"

Mr. Darwin laughed. "They don't put stories like that in my newspaper or magazines."

"Exactly my point. You need to look at the whole picture and

not just the scenes that you like because they back up your opinion."

"You need to watch your mouth when you're talking to a teacher. Aren't you the Barnet kid that plays on MY football team?"

"That's me."

"Maybe I can't stop you from praying, but I can stop you from playing. And Morales, that goes for you too."

"Is that a threat?" Pedro asked.

"Not even close. My threats are a lot less friendly."

The bell sounded and Mr. Darwin hastened toward his classroom. The kids watched him briefly and then started walking toward the school.

Adam stayed behind. "Father, forgive him, for he knows not what he does." He then ran to catch up with Pedro.

"What are we going to do?" Pedro asked. "You can't give up football. We could pray at home or something."

Adam shook his head. "I certainly could give up football. I'm not going to let this bully intimidate me. Sports aren't the most important thing in life."

Pedro winced. They were for him.

"Pedro, if you want to drop out of our prayer group, I'll understand."

"I don't know. One good thing; Mr. Darwin's tour of playground duty will be over at the end of the week. It won't be his turn to be a babysitter again until after the football season is over. We could just avoid him the rest of the week and then go back to praying."

"We could. That would make me feel like I was compromising, not to mention being a chicken."

Pedro made a face. "I was afraid you'd say something like that. Man, I can just picture it. Coach runs our butts off, makes us do special drills, and then doesn't let us in the game. It would be one frustrating season."

"I don't disagree. In a way, it could be a cool witness. We take everything he dishes out and hang in there. We could make it frustrating for him, too."

"Especially if we're losing because he has two of his best players on the bench."

"The trouble is; what do we gain by getting everybody frustrated? Life should be a win-win proposition, not a lose-lose one," Adam said.

"That makes sense. So, what are we going to do?"

"Pedro, I don't decide for you. That has to be your own decision. As for me, I'll keep praying and let the chips fall as they

may."

"Maybe our dads could get involved and make sure that everything works out OK."

"They could. Or we could solve our own problems, with God's help."

Pedro rolled his eyes. "Why does life have to be so complicated?"

"Life in the fast lane, my friend. If you just trust in Romans 8:28, you have no worries."

"I'm not much of a Bible scholar. What does that verse say?"

"All things work to the good of him who loves God and is called according to his purpose."

"How do we know if we're called according to his purpose?"

"Good question. I think we all are. Even those who don't believe are called. They just refuse to answer."

"I guess. I'll see you later, Adam. Have a good one!"

"You, too." The boys separated and headed down separate hallways to their homerooms.

* * *

At lunch, Pedro found Adam and sat down beside him.

"You figure out what you're going to do about football, yet?"

Pedro nodded. "I'm going to practice this afternoon. We'll see what happens."

"Good idea," Adam said.

Timmy and Chung sat down across from them.

"Anything new on your assignment?" Adam asked.

Chung looked around before answering. "One thing I've picked up is that every Monday night for the last three weeks they've left about six and come home at ten. They haven't left any shades open so we can't see anything. That's about all we have."

"I wonder what they're doing on Monday nights," Pedro said.

"Me too. Maybe having a secret meeting somewhere to discuss blowing up something," Chung said.

"Or someone," Timmy added.

"Gosh, if we want to get in the house and take a look, Monday nights looks like the time," Pedro said.

"Are you serious? How would we get in?" Timmy asked.

Adam covered his ears. "I don't want to hear any of this." He got up, emptied his tray, and continued out of the lunchroom.

Pedro brushed some dandruff off his shoulder. "I hate to say this, but my little sister suggested that since they probably don't have air-conditioning in that old house, they'll probably have a window open somewhere."

"Your sister came up with that plan?" Chung asked.

"Yep. Pretty dumb, huh?"

"No, pretty smart. We'd have to wait until dark so nobody sees us. If we can find a window in the back of the house, that will make it easier to escape detection. It gets dark about eight-thirty. That would give us plenty of time to look over the whole house and get out again long before they come home."

"If they follow the same ten o'clock pattern," Timmy said.

"True. If they came home early, dang, you'd be busted," Pedro said.

"You? Does that mean you're not coming?" Chung asked.

"My curfew on school nights is nine. Even if I could be there, it doesn't make sense for everyone to go in. That just increases the risk. Maybe only one person should go in and the other should be on guard to make sure the coast is clear."

"My curfew is ten," Chung said.

"Mine too. Which one of us is putting his butt on the line?"

Chung closed his eyes and then slowly opened them. "I'll do it."

"That means I'll be the lookout," Timmy said.

Pedro fingered a zit on his neck. "So, looks like the team is set. Will you do it this coming Monday?"

Timmy looked at Chung. "Maybe we should watch them one more week to make sure the pattern continues?"

"Works for me. I have a question. What do we do if we find something in there?" Chung asked.

"Call the cops," Pedro said.

"And how do we do that? 'Hi, this is Chung. I just broke into the house next door and found some bomb-making materials. Would you come over and arrest them, please.'"

Pedro nodded. "I see what you mean. That is a little problem. You can say you think there's stuff in there for making explosive devices, but they need more than just someone's suspicion. We already have that without going in. If you tell them you entered illegally into the house, they might arrest you."

"It would have to be an anonymous tip. They might not follow up on it. We might be risking our necks for nothing," Timmy said.

* * *

On the bus ride home, EJ made sure she sat by Amy again. "Amy, when we get home today, can I call you?"

"Fine."

"I need your number." She grabbed a pen out of her purse and a slip of paper.

"Twenty-three," Amy said.

"Twenty-three?"

"Did I stutter?"

"No. Twenty-three what?" EJ asked.

Amy giggled. "That was supposed to be a joke. I have a weird sense of humor."

"Oh. I get it. Twenty-three, like the Dr. Pepper commercial."

"Bingo. Anyway my real number is 745-1311."

"Got it. I'll give you a call about fifteen minutes after I get off the bus. Oh, I just thought of something."

"What's that?"

"Will Roberta be waiting for you again today?"

"I don't know. She skipped school yesterday. She probably won't be able to skip two days in a row without getting in big trouble, so I think I'll get home before she arrives if she does come over."

"Cool."

Amy, Tammy, and EJ chatted about school news and gossip until EJ exited the bus. Fifteen minutes later she placed the promised call.

"Hello."

"Amy, this is EJ. So, now that we're alone, can you tell me what happened yesterday after I left you and Roberta?"

"She was mad. I swear she's like a jealous lover. If I hang out with anybody else, she gets upset with me."

"I probably don't have to tell you that's sick behavior."

"You're right, and you don't have to tell me."

"Then why do you put up with it?"

"I don't know. She's just such a strong personality. I can't seem to stand up to her, so I always end up doing what she says."

"Well, I'm a strong personality too, Amy. And I say quit letting her push you around. When she starts talking about suicide pacts, you need to tune her out. Would you go through with something like that just because she told you to?"

"I hope not. That's why I asked for your help. I can't pull away from her all by myself."

"Amy, I don't get it. Why is she controlling your life?"

"I...I don't know. Maybe because I'm afraid of her."

"You're afraid she'll hurt you?"

"Yes. She has kind of a crazy streak."

"Do I need to point out the fact that if she convinces you to commit suicide with her, you won't have to worry about her hurting you? She's getting you to hurt yourself. Beyond hurt actually."

She's getting you to hurt everybody around you that loves you."

"I don't know if anybody loves me."

"Amy, people don't always show their love in the way you expect them to. That doesn't mean they don't love you. It's really hard for some people to say 'I love you', so you can't really use that as your guide."

"Do you love me?"

"Ahh. Yeah. Sure. It's hard for even me to say it. The Bible says that we're supposed to love everybody. So I can honestly say, yes, I do love you."

Amy began to weep.

"Are you OK, Amy?"

"Yeah. Thanks, I needed that. Roberta's been the only one telling me she loves me. That was part of the power she had over me too. I was afraid she'd quit loving me, and then I'd have nobody."

"Girl, you've gotten into some stinking thinking. When you come visit the church, I'm going to introduce you to a lot of people who love you."

"That sounds wonderful, but I'm not much to love. I'm not pretty or talented or rich or anything that makes people love them. And I'm overweight."

"Amy. Those things might seem like they're important, but when it comes to love, they're no big deal. God created you, and God doesn't make junk. Do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear."

"That's good. Now I'd like to pray. Is that OK?"

"Go for it."

"Father in Heaven. Please let Amy know that she is loved, by you, by me, by her parents, and by those around her. Wrap her in your arms and make her feel safe and secure. Give her a strength that allows her to pull away from Roberta's bad influence. I also pray that you might help us straighten out Roberta. Help her to find you and your love. Take away the thoughts of suicide. Help her choose life. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen."

"Thanks, EJ. That was.... Oh! Someone's ringing the doorbell. Hang on a second." There was silence on the line for a few seconds. "It's Roberta! What should I do?"

"I think the best thing is to not answer the door. That sounds kind of rude, but you need some space right now."

"OK. I'm going to hang up and go upstairs because she might start peeking in the windows and see me here. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Wait. We have a prayer circle at the flagpole before school. I'd love to have you join us."

"Prayer? I don't know. That sounds a little far-out. I'll think about it though."

"OK. Hang in there, kiddo. This too shall pass."

EJ hung up the phone and stared at it. She took a deep breath and blew out noisily. "Lord, help that Roberta girl. She is really messed up. And help Amy to break away." She stood wondering where all her new wisdom and compassion had come from. It seemed that it started when she met Tammy and Adam.

* * *

The whistle blew. The front line of players took off running from the goal line to the forty-yard line. As soon as they reached the ten, the line behind them started. When they reached the ten, the last group, which was made up of the slowest guys on the team, started. When the last player arrived at the forty, the coach blew his whistle again and the process was repeated going back to the goal line.

The next time the coach yelled out before blowing the whistle, "High knee kick this time."

After a few more repetitions, most of the players were slowing down considerably. Pedro and Adam pushed to keep their pace.

"OK. Enough of that for today. Water break."

Some cheers went up among those who were convinced they were on the brink of death.

Five short minutes later the whistle sounded and everybody gathered around the coach. "OK. Time for a little bit of position work. I want all the linemen, defensive and offensive to go with Coach Wilson except for the top two centers. I want the quarterbacks in a line to my right, the running backs to my left, and the receivers over on the right of the running backs. If you don't know what you are yet, go with Coach Wilson. I want one center here and the other one over there next to the orange cone."

Six guys jumped into the quarterback line. The coach walked up and looked them over. "We certainly can't use six quarterbacks." He pointed out one small kid, "Son, I'm moving you to receiver. He surveyed the group again. Morales, I hear you were starting QB last year?"

"Yes, sir."

"We'll soon find out if you have a *prayer* of hanging onto the job this year." The emphasis on the word prayer sent a clear message to Pedro. "Barnet, I'm going to move you over to receiver."

"But, Coach," Pedro said. "Adam is a better thrower and runner than I am."

Mr. Darwin stared at him. "Excuse me, son. Did you want me to hand over my whistle to make your coaching job a little easier?"

"No sir, I just —"

"You just earned yourself two laps around the field. Take off."

Pedro looked over at Adam.

"Morales, if you don't start now, I'll double it. You'll think you're training for a marathon before you get done."

Pedro took off. Adam hadn't moved from the quarterback line.

"Barnet, I thought I told you to take a place in the receiver line! You can give me two laps, also. Maybe you can catch your prayer buddy."

Adam didn't hesitate. Partway around the track he whistled at Pedro, who turned around enough to see his friend following him. He slowed down and let Adam catch up.

"How come you're out here? Did you try to impersonate a coach too?" Pedro asked.

"Me? I didn't do anything except move too slowly."

"We better pick up the pace in that case so we don't get the bonus round. Is he really putting you at receiver?"

"Looks like it."

"And you're going to let him?"

"I don't know yet. Unless I feel that God tells me to quit, I'll stick it out no matter where he puts me."

"OK. Since God doesn't talk to me, I'll just hang in there until I get mad enough to quit."

"I think that God talks to you more than you know. You just need to fine-tune your reception, just like you do with a radio."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Someday, Pedro, you'll see what I'm talking about."

"Maybe. But don't hold your breath. By the way, do you remember those Goth chicks we saw over by Chung's house?"

"Very well."

"You also remember then your word to the bigger girl that suicide was not the answer."

"Yes."

"Turns out that is exactly what she's planning and trying to get the other girl to do it too."

"You mean Amy?"

"Yeah. Did God tell you that too?"

Adam laughed. "Actually, it was my sister."

"Ahh. Should have figured. My sister told me about it."

"God is talking to me right now though," Adam said.

"What about?"

"There's somebody on the team over there with the linemen who's going through a desert experience."

"A what? You mean he needs another water break?"

Adam laughed. "Not the water we just drank. He needs to drink from the fountain of the water of life."

"As opposed to the drinking fountain in the locker room which is the water of death."

"I'm serious, Pedro. Jesus is the water of life. I get the impression that one of those guys over there is a believer, but his faith is being shaken like a palm tree in a hurricane. A desert experience is when God seems a million miles away, making life tough."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"First I have to figure out who it is, and then hopefully the Lord will give me a word to help pump life back into him."

"Kind of a spiritual CPR?" Pedro asked.

"You might say that."

"I just did."

On the second lap past the linemen, Adam turned and looked at the group. "I have his image in my mind now. It's a guy I've never noticed before. With their helmets on, I can't see which one it is. I'll figure it out after practice."

"If coach ever lets us off the track."

"Just keep your mouth shut and do what he says as fast as you can, and then he won't have any reason to make us run more."

"Yeah. That's shouldn't be so hard now that we know the rules to this game."

Adam and Pedro coasted to a finish of their two laps and rejoined their groups. Pedro was directed to the line where the quarterbacks were throwing to the line of receivers, the line that Adam was in. Adam's turn came when it was Pedro's turn to throw. The pass was over Adam's head and behind him. He stopped, turned, leaped and snagged the ball out of the air. There were several oohs and ahhs from the other kids.

Pedro waited for the coach to compliment Adam on a beautiful catch.

"Morales, if you threw the ball out ahead of him instead of behind him, he wouldn't have to do a Gumbi imitation, and he might have scored in a real game. Make sure you lead the receiver far enough so he can catch it in full stride."

Pedro stood there looking at the coach and trying not to let his thoughts come out his mouth. *No kidding. I can't believe he doesn't compliment Adam on a highlight catch, and he gives me grief about a pass that got caught. This other QB is throwing like a girl, and coach doesn't say anything to him. This isn't fair.*

A few passes later, a receiver got his feet tangled up and fell down in a heap, and then the ball plunked him in the helmet. Everyone laughed. The coach ran over and picked the boy up. He then turned back to the rest of the group. "What did I tell you guys about laughing at someone on the team during practice? Who was doing that?"

Nobody spoke. "Morales, did you laugh?"

"I couldn't help it."

"Give me a lap. Barnett, were you laughing?"

Adam didn't answer. He just started running to catch up with Pedro. They looked back to see how many of their teammates would suffer the same fate. No one followed.

"This guy is being a real jerk," Pedro said.

"Normally when someone says something negative about someone else, I try to look at the positives. Coach is making that a challenging task for me. I can see that we need to include him in our prayer tomorrow."

"I hope God can help. I'm starting to think this guy is beyond hope."

"Nobody is ever beyond hope, Pedro. Nobody."

At the end of practice, the team gathered in a circle. "OK, guys. Good practice. I want everybody, except Barnett and Morales to take a lap. The last two guys in have to run another lap." Amidst many groans, the team took off. Adam and Pedro looked at each other.

"So, boys, are you enjoying practice?"

"Yes, sir," Adam said. "I enjoy a good challenge."

The coach eyeballed him. "Hmmm. We'll see. You guys look pretty good out there. I'd like to be able to put you on the field when we play our first game in two weeks. You weren't planning on another prayer session I hope."

Pedro looked out toward the long line of players running around the track. Adam looked the coach straight in the eye. "As a matter of fact, we were looking forward to a time of prayer tomorrow. There are lots of people in this school who need some prayer."

The coach's face got red. He walked over and surveyed Adam from head to foot. "Are you challenging my authority?"

"I'm just doing what the Lord wants me to do."

"Well, on this football field you better be doing what I want you to do. And right now what I want you to do is run the lap with the team. Remember, the last two guys get a bonus lap."

"But the end of the line is halfway around the track already," Pedro said.

"Yes, it is. You'll have to bust your butt not to be the last two, huh?"

The two friends started to run to the track. The coach grabbed both of them by the arm. "Just a second, boys." He bent down and untied one of each of the boys' cleats. "I do believe your shoes are untied. Better tie those up nice and tight so you don't trip yourself." As the boys were finishing the task he added, "I certainly hope you guys aren't entertaining the notion of including me in that prayer tomorrow. If you do, when you finish practice tomorrow, you'll be the ones needing prayer. Have a nice run." He walked away to join the other coach at the finish line.

Pedro and Adam took off almost sprinting.

"We're never going to catch them," Pedro complained.

"You can't run hard and talk at the same time."

The boys were silent the rest of the way around the track. Adam started pulling away from Pedro. One heavy boy had fallen way behind the pack, most of whom had finished already. There were about seventy yards to go when Adam caught him. He breezed past the big boy and looked back to see where Pedro was. He caught a glimpse of the slow boy's face.

Adam slowed, turned around, and went back the other direction until he met up with Pedro. "See that big guy up ahead."

"How could I miss him?"

"He's the one."

"Which one?" Pedro asked.

"The one in the desert."

"Oh."

"He's dying. If he has to run another lap, he might literally croak. I think you and I should let him beat us."

"Are you kidding? I'm dying here too, you know."

"No. I'm totally serious. Think about it. I'm going up there and talk to him."

Adam turned on the jets and caught up with the object of their discussion.

"Hang in there, tiger. You're almost to the finish. Don't try to answer me; you need your breath. We have a prayer circle around the flagpole before school starts. I'd like to see you there

tomorrow."

The boy barely had the strength to turn his head to look at Adam. His face was cardinal red and sweat poured off it. With each step his face contorted in pain. With twenty-five yards to go, Pedro caught up with them. He looked at the face of the plodder and then slowed to match his pace. Just before they reached the finish line, Adam and Pedro slowed down to almost a walk. The boy crossed the finish line and staggered toward the school.

The coach stood there looking at the two rear-enders. "I thought one of you guys was going to luck out and beat Minnesota Fats. You must have run out of gas though. Probably a bit tuckered from all those other laps. Now you get to do another one. I have an idea you're going to have this course memorized before long and you can throw your maps away. Take off, eh. Oh. I'm timing you on this one. If it takes more than three minutes, you get another one."

The boys picked up their weary legs and continued their journey.

"Can we make it in three minutes?" Pedro asked.

"That would be a twelve-minute mile pace. The cross-country guys run two miles in that time."

"We're not cross-country runners, we're wearing football cleats, and we're already tired. Should I mention it's hot out? This could be close. I can see where people build up enough anger toward someone to hurt them. This guy is riling me big time."

"He's not exactly scoring brownie points with me, either. Remember that Jesus said to love everybody, even the dirtbags."

"Do you have to keep reminding me? Can't you just let me run a few thoughts for revenge through my head?" Pedro asked.

"Sorry, pal. This is called spiritual accountability. We all need people to talk to and share our frustrations and hurts with. That way we can encourage each other to bear the burden without going postal."

"Can you use a different word? My dad works for the post office."

"Oops. How about ballistic?"

"That works. Now, how about we shut up and breathe."

"Good idea."

The two trudged across the finish line at two minutes and fifty seconds. The coach acted a bit disappointed that they had beat the time limit. "You guys were going pretty slow out there. Maybe next time I'll make the limit two and an half minutes. Speaking of time, if you guys hurry, you might make it on time to catch your

activity bus. If not, I hope your walk home is pleasant." He grabbed his clipboard and walked away from them.

"Come on, Adam. I really don't feel like walking two miles."

"I hear you. And I have farther to go than you do."

The two boys painfully jogged to the locker room.

When they exited the locker room with hair still wet from their hasty shower, the bus was just starting to pull away.

"Hey!" Pedro yelled, running toward the street and waving his hand. The bus screeched to a stop right in front of them.

The door opened up and the bus driver smiled. "Did you guys want something?"

Pedro rolled his eyes as he plunged through the bus entrance. Adam was right on his heels as they threw themselves into adjoining seats.

"By the way, Pedro, I invited that big kid to our prayer meeting tomorrow."

"Do you think he'll show up?"

"Doesn't matter what I think. It matters what he does. If he doesn't, I'll corner him another time. He's not going to escape my message...I mean God's message."

Chapter 8

The next morning Pedro's bus pulled up to the school, and the passengers emptied out, joining the throng of students already waiting for the first bell.

EJ walked with Amy and Tammy. "Amy, we're headed to the flagpole right now if you want to join us." She looked into Amy's face.

"Umm. I've got nothing else going on. Why not?"

EJ smiled brightly. "Cool."

There were three new kids waiting at the flagpole when they arrived. Two more approached them later and asked to join in. Adam was just getting ready to pray when the large boy from the football team walked up.

"Am I too late?"

"Hey, right on time, man. I'm Adam." He held out his hand.

The boy shook it. "I'm Joe. My nickname is Curly."

Adam looked at his hair. There was no sign of a single curl. "Curly?"

"Yeah. After the fat guy in the Three Stooges."

"Oh, that Curly. I'd introduce you to everybody here, but I don't even know half the kids here. We better pray. Time is running out."

After praying two sentences, Adam said, "The Lord has laid some things on my heart so we're going to break our routine today. I want to pray individually over a couple of you." He dropped the hands of the people next to him and walked behind Joe. He placed his hands on Joe's head. "Joseph I have named you, and Joseph you shall become. Your name means to increase or add. In the past you have added bulk to your body. In the future you shall add to the strength of your spirit. Like the son of Jacob, you shall become a leader. Rise up and fulfill your destiny."

Adam removed his hand from Joe's head and walked around the circle until he reached Amy. He placed his hands on her head. "Your name means 'beloved' or 'friend'. You shall be a friend to many. Lives will be spared because of your love. The Lord has placed a heart of great compassion within you. It is time to become a vessel into which God will pour out love which will flow from you to others."

Adam opened his eyes and removed his hand from Amy's head. In the corner of his eye he saw Mr. Darwin headed their way. He stepped into the prayer circle again and took up hands at his side. "Father, may you pour your Spirit out on this school so that your love flows like a river in the spring. And please bless Mr. Darwin so he can provide strong leadership for the members of the football team. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen."

EJ and Tammy went over and hugged Amy. Pedro and Adam were shaking hands with Joe when Mr. Darwin interrupted them.

"What were you trying to prove, Barnett? I told you not to pray for me."

"My boss is just a little higher on the food chain than you are."

"We'll see about that. Isn't this the guy who came close to getting an extra lap yesterday?"

"Yes, Coach," Joe said.

"Holy cow, dude. You were dying out there with just the regular workout. Obviously you aren't aware that being part of this prayer circle is not going to advance your football career. In fact, you might get run right off the team. What's your name, son?"

"Curly. No scratch that. My name is Joseph."

The bell rang, sending everyone scurrying for the school. Joe and Adam walked together.

"I really appreciate your words over me today. It's impossible for to express how much they meant."

"My pleasure, believe me. But don't thank me. They're not my words."

"I prayed a couple of days ago that if God was real, he would send someone to give me hope."

"Well, here I am."

"Yes, you are, and now I'm blown away. That word over me was awesome. It made me feel like a different person, someone of value."

"You are of value, Joseph. Sometimes we lose sight of the fact, mostly because we start thinking too much about ourselves and not enough about God and our fellow man."

"You hit that one on the head. I've been whining because I'm so fat and nobody likes me and I should go and eat worms."

"Sounds like most of the Christians I know. There's a song we sing at church that sums up the answer perfectly. Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of Earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace."

"Wow. That's good. I'll have to check out your church sometime."

"Cool. There's room for lots more people."

"Even fat ones like me?"

Adam punched him in the arm. "Remember, Joseph, not Curly!"

"OK. I'll see you at football practice."

"You're not going to let Coach scare you off?"

"No way, baby. Now that I feel that God really is watching over me, I can take whatever he can dish out."

Adam just pointed his finger at the heavysset youth and then brought his finger up to his forehead in a salute.

"Bye," Joe said. He opened a locker and took out some books. After making sure he had everything he needed for his morning classes, he closed the locker and shuffled toward his homeroom.

On the way down the hallway, Joseph bumped into a girl who had moved into traffic without looking.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said.

"Not a problem. It was probably my fault for taking up too much of the hallway."

"Hey, aren't you Joseph, the kid we prayed with this morning?"

"Yeah. Oh, wait. You're the girl that Adam had the word for. Annie or something like that."

"Yep. I'm the girl, but the name is Amy."

"I'm Joseph. Oh gosh, that was real intelligent. You already said that. I'm glad to meet you – officially."

"Me, too. That was a wonderful prayer over you."

"Yes, it was. The one over you was, too. You must be a very special person in God's world."

Amy laughed. "You've got to be kidding. Until a couple of days ago I was convinced that God was a myth, wishful thinking by people who should be smart enough to know better."

"And now?"

"Hmm. Now I have friends who are showing me what love is. They said that God is love."

"That's what the Bible says."

"I wouldn't know that. Never read it myself. I got saved when I was seven years old in a Sunday school class. My parents just quit going to church when I was eight, so my faith was pretty well stamped out until EJ and Tammy came along."

"And Adam."

"Well, yes. I haven't really talked to Adam much personally. Actually, I'm in awe of him. He's like a pastor in a teenage body."

Joe laughed. "That's a good description. So, where do you

live?"

"Over on Hawthorne and 3rd."

"No kidding? I live such a few blocks from you on 2nd and Maple."

"Why don't you ride our bus?"

"I don't take the bus. The kids were teasing me so bad about my weight and saying I took up two seats. My mom agreed to give me a ride every day instead of putting me through that torture."

Amy grimaced. "Your weight really bothers you, huh?"

"Yeah, it did. After Adam's word this morning, I'm trying to focus on other people and God and not worry about myself."

"That's a good idea. I worry about my weight sometimes."

"But you're almost skinny."

"No, I'm not. But thanks for saying that. I could certainly take off a few pounds."

"What bugs me is that when I get depressed about being so heavy, I go to the kitchen to seek relief, and a bag of Oreos later, I feel worse mentally and physically."

"Me, too. It's a vicious cycle. Well, I gotta leave you now. This is my classroom. I'd like to finish our conversation some time."

"Really?"

"Yeah! Wanna come over after school?"

"Sorry. I have football practice. I finally found a place where being big has some advantages. Maybe I could ride the bus tomorrow, and we could sit together. And don't you dare ask if there will be room for both of us!"

"Yeah, sure. You'd ride the bus just so you could talk with me?"

"I can't think of a better reason."

Amy smiled. "I'm going to take that as a compliment. See you tomorrow, if we don't bump into each other during the day."

"Again! I've never been so glad to have a collision in my life."

Amy laughed as she entered her classroom. Joe lumbered down the hall trying to make up for lost time. He was whistling *Tomorrow* and wondering if football practice was going to be more like track practice for him and his fellow prayers.

* * *

The next morning Joe climbed aboard the bus. He surveyed the passengers but didn't see Amy. Pedro and Adam greeted him as he walked by. He sat down in a seat by himself. Snide comments reached his ears, but he ignored them. A couple of stops later, Amy boarded.

"Hi, Amy!" EJ said. "I saved a spot for you."

Amy looked back and saw Joe watching her carefully. "Sorry, EJ. I promised Joseph I'd sit with him today."

EJ's eyebrows shot up. She looked back, saw Joe grinning and then broke out in a smile of her own. "Not a problem."

Amy continued toward the back, and Joe slid in by the window. "Anyone sitting here?" Amy said.

"Yeah. You."

She giggled and sat down. She glanced down at his pile of books. "Oh, you're reading Harry Potter?"

"Yep. My mom's gotta have her coffee in the morning, and I've gotta have my Harry."

Adam and Pedro turned and looked at Joe. A look of concern came across both of their faces. Pedro shook his head. *Looks like we're going to need to have a long talk with that boy.*

* * *

All the God Squad kids headed for the flagpole after exiting the bus. Joe and Amy were involved in an animated conversation, as more new kids showed up.

When the time came to hold hands, Joe and Amy were still standing together. Joe put his hand out, and Amy put hers out, but they were both going in the same direction. So both of them changed the direction their palms were facing. Their faces both got red, and Amy let out a nervous giggle.

"Just keep your hand where it is, and I'll change mine," Joe whispered to her. She followed orders and Joe's fingers intertwined with hers. The prayer was over way too fast for both of them and they had to let go. Amy squeezed just a little bit before she let go.

Pedro said, "No Mr. Darwin in our faces today. What's up with that?"

"Maybe we're wearing him out," Timmy said.

Everybody laughed. "Yeah, it's hard work telling people to take a lap," Joe said.

Mr. Darwin flashed them a dirty look as they filed past him on the way to the school.

"Maybe you need to pray for him again, Adam," said Chung.

The rest of the group watched Amy and Joe walk into the school together.

Pedro pointed to them and asked his sister, "What's up with that?"

"They seem to be getting along really well. I heard Amy ask him to come over tonight after football for a barbecue."

"Is he going?"

"Sounds like it. Looks like we don't need to hold Joe and Amy up anymore. They seem to be holding each other up right now."

"Love can do that," Pedro said, looking at Faith. She winked at him.

"We still need to lift them up in prayer and keep being their friends," Adam said. "A romance would be nice, but if they get involved and then breakup, they'd have new hurdles to jump over."

* * *

After returning home from football practice, Joe showered again, smudged on deodorant, then combed his hair. After putting on a pair of shorts and peering into a full-length mirror fastened to the back of his bedroom door, he shook his head and changed into a pair of long pants. "Mom, I'm leaving."

"OK, Joe. Have a good time."

"I will."

Whistling another tune, he strolled out the door and down the sidewalk. When he reached Amy's house, he discovered Amy and another girl sitting on the front step. His pace slowed as he approached the two girls.

"Hi, Joe," Amy said.

The other girl glared at him. "Hi, Amy. And this must be Roberta, who I've heard so much about."

"From whom?"

"From Amy."

Roberta's face flashed from hangdog to cornered coyote. "What did you tell him about me?"

"Ahh. Not that much. I said you like Harry Potter. And...."

"And what? Did you tell him about our pact?"

"No! I didn't. In fact, I couldn't because we don't have a pact."

"You said you'd do it, and now you're backing out?"

Joe stood looking down at the ground and biting his lower lip.

"Roberta, I never made the pact."

"You would have if you hadn't let those other people interfere. That little AJ or whatever her face is and this lard butt here. I suppose you're another one of those Christian creeps?"

Joe shifted his weight to his other foot and glanced up briefly. "Guilty as charged."

"Why don't you crawl back under the rock you slithered out from? Oh, in your case it would have to be a boulder 'cause you couldn't fit under a rock."

"Roberta!" Amy said sharply. "Joe's my friend, and I'm not going to let you talk to him like that."

"Since when do you tell me what to do? I'm the brains and the

brawn of this friendship. I'm calling the shots here. And if you don't like it, I might just have to do some redecorating of your face." She grabbed Amy by the shoulders and started shaking. "Maybe your nose would look more attractive in the middle of your forehead."

Two large arms encircled Roberta's waist just before she was lifted into the air.

"Put me down, fatboy!"

"Amy, would you mind if I take the garbage out to the curb?"

Amy looked over at Roberta, who began heel-kicking Joe's shins. "Be my guest."

Joe slowly bore his burden out to the intersection of Amy's walkway with the sidewalk. Unceremoniously he dropped Roberta unto the soft grass between the sidewalk and the street. Roberta lay there dazed for a second. She looked up and saw that Amy had followed them down the pathway.

"I'll get you, my little pretty and your fat dog too."

"I'm a nice guy, toilet-mouth, or whatever your name is, but if you don't get out of here right now, I'm going to sit on you."

Roberta jumped up and began to move away. She turned around and threw one last comment over her shoulder. "I was going to commit suicide, but now I have a reason to stay alive. Making you miserable, Amy, is going to become the joy of my life."

Joe took two quick steps in Roberta's direction. She took off running, and Joe stopped. He walked over and gently ran his fingers across her forehead.

"Were you trying to imagine what it would look like if my nose was there?"

"Do you really want to know what I'm thinking?"

She looked up at him curiously. "Yeah. I'm dying to know what you're thinking."

"I was trying to imagine what it would feel like if my lips were there."

Amy blushed. "Come on into the backyard. My mom is probably getting close to having dinner ready." They walked back up the walkway.

"Are all your friends as nice as Roberta?" Joe asked.

Amy laughed. "I've come to the conclusion that she's a psycho."

"How did you ever get involved with her in the first place?"

"I was lonely and she came along at just the right time, which was exactly the wrong time I guess. She's in high school, and I was impressed by an older girl wanting to be my friend. I was really ticked off at my mom at the time, and I was ready to do

some rebelling. She was my outlet I guess."

"Can I give you some personal advice?"

"Sure, but I might not take it."

"Please choose your friends carefully. I swear, we humans sometimes spend much more time choosing the clothes we wear than we do our friends."

"Believe me, I learned my lesson. EJ told me that if you want to soar with the eagles, you can't roost with the turkeys. Now I understand what she meant."

"In this case I think a turkey is the wrong bird. Vulture would be a more appropriate representation."

Amy laughed. "When she did that wicked witch of the west imitation, I could easily picture her with a crooked hat on her head."

"Yeah, she seemed to fit that role pretty good. I would have preferred to see the 'I'm melting – I'm melting' scene."

"When she started getting on me, I could picture her flying across the sky and spelling out 'Surrender Amy' in smoky letters."

Joe laughed and then stopped abruptly. "What am I doing? That sounds funny right now, but what are we going to do about her? She issued a pretty serious threat, and she impresses me as the kind of person who might carry it out."

"Did I mention she's a psycho?"

"You did. What was the pact she was talking about?"

"I decline to answer that question on the grounds that it will totally embarrass me."

"Oh. Well, if you don't want to tell me...."

"Joe, I don't want you to think I'm a wacko."

"I'd never do that."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, maybe 'never' is too strong of a word, but right now I can comfortably say you're not a fruitcake."

"Thanks for that vote of confidence. OK, I'll trust you. Roberta wanted us to sign a...." The two had reached the patio in the backyard. Amy looked up to make sure her mom or dad wasn't present. "A suicide pact."

"And you were going to?"

"I don't know. Right now I can hardly believe I even considered it. I was pretty messed up at the time. I think the prayers of some of my friends and their words of encouragement brought me back to the light out of a dark place."

"I can relate to that, Amy. I'd thought of ending my life too."

"So are we a couple of crazies?"

"Just because thoughts of suicide entered our head?"

Amy nodded.

"Adam tells me that Satan can talk to us, and he uses suicide as one of his main strategies. He puts the ideas into our brain. Almost every person on Earth has had those thoughts pass through their mind. Not many people act on them, thank goodness, but it's not unnatural or crazy to have the thought."

"That makes me feel better. I felt like such a scumbag," Amy said.

"Adam said something else interesting. Satanists are into blood sacrifice, usually an innocent child. If Satan can convince a kid to commit suicide, it's like he's recruited the victim and the executioner in one swoop."

"Are you kidding me?" Amy asked.

"I wouldn't do that, not about a matter as serious as this one anyway."

"I want to know more!"

A woman came out of the house carrying a couple of large bowls and placed them on a picnic table. "There you are, Amy. I was just about to come looking for you. This must be Joseph?"

"Yes, ma'am. But you can call me Joe. Nice to meet you."

"Same here. What were you guys talking about?"

"Ahhh. Harry Potter," Amy said.

"Oh, yeah. Everybody is talking about Harry Potter. I don't understand what the big deal is. Well, the meat is almost done. Can you go get your father while I get the rest of the meal ready? And stop by and pick up a couple of dishes on your way back."

"OK, Mom. Sorry, Joe. I'll be right back."

"No problem."

"Go ahead and sit down somewhere."

"Are you sure you have a chair strong enough to hold me?"

Amy punched his shoulder before leaving as her response.

Joe chose a plastic lawn chair and made himself as comfortable as possible. He closed his eyes and prayed for Amy and her family.

* * *

On Saturday morning, the Morales family hustled around the house to get ready for another social visit with Barbara's family. EJ hadn't wanted to go, but she wasn't given the option of staying home. On the way over to the Nelsons' house, she whined.

"Dad, I just don't see why I need to go with you guys. You're both going to see sweethearts. I get stuck playing with that pain in the neck Matthew. I'm not a little kid anymore."

"I can see that, EJ. Number one, I didn't want you staying home alone, and secondly, I want to spend some time with you."

"Dad, in answer to number one, you let me stay home alone every afternoon after school."

"That's different. I don't have much of a choice. It's that, or I hire a babysitter for you."

"No way on the babysitter business. Now, as far as spending time together, if you want to spend time with me, why are we going to the Nelsons'?"

"I want to be with Barbara, too."

"So I have to share you?"

"Kind of."

"I'm afraid she's going to get most of your attention. I'll feel just like the spare wheel on a car."

"EJ. There's no reason to feel that way. I love you!"

"You have a funny way of showing it."

"I hate to break in on your whining," Pedro said. "But I was wondering if we could pick up Joe and take him to church with us tomorrow."

EJ raised her hand. "Ooh. And we could pick up Amy at the same time. They live in the same neighborhood."

"I don't remember taking my taxi exam."

"Dad, please. These guys need to get to church!" EJ pleaded.

"Fine. You better be good tippers."

"I'll give you a tip, Dad," Pedro said.

"Thank you, son."

"Stay out of dark alleys."

EJ laughed. Pedro turned around and bumped fists with her.

"I'll give you kids a tip. Don't antagonize Dad before you get what you ask for."

"Does that mean you're changing your mind?" EJ asked. "We were just messing with you."

Sal laughed. "Two can play that jerk-the-chain game. Seriously, I'm glad to help these kids in their spiritual walk – as long as they're serious about their faith. I don't want to be driving all over Tarnation picking up kids so they can play around."

"I think they're pretty serious about learning," EJ said.

"No doubt Joe is," Pedro added. "Also, they live very close to the street we take to the church."

"OK. When we get home, call them up and tell them their chariot will be picking them up a little after ten."

"You're the best, Dad!" EJ said.

"I bet you say that to all your fathers."

EJ was prepared for her time at the Barnett household. She brought a Christian teen novel to read, just in case. Matthew noticed it in her hand as soon as the Morales family arrived. As they went down the stairs to the family room, he asked. "What's your book about EJ?"

"About 180 pages."

"No, I mean what's the story about?" Matthew asked.

"It's about a teenager trying to be Christian in a world where Christianity is persecuted."

"Sounds boring with a capital 'B'. Why are you bringing that over here anyway? You're not going to want to read when I show you my newest game."

"What is it?"

He walked over to a nearby shelf and lifted a box from it. EJ could see the name written on the box before he arrived.

"Dungeons and Dragons!"

Matthew's face beamed. "It's awesome."

Pedro strolled over and took a look. "You know Adam says that game is the cause of a lot of grief in the world."

"Oh, my gosh. Give me a break. It's just a game. Have you ever played it?"

"No."

"Then how can you badmouth it?"

"You know, Matthew, I've never drunk Drano before, but I can certainly warn people about drinking it because I've read what it can do to the human body."

"That's totally different. This is just a game that let's you play different roles in life. It's like when we were little and we used to pretend to be cowboys and Indians, or cops and robbers."

"So what do you pretend to do?" Faith asked.

"I pretend to be a wizard most of the time, just like Harry Potter."

"I understand you can choose an evil-good setting to determine how your character will behave," Pedro said.

"Yep."

"Where do you normally set it?"

"Towards the evil side, but not all the way."

"Why do you do ramp up on the side of evil?"

"Because it's more interesting when I do."

"That's exactly what Adam told me. He said kids learn that might makes right. Whatever you can get by force or by magic is good."

"What's your point?"

"Kids should be learning how to love and how to work hard to get what they want, not steal it from others just because they can."

Matthew rolled his eyes. "Love is boring."

Pedro repositioned himself so he was toe to toe with Matthew. "You really think so?"

"Yeah."

"I got a feeling that you'd like boring if you were the one that was on the receiving end of a beating or someone stealing. It's only fun when you're the one winning."

"So that's why I try to win."

"The problem is that some kids carry over that attitude and actions into real life and hurt or kill people."

"Pedro, you used to be cool to talk to. Now you're a pain – almost as bad as a parent. Where are you getting all this crap?"

"From Adam."

"Don't listen to him. He's just a nigger."

"Matthew Ward Nelson! What did you say?" Faith brushed right by Pedro, grabbed her little brother by the shoulders and began shaking him.

"Take your mitts off me!" he demanded.

She let go of him. "Don't you ever say that again!"

"Frankly, my dear sister, I'm not sure a human is capable of not using the word 'that'."

"No, idiot box, I don't mean the word 'that'; I mean the 'N' word."

"Oh, you mean, 'Nig--'"

Faith raised her hand to slap him silly, causing him to rethink the repetition of the word that had caused all the hassle.

Matthew threw up his arms. "This is unbelievable! Now you're doing it to me too. I bet it's that crazy prayer circle you got going at school. I found out from somebody what you're doing out there at the flagpole. Kids are talking about it. They say you're a bunch of kooks. I'm gonna squeal to Mom."

"You're going to squeal on me for praying?"

"Yeah, it's against the constitution of the United States of America to pray at school."

"Dry up, you little drip. You don't know the difference between the constitution and toilet paper. You don't know jack!"

"Jack who?"

"Arggggh! Why couldn't Mom have quit having kids after I came along?"

Matthew grinned impishly. "She wanted to try to get it right."

"You better watch it before I *really* get mad."

"Oooh! Scary! Are you going to pray me to death?"

Faith rushed toward him while cocking her fist. Matthew ran up the stairs yelling, "Mom! Sister brutality!"

"I'm so sorry, Pedro. I don't know what's gotten into him."

"I'm starting to get an idea. Looks like we might have to pray him to life."

Faith sighed. "You might be right. I might start sleeping with my door locked at this rate."

"I think you're just trying to be funny, but unfortunately it could come to that. Adam showed me an article showing that kids are getting hooked on violence from video games and television."

"And movies," EJ added.

"Right. To use Matthew's words, it's pretty scary. Little kids, you know, like kindergarten-age and stuff, are committing violent acts. Kids that are Matthew's age are killing more and more people."

"Thanks for worrying me. What am I going to do? I'm living with a little monster and it's growing every day," Faith said.

"I think Adam would tell us to pray the blood of Jesus over you, Matthew, your mother, and even over the house itself."

"That sounds crazy."

"It probably sounded crazy to the Hebrews too when they were told to brush the blood of a lamb over their doorpost."

"I suppose."

Their conversation ceased as they listened to footsteps coming down the stairs. Barbara burst into the room with Matthew right at her heels like a puppy.

"Matthew says you guys are picking on him. What's going on here?"

Faith looked past her mother and saw Matthew grinning at her. "Mom, he's been stirring up trouble."

"And what's this about you praying at school?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"I don't want people calling my daughter a fanatic."

"Who cares what people say?"

"I do. I've got a reputation to uphold, for myself and the family. I'm sorry to do this, Pedro, but I have to. Faith, you're confined to your room for the rest of the day – without Pedro being in it. In other words no talking to him or talking to anyone on the phone, etcetera."

"That's not fair, Mom!"

"Tell it to the Marines. Keep it up and I'll give you a longer

sentence."

"Make it a whole paragraph, Mom!"

"Matthew, keep your nose out of this, or you'll be going to your room too."

Matthew made the sign of the zipper.

Mrs. Nelson turned back to Faith. "Now, young lady, say goodbye to Pedro and EJ."

Faith fought back tears. "Goodbye, EJ. Bye, Pedro." She began the painful walk to her bedroom. She turned around when she was halfway there and saw her mother hugging Matthew. Pedro was watching her. She folded her hands together to signify prayer. Pedro nodded.

Barbara went back upstairs where Sal was waiting for her. EJ opened her book and started reading. Matthew walked over to Pedro. "Since you can't play with your girlfriend now, how about a game of Dungeons and Dragons?"

Pedro looked at the ceiling.

"Does that mean no?"

"Hello-o, anybody home in that pea-brain of yours?"

"Ouch. That's not a nice thing to say. Christians aren't supposed to talk like that."

Pedro studied his feet for a second. "You're right. They're not, and I'm sorry."

Matthew smirked. "You better be. You wouldn't want God grounding you." He turned to EJ. "Are you just going to sit there reading a book or are we going to do something?"

"I'm going to read a book."

"What a bunch of duds!" Matthew grabbed his Dungeons and Dragons game and headed into his bedroom.

Pedro folded his arms. "Well, sister, how'd you like to go for a long walk?"

"Where to?"

"Home. I'm busting out of this joint. There's no sense sitting around here until Dad gets his fill of Barbara."

"Or vice versa."

"Exactly."

"I'm in. Will Dad give us permission though?" EJ asked.

"He better. I'm not sure what I'll do otherwise."

"What if we just ask him if we can all go home?"

"I don't want to spoil his fun." Pedro pondered the recent exchange of conversation between Barbara and Faith. "On second thought, maybe we should try to spoil his fun. You realize that if they got married, she'd be our stepmother."

"And Matthew would be our stepbrother. Ewwwwwwwww! I'd be Cinderella."

"I guess that'd make me Cinderfella!"

"Dad wouldn't do that to us, would he?" EJ said.

"Not on purpose. However, they say love is blind. He might not see her faults and the problems she could cause – unless we tell him. And even then, he might not listen."

"Oh, God, rescue us."

"I think we'll need to pray a little more fervently than that."

"Yeah, I know. That was just a warm-up."

They walked slowly up the stairs and approached their father, who was curled up on the couch with Barbara leaning against him.

"What's up, kids?"

"We want to go home," EJ said.

"But we barely got here."

"Doesn't matter."

He looked at Barbara. "I don't want to leave."

"OK, Dad. You don't have to. We'll walk home." Pedro said.

"It's like three miles away!"

"We need some exercise. I need to walk off the soreness in my legs from football."

Sal shrugged. "Fine. Go for it. Do you have your house key?"

Pedro reached into the pocket of his jeans. "Yep. Let's go, EJ. See ya, Dad."

The two began walking toward the front door. "Aren't you going to tell Barbara goodbye, too?"

Pedro made a face and glanced at EJ. She nodded. The two of them turned around in unison, reminiscent of the orphans in Annie, and recited, "Goodbye, Barbara."

"Goodbye, kids. Thanks for coming."

They continued their journey.

"Thanks for coming? What's that all about?" EJ asked.

"That's just the way adults talk. They have a habit of saying just the opposite of what they really mean."

"You think she didn't want us coming over?"

"I don't know for sure. Just a gut feeling."

The two walked briskly for a mile, sharing their concerns about the current state of their household.

Pedro looked ahead of them and saw a group of kids standing near the next intersection. A cold shiver ran through him. "That was strange," he said.

"What was strange?"

"I just had a feeling of cold run through me."

"It's over eighty degrees out here, and we've been exercising. How could you be cold?"

"I'm not cold. I just had this cold feeling pass through me. For some reason I think it has something to do with those kids up ahead."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. It's just like something is telling me that those kids caused this."

"Voices?" EJ asked.

"Yeah, but no. Just thoughts really."

"You think there's danger? They might mug us or something?"

"I don't know. Paradise isn't the kind of city where people get mugged in broad daylight. That's why Dad chose to live here."

"That's true. Maybe it's just your imagination. All that talk of violence at Faith's house is making you nervous," EJ said.

"Maybe. Whatever it is seems totally weird."

Their pace slowed as they came nearer to the corner. As they reached the group, they picked up the pace to hurry past them. Pedro had been walking with his head down, but something pulled his eyes toward the group. The first person he saw had a lightning bolt on her forehead. Quickly he surveyed the rest of the group, who were all staring at him and EJ. Every single one of them bore the lightning bolt. Pedro felt the hair on his arms rise.

"Did you feel anything, EJ?"

"Nothing – except that rock I stepped on. Did you feel more ice shooting through your veins?"

"Not this time. It's hard to describe the feeling. A cat arching its back and spitting describes it best."

"You were spitting?" EJ asked.

"No. I don't think my back was arching either, but my fur felt like it was standing straight up. I felt like a cat that has just seen a dog and all my defenses were going into action."

"But why?"

"Did you look at those kids?" Pedro said.

"Not really."

"Every one of them had a tattoo or something."

"Tattoos, real and fake, are pretty big now, you know. Nothing unusual about that."

"But these were on their foreheads."

"So, what diff...wait! They weren't, by any chance, tattoos of Lord Voldemort's curse?"

"That's exactly what they were."

EJ scratched her head. "Umm. Harry Potter fans."

"More than just fans perhaps."

"You think they might be witches?"

"Maybe. I don't know how to explain any of this. It's just like I brushed up against an enemy and my body responded."

"Or maybe it was your spirit."

"Gosh. You could be right. Holy cow! And the feeling did start before I saw the lightning bolts. Maybe Adam's gift is rubbing off on me."

"That's really freaky."

"I know. In a way though it's kind of cool."

"If they are witches, I wonder if they felt it," EJ said.

"Felt what?"

"Felt that we were enemies."

"Want to go back and ask them?" Pedro asked.

"No, thanks. Did you know any of them?"

"Nah. I think they were high school kids. Wait, one girl did look kind of familiar. She was dressed Gothic style," Pedro stated.

"That could have been the girl harassing Amy."

"Ahh. And Joe, too."

"If it was, that means she just got her lightning bolt recently because she didn't have one when I saw her a few days ago."

"Isn't she the one who was going to commit suicide?" Pedro asked.

"That's what she claimed. She was trying to get Amy to do it with her."

"Maybe she's like the kamikaze pilot who flew thirty-five missions."

"What?"

"Forget it. Bad joke. Makes me wonder if she was just trying to get Amy to kill herself; like the old prank where two people are going to dive off a high place. One says 'let's go' and pretends to jump and watches the other one falling into the water."

"I never thought of that. Maybe she just changed her mind. Maybe now she just wants to get revenge, like she said."

"On Joe and Amy?" asked Pedro.

"At least. I just about died laughing when Amy told me the story of Joe carrying Roberta down the sidewalk and dumping her on the grass."

"I would've loved to see that myself."

"It's pretty cool that Amy and Joe have struck up a relationship."

"Yeah, really. A few days ago he was desperately in need of prayer, and now he's praying for others." Pedro started laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"I just had a vision of me carrying Faith's mom down the sidewalk and rescuing Faith."

"That's not really funny. Dad would go ballistic."

"You think I don't know that? It just makes me mad thinking of Faith sitting there in her bedroom right now, all alone. And that little twerp Matthew basking in the glory of his dirty tricks."

"You really like her, don't you?"

The soft tone of EJ's voice caused Pedro to glance at his sister's face. "Yeah. I like her a lot."

"Can we use the word 'love' here?"

"What does that word mean? Exactly what is 'love'?"

"I hope you're not expecting an earth-shaking answer from a twelve-year-old on the subject of love. It's kind of a mystery to me."

"Yeah. Me too. Funny thing is, it seems to be one of the most powerful forces on Earth. Some scientists are trying to tell us that it's just the result of some chemicals interacting."

EJ twirled her hair. "There are different kinds of love. The love you have for Dad is different than the love you have for Faith."

"And the love I have for football is different than both of them."

"One funny thing is that if you talk about your love for football, it's cool with everybody, unless they're jock haters. If you talk about love for humans, it makes a lot of people uncomfortable – like it's embarrassing to love someone."

"You're right. I noticed that too. Why is that?"

"Again, as a twelve-year-old, I plead total ignorance. The only thing I know for sure is that Jesus said we're supposed to love everybody, especially him and his Father."

"And the Bible says that God is love," said Pedro.

"That too. By the way, what have you been researching on the net?"

"Satanism. I'm checking on the crime statistics and stuff. It's pretty interesting. I find articles that argue against each other too. Some people say that Satanism has no part in the rise of violent crime in the world."

"That doesn't surprise me. I always thought that Satan worked underground anyway. He always seems...."

A loud noise suddenly distracted the siblings.

"Speaking of the devil, look who's coming," EJ said.

A familiar Ford Pinto came toward them. It slowed down as it reached them, but then sped up as EJ and Pedro kept themselves from looking over. They turned around after the car went by and

saw it pull to a stop across the street from the group of kids wearing the lightning bolts.

* * *

EJ was absorbed in her book, and Pedro was continuing his research on the computer when they heard a car door slam outside.

"Guess who's home," EJ said. "I wonder if he's going to be mad."

"Very possibly. Depends on how things went with Barbara after we left. Maybe he was glad to have us out of the way."

"What do you mean?"

"Shhh. He'll be coming through the door any second."

He did, smiling and carrying a colorful book. "Hey kids, how was your walk home?"

EJ looked at Pedro. He was trained to know that whenever she did that, she wanted him to answer their father's question.

"It was interesting."

"Sounds kind of boring to me, but I'll take your word for it. Hey, are you guys up for some Harry Potter? Barbara let me borrow her copy of book three."

"No thanks, Dad," EJ said. "I'm reading a book Tammy lent me."

"I'm busy researching," Pedro said.

"Something for school?"

"Nope. Curiosity. I'm studying about...spiritual warfare."

"Ohh. Heavy topic. Don't forget that curiosity killed the cat."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Pedro asked.

"It means be careful. There are some real flakes out there spewing out a bunch of garbage. You have to be careful about who and what you believe."

"What do you mean?" Pedro asked.

"I hate to say this, son, but there are some people out there who are just a little... goofy. When you get into the spiritual realm where most things involve opinions, it's easy to find people who go off the deep end. Sometimes they distort the facts a little bit to help their own agenda."

"You mean they lie?"

"I'm not sure I'd say that. It's just that their perception of reality may be a bit crooked," Sal said.

"Are you saying they're crazy?"

"In some cases, maybe. It's hard to define exactly where crazy ends and sanity with goofiness begins sometimes. Just like it's hard to detect the difference between truth and fiction. We can

only take in all the evidence we can and weigh it. I'm probably not making much sense here, am I?"

"Actually not too bad – for an adult."

"Another way of looking at it is that some people suffer from what I call the Forrest Gump syndrome."

"They're always running?" Pedro asked.

"No, they're always claiming they were involved in a big event. Like being abducted by aliens. They make up stories about something they know people are interested in just to get attention and feel special."

"That's pretty sad. I guess they don't have a daddy like you to make them feel special."

"Why thank you for the compliment, EJ! Warms the cockles of my heart."

"What's a cockle of the heart?" EJ asked.

"I don't have clue."

"Then why'd you say it?"

"It's just an expression that people use."

"Ahh. People that don't have a clue what a cockle is, I suppose," EJ said.

Sal thought for a moment and then laughed. "Probably. So, maybe we can read Harry together later?"

"Dad," Pedro said. "Ahhh, I'm not sure how to break this to you, but we really don't want to continue reading the Potter series."

"You're joking, right?"

Pedro shook his head.

"EJ? This is book three. You said it was your favorite, right?"

"That's ancient history. I'm not into that stuff anymore."

"Go figure. A couple of weeks ago you guys were chomping at the bit to read Harry, and I didn't let you. Now I want to, and you guys are the ones dragging your feet."

"That's life in the fast lane," Pedro said. "Make some mistakes and learn on the fly, allowing a change of course."

"You guys are weird. I'm going to my room and diving into this book."

EJ shook her head. "Don't drown and make sure the book's deep enough before you dive. Don't want to hit your head on the bottom. By the way, don't forget we're going to Tammy's church tomorrow and picking up Amy."

"And Joe," Pedro added.

"Yes, and Joe. Anyway, don't forget, Dad."

"Don't worry, kiddos. Barbara tried to talk me into coming over

to her house tomorrow for brunch instead of going to church. She has the Harry Potter movies too. We were going to watch the first one. But since I promised you to pick up Joe and Amy, I had to turn her down."

"Dad, are you saying Barbara tried to talk you into skipping church to watch a Harry Potter movie?"

"And brunch!"

"Well, big whoop!" EJ said. "You can eat anytime. I can't believe you even considered it. I'm starting to think that woman is a bad influence on you."

"Is that so? Maybe you should forbid me from seeing her."

"We can't do that."

"I know. Do you know the word 'sarcastic'?" asked Sal.

"Duh. I just never expected such stuff to come out of your mouth."

"I never thought I'd have my kids preaching to me about church and relationships. Sheesh!" He stormed up the steps.

"That went really well," Pedro said.

"What's gotten into Dad?" EJ asked.

"Do I look like a psychiatrist?"

"Oh, come on. You're not bailing out of this question with a joke."

"I don't know, EJ. But, if I've not mistaken, Barbara is being influenced by the devil. She in turn is influencing Dad with her beauty. She's almost got him wrapped around her big toe."

"You mean her little finger?"

"No, I meant her big toe. And I think she's suffering from fungus amongus."

"Why are you trying to be funny? This is serious stuff."

"I know. Maybe I'm trying to be funny because I don't have any answers for the problem. I can't believe it. Here we are, the kids, trying to prevent our parent from getting into trouble. Talk about role reversal!"

"Yeah, but we don't have the power to do any disciplining."

"Look's like we'll have to rely on the three P's," said Pedro.

"The three P's?"

"Persuasion, persistence, and prayer."

"I like it. I think I'll start doing some persuading right now. Please follow me into the kitchen and help me whip up a delicious feast for our messed-up father. This is a team effort you know."

"EJ, I'm a quarterback, you know, and I'm going to have to pass. I'll work extra hard on the prayer while you tickle his taste buds."

"I'm going to do some tickling all right, starting with you." She started toward where Pedro sat at the computer. He dodged her, escaped into his room, and slammed the deadbolt home.

"Chicken!" she yelled.

"Nope. We had chicken last night. How about something with pork?"

"Cannibal!" She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling before stomping off to the kitchen.

* * *

On Sunday morning, Sal and his passengers exited his car at the First Assembly church parking lot and strolled to the entrance.

A nicely dressed woman with a noticeable glimmer of joy on her face gave Sal a bulletin as he went through the door. "Welcome to First Assembly."

"Thank you." Sal said.

"Is this your first time here?"

"Second."

"Hope it's not your last."

"It won't be," EJ said.

The woman looked at EJ and laughed. She turned back to Sal and winked.

The motley crew stood in the back of the sanctuary for a moment. EJ saw Tammy and Adam. "Come on. There they are – down in the front."

"Go on without me. I'll be down in a second," Pedro said.

"What's up?" Sal asked.

"Come on. Let's walk down to where you want to sit."

Sal shrugged and started walking. "Did you need to wait before saying something to me?"

"As a matter of fact, I did want to get a little farther from the door. Did you notice the radiance on the face of that woman usher?"

"I did."

"Did you notice that she didn't have a ring on?"

"Pedro! What does that have to do with anything? I'm seeing Barbara."

"Just thought you might want to leave your options open."

"Barbara is beautiful. That lady is attractive, but not really drop-dead gorgeous like my lady. By the way, a few weeks ago you were giving me grief for ruining a relationship with Barbara. Now you're trying to break us up?"

"Forget it, Dad. I'm outta here." Pedro walked down to join his friends.

Sal turned around and looked at the door to the sanctuary. He shook his head and laughed before taking a seat.

"Hey, Pedro. What were you talking to Dad about?"

"Just put a little bug in his ear."

"I hope it likes wax."

"Funny. NOT!" Pedro said.

"I liked it. Anyway, is there any chance that little bug had something to do with the lady in the blue dress?"

"How did you know that?"

"Just a vibe. I've seen Christmas trees that give off less light than the glow of her smile."

"Who you talking about?" Tammy asked.

"The lady at the back door handing out bulletins."

Tammy peered into the rear of the church. "Oh, that's Rachel Schwartz. She's a really neat lady."

"I can see that. Does she have a husband?"

"Yeah."

"Bummer."

"But he's in the cemetery."

EJ's face took on a tone of sadness. "Oh. That's too bad. And she's still that happy?"

"Doesn't seem to dim her light any," Pedro said.

Tammy shook her head. "Not a bit. By the way, she's a florist. Maybe working with flowers every day helps her to be happy."

"Hmm. I hereby nickname her the 'flower lady'. It might be time for my daddy to stop and smell the roses."

There was a group of fifteen kids chilling together. When it was almost time for the service to start, Adam got the group's attention. "There are two things I want to talk to you about. First of all, I need to speak with all the members of the God Squad after the service. And secondly, we're going to try something new today. We kids are going to be together for the worship service at the front of the church. I felt the Lord asking us to praise God with all we've got. The church needs to be energized."

"Do we all have to?" Amy asked. "I'm pretty new at this. I wanted to kind of sit and watch today."

"Not a problem, Amy. If anyone else feels uncomfortable, take a seat before or during the service. We don't force anybody to do anything."

"I'll sit with you, Amy," Joe said.

Her eyes lit up. "Thanks, Joe."

Pastor Barnet came out of the prayer room, and the worship team filed in behind him. Most of the kids followed Adam to the

front of the sanctuary. Joe and Amy took seats near the front.

Pedro stood up at the front with his back feeling like people were boring into him with their eyes. He was tempted to join Joe in the safety of the pew, but the presence of Adam nearby gave him the strength to resist. He watched Adam and Tammy throw themselves into the maelstrom created by the beat of the music. He felt his feet tapping in unison with the drums, but he couldn't abandon his attitude of cool.

Some of the other kids had their hands raised and swayed like palm branches in a stiff breeze.

Pedro's mind rambled. *At least I'm thinking about God and not about football or food. I'm no good at worshipping. In fact, I don't have a clue what worship is. I could raise my hands and do what others do, but I feel it would be fake. God, help me to be real. Help me to honor you the way you want. Show me how to leave this world behind and approach you in your world.*

A vision appeared to Pedro of a rock star striding on to the stage with thousands of fans screaming, and him trying to get up on the platform to be near the star. That vision faded and another one appeared. This time the setting was a football stadium which was full of people who had driven and flown hundreds and thousands of miles to see the game. As he stood there pondering what those things represented, a thought explained it. Those people abandon their dignity and their comfort to draw near unto Earthly idols. Yet they refuse to draw near unto their Heavenly Father because they're too dignified or because they don't want to leave their comfort zone.

Oh, God. I don't want to be like that. Release me from this jail I put myself into that prevents me from approaching your throne. Untie the knots that bind me in a state of mediocrity. The worship band began to play a song that Pedro knew very well. He let himself go and sang with all his heart.

"Our God is an awesome God.

He reigns from Heaven above

with wisdom, power, and love.

Our God is an awesome God."

A flash of blue caught Pedro's attention. The flower lady was dancing in front of the altar. *I wonder if Dad's watching her.*

Pedro felt something brush his shoulder. He turned and saw Joe and Amy beside him. The smile that broke out on his face was so wide his face hurt. Observing the rest of the kids honoring their creator, he suddenly had the feeling of 'team'. *This feels like strapping on the helmet and pads and going out to do battle with*

an opposing school. These guys are my teammates. The feeling of being at the right spot at the right time washed over him, filling with what he could only describe as love. *Too bad Faith isn't here.*

* * *

After the service, Timmy, Chung, and the Morales and Barnet siblings gathered together in a corner. Joe and Amy stood close by.

Adam turned toward Joe and Amy. "Ahhh, guys, I'm sorry but this meeting is for members of the God Squad only."

"We'd like to be members," Joe said with conviction.

Adam looked over at the rest of the squad. "Anybody have objections?"

A couple of kids shook their heads, and no one spoke up.

"OK. Come on over and join us," Adam said.

With his hand entwined in Amy's, Joe guided her to a spot beside Pedro.

"The reason I called this emergency meeting is because there's been a change in plans." Everyone's ears perked up. "Tomorrow night Chung and Timmy were going to do some detective work."

"So our mission is called off?" Timmy asked.

"Changed is a better word. This morning on the way to church we heard on the radio that somebody shot up a mall back in Nebraska and killed a bunch of people. I don't think we can afford another week to check these guys out. If they went on a killing spree this week, we'd all be sick because we didn't do anything to stop it."

"You mean tomorrow night we're going in?" Chung said.

Adam bit his lip. "Afraid so, if you still want to do it?"

"Are you going to be involved?" Timmy asked.

"I thought long and hard about it. Really, I feel guilty sending you guys in there and hiding in the shadows myself. However, my dad is a brand-new pastor here in town. Having me get caught doing something illegal, even though it might not be immoral, would be earth-shattering to Dad. So I'm going to stay at home and pray."

"No problem," Timmy said. "We can handle it ourselves."

Joe cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to do this to you, but can I ask what it is that 'we' are doing? It worries me slightly when I hear the word illegal mentioned."

Adam explained the situation to them.

"I know the guys you're talking about," Amy said. "I've seen that old Pinto dragging our neighborhood. When EJ told me her

scary story, I knew exactly who she meant."

"I'm too fat to go into the house," Joe said. "But I can be a watchman or something."

"I can help, Joe," Amy said. She looked up at him with doe-like eyes, and he squeezed her hand.

Adam nodded. "Sounds good. With both Timmy and Chung in the house, they can search faster. Pedro and EJ, I'd like to put you in the prayer chain also."

"We can do that," Pedro said. "I was wondering if we shouldn't try calling the police and explaining the situation to them. It would be better if they did the searching."

"I agree that it'd be better. It's doubtful they could get a search warrant with no evidence to speak of, but it's worth a try. I'll call them this afternoon and explain the situation. I'll call you afterward and let you know what the plan is."

Everyone nodded their agreement.

Pedro, EJ, Joe, and Amy walked slowly up the aisle together. EJ elbowed her brother in the ribs, nodding towards the church entrance. They saw their father at the door, impeding traffic as he traded smiles and conversation with the flower lady.

Pedro grinned.

* * *

That afternoon the phone rang, and Pedro ran from the computer to answer. He heard his dad's voice saying hello on the other phone about the same time he answered.

"Is Pedro there?"

"Right here, Adam. Dad, it's for me."

"I kind of figured that when he asked for Pedro. Hi, Adam."

"Hi, Mr. Morales."

"OK, I'll leave you two alone now. Bye."

Pedro stood there waiting to hear the click when his father hung up the other phone. He didn't hear it.

"I called the police—"

"Hold on, Adam. I can't hear very well right now. Hold on just a second." He turned to EJ and whispered. "Would you make sure Dad has hung up the phone? I don't want him to hear this."

She nodded and raced away. In a few seconds Pedro heard the click he had been waiting for. "OK, Adam. Go for it."

"The police told me their hands are tied. There's nothing they can do without having some kind of evidence of a crime."

"Well, you tried. Have you talked to Chung and Timmy yet?"

"Yeah."

"Did you tell them what to say in the event they get busted?"

"No. I don't know what to tell them. We've got to hope that doesn't happen," Adam said.

"Duh!"

"Talk to you later, Pedro."

"Bye." Pedro turned to EJ, who had returned to the room.

"So, what's going on?" EJ asked.

Pedro shook his head. "There's never a cop around when you need one. Operation Nosy Neighbor is on as long as the suspects follow their usual pattern of leaving."

"Hopefully, if they do, they follow the same pattern of returning late."

"Really. What did Dad say about the phone?"

"Nothing meaningful. He saw or heard me coming and hung up just as I was coming around the corner. He put on the nonchalant act and pretended like he wasn't busted. He started a lame discussion about what to have for dinner."

"Typical. Unfortunately, Adam mentioned the police before Dad hung up. He's got to be wondering what's going on."

Chapter 9

The next evening at Chung's house, Timmy and his host stood in Chung's bedroom looking through the Venetian blinds.

"You know, we really don't have to watch. When they fire up that Pinto, the whole neighborhood will hear it whinny," Timmy said.

Chung laughed. "That's too funny. You Indians just have a way with horses, don't you?"

"That's the story. Personally, I've never been on one. Anyhow, I suppose we have to keep watching though to make sure both dudes get into the car. We wouldn't want the rude surprise of getting in the house and finding one of the guys stayed home tonight."

"Bingo."

They swapped small talk as they waited. Timmy suddenly snapped to attention. "There's one of them now."

They watched as the second man came into view. The two got in their car and turned on the fluorescent noisemaker which barely merited the title of automobile.

"These guys would sure be welcome in an orange grove during a freeze. That car puts out more smoke than a thousand smudge pots," Chung declared.

"Where are you? I can't see you." Timmy made gestures like he was trying to feel his way through the darkness.

Chung laughed. Suddenly he stopped, and a frown replaced his smile. "I just thought of something."

"What?"

"How are we going to search in the dark? The plan was to go in after sunset so no one would see us going through the window, if we can find one. But if it's so dark people can't see us, then we can't see either."

"Gosh, you're right. We could use flashlights but those will give us away quicker than anything," Timmy said.

They watched the car belch undigested oil as it wobbled down the street.

"I think this calls for a change in plans. First thing we have to do is get into their yard. Then we need to find a window we can get in. Then we gotta go for it and get the job done fast."

"What time are Joe and Amy coming?" Timmy asked.

"Just before dark."

"We can't wait for them. Do you have their phone number?"

"Not me."

"Me either," Timmy said.

"One of us could stand guard."

"But two of us can search twice as fast."

"That's right. Oh, well. I think with the noise of that car, we have a built in advance warning system. We'll be fine without a watchman."

"I agree. No sense waiting around. Let's get started."

The two boys descended the staircase that led to Chung's bedroom. "Too bad we didn't get out there before the smoke blew away. Nobody would have seen us," Chung said.

"Before we get in there, exactly what are we looking for?"

"Good question. Boxes labeled dynamite. Flame throwers. Hand grenades. Weapons of any kind, I guess."

"My dad has weapons, but he's not a terrorist."

"That's true. I guess we just have to hope we can recognize a problem when we see it."

"How do we get through their fence?"

"That's the easiest part – if nobody's watching. There's a loose board in the back. The suspects put it back on after it fell down, but it's not on tight. We can pull it off and put it back on again. It's wide enough to squeeze through if we go sideways."

"Looks like you've been doing your homework."

Chung nodded. "Yeah. I just hope I pass the test."

The two boys went through Chung's backyard and entered the alley. They turned to the right and followed the alley toward the loose plank. Chung pointed at the house behind the target home. "This house is blocked by the trees and their own fence. Nobody's home at mine to threaten us, thank goodness. The house next to the suspects is vacant and for sale. There's only two houses that might hold a peeping Tom that could spot us."

"I thought peeping Tom's looked into people's houses, not out of them."

"Technically, you might be right. It was the only phrase that I could drum up right now."

"Obviously, you weren't the drummer in the band."

Chung frowned. "And also obviously, you aren't the class comedian. We do have one more worry here."

"What's that?"

"Somebody coming down the alley just as we go through the

hole in the fence."

"The old coincidink."

"Huh?" Chung asked.

"If you don't know what that means, look it up under coincidence."

"Oh. Another bad attempt at humor."

Timmy put his fingers up to his mouth, like he was holding a cigar, and leaned over. "Or perhaps another attempt at bad humor."

"What was that all about?"

"That's my Groucho Marx impression."

"Who?"

"Groucho Marx, you know, from the Marx brothers."

"Well, in this case your impression is safe from criticism by me because I've never heard of the guy or his brother."

"There were five brothers. Only three of them were big movie stars. You gotta see them. They're a riot."

"If we live through this little adventure, I'll check 'em out. Maybe, if we get busted, we can check out the materials from the prison library."

Timmy rolled his eyes. "Thanks for the encouragement."

"Any time."

The boys walked by the loose plank. They looked in front of them and then behind them. No one was in sight.

"OK, let's do it." Chung strode purposefully to the fence, looked around one more time, and pulled on the plank from the top. It came right out of the framework. He set the board next to the fence as Timmy scooted through the hole. Chung was just pulling his trailing leg through the hole when the sound of an automobile turning into the gravel alley grabbed the boys' attention. They pressed up against the inside of the fence until the car went past.

"Do you suppose they saw us?" Timmy asked.

"I don't know. Even if they did, they might ignore us. Lots of people don't want to get involved."

"What are we going to do about the plank?"

"We can't put it back like it was from this side."

"Not exactly, but we can at least cover the hole a little so it doesn't stick out like a bikini in a one piece swimsuit competition."

"Trouble is, to get the board in place, one of us would have to crawl through the hole – twice. That increases our chances of getting caught. Somebody comes through this alley once in a blue cheese."

"You mean blue moon?" Timmy asked.

"The moon is made of cheese, so it's the same thing."

"And you accuse me of bad jokes. OK, I guess we leave the hole wide open. That will give us a chance for a quicker escape if necessary."

The two boys tried to walk naturally up to the house as if they belonged there. They reached the back of the house and surveyed the windows on the bottom floor.

"Nothing open down here, but that window up there is open," Timmy said.

"Let's look on the sides of the house."

They tried one side and discovered that all the windows were closed; the other side offered no means of entrance either.

"Do we want to check the front yard?"

"That would be really risky. It looks right out onto several houses, some of which contain busybodies, and the fence isn't very high. We're pretty much dogmeat for sure if we used the front of the house."

"Great. That leaves that one window in the back on the second floor. How are we going to reach it?"

"I left my pole vault at home."

Timmy looked at Chung to see if he was joking. He couldn't tell for sure. "What about a ladder?"

"You got one in your pocket?"

Timmy rolled his eyes. "Let's check that shed in the back. Maybe we'll get lucky."

"No sense both of us going. One less person to be seen. Go for it."

Timmy walked along the edge of the fence until he reached the back wall and then followed it to a dilapidated outbuilding. He tried the door, but it was locked. He peered in the window but couldn't see anything. Just for jollies, he walked around the building and found a tall wooden ladder leaning against the back, almost hidden in the grass. With a little difficulty he hoisted it up and carried it toward the back of the house. Chung met him below the window and took a long look at their stairway to Heaven.

"Dang. Looks pretty rickety. I'm not sure I want to climb that high on that piece of junk."

"Chung, I'll hold the ladder at the bottom when you go up. I'll go up it by myself afterward. Does that make your decision easier?"

"That way, if it falls, I'll land on you so you can cushion the blow."

Timmy shrugged. "Whatever. Just go."

Chung carefully and slowly began to climb. Timmy was just moving into place to hold the ladder when the third rung broke off and Chung fell through. He landed on the second rung, which also gave way, giving him jarring landing on the bottom rung.

"Are you OK?"

"As soon as my heart quits beating at 200 beats a second, I'll be fine. Now what are we going to do?"

"Pretty hard to get past those two broken rungs. And if we did, there's no guarantee those other rungs are going to hold up."

"That's true. Looks like we're between the two prongs of a nutcracker," Chung said.

"Your grasp of the obvious is overwhelming."

"Thanks for noticing."

"I think we might as well get this ladder back and get out of here. Mission scrubbed," Timmy said.

The two boys put the ladder back where they found it and started toward the hole in the fence.

"Wait, Timmy. I hate to get this far and not try everything. Let's make sure the back door is locked."

"Are you kidding? They wouldn't be that dumb, would they?"

"Only one way to find out. If we had any brains, that's the first thing we would have tried."

"It's your idea. I'll wait here while you give it a shot."

Chung came back a few seconds later with a grim expression on his face.

"Strike three, huh?" Timmy said.

Chung's face exploded into a grin. "We just found out these guys aren't the sharpest knives at the picnic."

"You mean in the drawer?"

"That too."

"Are you joshing me? Did you really get in?"

"Follow me and become a believer."

Timmy marched to the door and turned the handle. The door opened easily. He turned back to offer his grin to Chung, who was still smiling from ear to ear. "Are you sure that no one is in there?"

The smile disappeared. "Pretty sure. I've never seen more than the two guys that left."

Timmy shook his head and plunged into the doorway. Chung followed. They shut the door behind them and stood there trying to figure out what to do next.

Chung scratched his head. "Let's see if we can find the basement stairs. Cellars are the best place to hide stuff."

"Works for me. We should have worn gloves."

"Gloves? When you're doing something scary you get cold feet, not cold hands. It's still technically summer, you know."

"Duh. Have you ever heard of fingerprints? We're leaving our fingerprints on everything we touch," Timmy said.

"Oooh. That's true. Nothing we can do about it now though. We could have planned this little escapade a little more thoroughly."

"Gee. Do you think so? I feel like I've sprouted wings on the seat of my pants, and I'm flying by them right now."

The two opened a door in the kitchen. It was filled with shelves, some of which contained food.

"Pantry. Not exactly a prime location for explosives," Timmy said.

The next door looked more promising. A dank odor greeted their nostrils. They searched for a light switch on the wall. The flipping of the switch lit up the stairs in front of them. They cautiously descended the rickety stairs into the dusty and musty bowels of the cellar. The walls were literally crumbling away and the rubble hadn't been swept away.

"This place ought to be condemned. Any terrorist worth his gunpowder would know better than to keep anything down in this damp environment." They searched anyway and found a furnace, a washing machine, and a dryer, all of which were way past their prime.

"Come on, Timmy. Let's get out of here. This place gives me the creeps."

"Don't feel like the Lone Ranger. This is more like a cave than part of a house."

The two left the dampness behind and began to prowl around the downstairs of the house. Nothing of any significance stood out.

"Check this out," Chung said.

Timmy walked over to the bookshelf that Chung was examining.

"Look at all the books on witchcraft here."

Timmy let out a low whistle. "Funny reading material for jihadists."

"You can say that again."

"Funny reading material for jihadists."

"I said you *can* say it; I didn't say you *may*."

"Oh, sorry. I forgot to say 'Captain, may I,'" Timmy said.

"Exactly. That pretty well finishes the downstairs. Let's go check the second floor."

"Interesting choice of words." Timmy's face lit up. "What if they had a second floor, literally? What if they built a floor over the floor with a gap between them to hide stuff?"

"That would be slick, but that's pretty much out of the picture. It doesn't look like this house has had any work done on it for years. Talk about your fixer-uppers. Besides, we wouldn't have time nor the expertise to look for hidden floors."

Timmy shrugged. "It was just a thought."

"Don't stop thinking just because you had one dud."

"I'm going to take that as a positive comment."

"Good. That is the way it was intended."

They were halfway up the stairs when the noise of running water stopped them in their tracks. They looked at one another and then toward the upstairs. The noise went away as quickly as it had come. The boys remained frozen on the stairs for a few more minutes.

"What was that?" Timmy whispered.

"You got me. Is someone here?"

"I thought maybe so, but we haven't heard any footsteps or anything."

"Let's keep going then. We can't stay here in 'no boy's land' forever."

They continued the climb. There were two small rooms, one on each side of a narrow hallway.

"I'll take the one on the right," Chung said. "This one looks like an office. You take the bedroom on the left. OK?"

Timmy nodded and the two detectives split up and began searching through the contents of their appointed rooms.

A few minutes later Chung joined Timmy in the bedroom. "I didn't find anything over there. How about you?"

"Nothing. The place is a blooming mess, but all the stuff strewn about is junk, not terrorist materials. Nobody seems to be sleeping in this one."

The noise of water running broke the silence again and then quickly disappeared. After two minutes without a new noise, Timmy whispered. "That does it. I'm going to the bathroom next."

"Why didn't you use the toilet at my house?"

"I'm not going to the bathroom; I'm going into the bathroom."

"That's not what you said the first time," Chung said.

"Whatever. Let's find out what's causing that noise."

They glided through the hallway without snapping any twigs, and Timmy walked into the bathroom first. "Gross."

"Find something?"

"Nothing to call the cops about. Maybe we should be alerting the neatness police though. These guys live like pigs."

"What do you expect from someone who drives a 1971 Ford Pinto that should have been put out to pasture years ago?"

"You have a point there."

Just then the toilet emitted a familiar noise. After a couple of seconds, it quit.

Chung laughed. "There's your noisemaker, a leaky toilet. Now can we search the rest of the upstairs?"

"Be my guest."

"Not if this was your house. I'd be looking for a new host."

"I wouldn't blame you," Timmy said.

Two more rooms lay beyond the bathroom. A staircase by one of them led upward. The two boys looked up the stairs.

"That must be an attic," Chung said. "Attics are even better than basements for hiding stuff."

"I'll take your word for it. I've never had an attic where we lived."

"I'm going to check it out." Chung climbed to the top. When he got there, he let loose a discouraging word.

"What's the matter?"

Chung descended the steps and looked into his friend's eyes. "That baby is locked. That could be exactly where we need to go, but we can't."

Timmy nodded. "Well, no sense moping about it. Let's check out these bedrooms and get out of here. I think we've worn out our welcome."

"And vice versa."

Timmy walked into the room on the left again. "Holy cow!"

"You're not going to believe what I'm looking at here," Chung said from the other room.

"Ditto."

Timmy walked over by the bed. He scanned the walls and tried to drink in all the details. A stand with candles was positioned right next to the bed. Timmy felt something brush against his leg. He yelped.

Chung came running from the other room. "What happened?"

"Something touched me."

"Something? What?"

"I don't know! If I knew what it was, I would have told you instead of using the word 'something'!"

"What did it look like?"

"I didn't see it," Timmy said.

"Are you sure it's not your imagination?"

"Swear and hope to die. Wait, let me rephrase that."

"How close were you to the bed?" Chung asked.

"Right next to it."

"Probably the bedspread brushed your leg."

"I don't think so. There was more weight to what I felt than a blanket. I've had enough of this place. Time to exit stage right."

"Hold on. There has to be a rational answer for this." Chung surveyed the contents of the room. "This one is decorated just like the one I was searching, vintage early witchcraft. Did you look in the closet? They're some wild-looking robes and stuff in there."

"That's nice. Now let's get out of here."

"You think it was a ghost or something?" Chung asked.

"I'm too scared to think. And I'd like to use that bathroom right now – the one over at your house – if it's not too late already."

Chung pulled up the bedspread. A shadowy figure leaped out and hissed at them. Timmy screamed again. Chung's initial chuckle evolved into a full-fledged belly laugh.

"Oh, Big Chief Stalking Boy, scared by a little old kitty-cat."

"I'm not so sure. It's jet black. Maybe it's more than just an ordinary housecat."

Chung started singing. "*You the devil in disguise.*"

"Maybe."

"And maybe pigs can fly." Chung laughed again.

A sound resembling a gunshot interrupted their conversation. They looked at each other. Chung's face now showed the same terror Timmy's had worn since his brush with the killer cat.

"They can't be home yet. It isn't anywhere near ten o'clock!" Chung said.

"Come on. We gotta get out the back door before they come in the front."

They took two steps toward the exit before the sound of a girl's laughter from the floor below shocked them into imitating statues.

A man's laughter followed. "Thanks for the ride home. It's nice to drive a real car with non-smoking seating for a change."

The girl laughed again. "My friends will be in seventh hell. They'll get their smoke fix without even lighting up in your Pinto."

"What are we going to do?" Timmy whispered.

"We could use some of those flying pigs right now to pick us up at the window."

Timmy went over to the window and looked down. There was cement below, so jumping was out of the question. He returned to

Chung's side.

"Don't panic!" Chung said. "Let's hide under the bed."

"But the cat's under there."

"Not for long."

Chung quietly got down on the floor, lifted the bedspread, and started sliding under. Suddenly he swept his leg to the side and the cat flew past Timmy, back arched and spitting in midair. It landed on all fours and took off running. Timmy stood there watching – until he heard footsteps on the stairwell. He quickly joined Chung in hiding. One section of the bedspread had failed to fall back to its normal position. Timmy pulled it into place just as a foot entered the room.

The two shaking boys suffered through a conversation consisting of smutty talk. Suddenly something dropped on the bed, causing the springs to sag enough to touch both boys. Timmy held on to his scream this time.

"Will it be as good as last week?" the man asked.

"I guarantee it, but not right now. The rest of the party is here now. Let's wait until everyone gets a little bit wasted and won't disturb us."

"Oh, baby. I know you Americans have a phrase 'don't put off until later stuff you can do now'."

"That's not exactly how we say it. Come on." The sound of feet hitting the floor and the removal of a weight on their backs brought relief to the hidden intruders.

The sound of receding footsteps brought more music to the boys' ears. It soon became apparent that there were several people downstairs. Their chance of escape seemed to rival that of an opossum trying to cross a ten-lane super highway during rush-hour traffic.

"God, help us!" Timmy whispered.

"If he doesn't, we're going to have to spend the night under here and at least part of the day tomorrow."

"I can't. My parents didn't give me permission to sleep over."

"Funny. What will our parents do when we don't show up at home?" Chung asked.

"I don't know. Probably call the cops."

"Hopefully they'll call our friends and Pedro or Adam can tell them where we went."

"My parents don't have their phone numbers."

"Mine do. But they might think I'm asleep and not even check the bedroom since they get home after my bedtime. That means it might be tomorrow before anyone comes looking for us."

"There's no way my bladder is going to hold out until then."

"Let's just hope that it's only your bladder that wants to do any evacuating."

"And I'm going to get hungry. They might hear my stomach growling from under here," Timmy said.

"They might think it's the cat. Besides, I don't think you'll be hungry after that couple does the hanky-panky on top of us. You'll be sick to your stomach for a week."

The two held their silence for a minute. It was quiet enough for them to hear the footsteps coming back up the stairs.

"What's the matter, Ace?" the now too familiar male voice said.

"This is crazy. You think the cat is trying to tell you something?"

"He wants me to follow him," the voice said.

"Uh huh. Shades of Lassie."

"What?"

"Forget it. Why doesn't the cat just tell us what the problem is without making us climb these stairs again?"

"I don't know. Why don't you ask him yourself?"

The irritating female laughter stung their ears again.

"I wish she'd shut up," Timmy whispered.

"Shh. No more talking."

They lay there trying to remain motionless. Timmy wondered why he had his eyes closed – as if they wouldn't see him if his eyes were shut. He opened them back up again just in time to see daylight pierce the darkness under the bed when the bedspread parted. The feeling of fur on his skin brought Timmy some relief until the bedspread was thrown back and an unwelcome face peered at him.

"Hello dere," Timmy said.

An arm attached to the face stuck the long barrel of a gun under Timmy's chin. "Goodbye."

Chapter 10

"Don't shoot, mister!"

"Come out from under there, get your hands up in the air, and let me look at you."

The boys complied.

"They're just kids," the girl said.

Chung looked at her, noticing a lightning bolt on her forehead immediately, and saw she wasn't much older than himself. He chose not to point that fact out to her, however.

"What are you doing in here?" the man asked.

"Would you believe looking for rats? We're on the neighborhood committee to control the rat population and we were just making a house call."

"Ace of Spades takes care of the little rats around here." The cat rubbed up against his leg and purred. He waved the gun in their face. "And Smith and Wesson take care of the big ones."

"What are you going to do with us?" Timmy asked.

"I don't know. I think I better talk this over with my buddy. First of all, I'm going to make sure you don't have any weapons on you. Fatin, will you frisk them for me?"

"No problem, babe."

"Don't you dare get any pleasure out of this!"

The girl laughed again as she began checking Chung. "This guy's clean." She began to repeat her search on Timmy. When she hit his pockets, she stopped. "Found something hard in here."

"Reach into the pocket and take it out."

She complied and then began laughing again. "Bubblegum. Exactly what I should expect out of a couple of bubble-gummers."

"Can I use your bathroom, mister?" Timmy whined.

"Sure. Fatin, go downstairs and tell Aubrey about our visitors. Tell him to come up here and bring his gun with him."

"You got it, babe."

The three remaining in the room stood there in silence until another man entered.

"Aubrey, keep this guy covered while I take the other dude to the bathroom."

"My pleasure, Ahti."

"OK. Come on, little boy. Don't want you to wet your pants and

our floor."

Timmy followed him into the bathroom. "OK, dude. Empty your radiator."

"Aren't you going to give me some privacy?" Timmy asked.

The man shook his head.

"I guess I don't have to go after all."

"Listen, kid. You dragged me in here. Turn the water jet on!"

Timmy frowned. He turned his back to the gun-toter and proceeded to obey the instructions.

After Timmy flushed, the man asked, "Don't you feel much better now?"

"Yeah, thanks a bunch."

The gunmen escorted their guests to the living room downstairs and told them to sit on the couch.

"What are we going to do with them?" Aubrey asked.

The frightened boys studied their captors. In addition to the first girl, two others, both with lightning bolts on their foreheads, stood and looked them over.

One of the unnamed girls said, "How about we boil them in oil?"

The other girl laughed. "Nah, let's turn them into spiders."

"Or better yet, let's cut them up into small pieces and dry the body parts for potions that require human ingredients," Fatin said.

Ahti waved his gun at the boys. "Are you having fun yet?"

Timmy shook his head. Chung didn't respond.

"I want to know what you guys were doing here in our castle," Ahti demanded.

Chung cleared his throat. "Would you believe we belong to this gang that has a strange initiation ceremony? Our mission was to hide under the bed of a stranger for a night."

Ahti went over to the couch and raised his arm like he was going to smack Chung in the face. "Wait a second. Aren't you the kid that lives next door?"

"Yeah. Actually we came over to borrow a cup of sugar, but since you weren't home, we decided to help ourselves."

"Did you think we keep the sugar under the bed, dung for brains?"

Chung grinned. "You know what they say: different strokes for different folks."

"I'm getting tired of your silly attempts to be funny. It's time for some straight answers. You seem to forget that we're the ones with the guns, and you guys are the ones with the runs."

"He does have a point," Timmy said. "What harm can it do to

tell them? I don't think they're guilty."

"Guilty of what?" Ahti asked.

"Terrorism. We thought you guys were Islamic terrorists plotting to self-detonate in a crowded mall or something."

Ahti looked up at the ceiling and laughed. "What made you think that?"

"We have a friend who—"

"Shut up, Timmy. We're not going there."

"What about this friend?"

"We don't have any friends."

"OK. That does it. I want these guys separated. We'll question them separately. I don't think this one is going to talk." He pointed at Chung. "And I don't think the other one can shut up without his buddy's support. Aubrey, take Mr. Tough Guy out in the kitchen, and I'll work on the chatty one out here. Mohana, you go with Aubrey."

"Sounds like fun. Come on, chink," Aubrey said, poking Chung in the back with his gun.

"I'm not Chinese; I'm Korean."

"Same thing. Maybe I'll start with the ancient Chinese water torture."

Timmy sat there all by himself waiting for the questions. Nobody said anything. He looked up from the floor where he'd been staring at a hole in the carpet, which already had enough holes to be considered air-conditioned. "You wouldn't really boil us in oil, would ya?"

"Don't be silly," Fatin said. "We don't have enough oil for that. I've always wanted to turn someone into a spider though."

* * *

Meanwhile, Joe and Amy stood knocking on the front door at Chung's house. The doorbell had already failed to summon anyone. Joe scratched his head as he looked at his watch. "I don't understand it. They said they'd be here waiting for us."

"Does it matter? The suspects are home now, so obviously the raid has to be called off."

"That's true." They started walking down the sidewalk. "Wait! What if they went without us?"

"You mean early?" Amy asked.

"Exactly."

"They'd have gotten a rude surprise when that strange car and the Pinto drove in just a couple of minutes ago."

"Again, right on the money."

"Yowser. What are we going to do?"

"First let's walk around the house and find out what we can see."

"It'll be dark soon."

"That's OK. It's easier to see into a lit house at night than during the daylight," Joe said.

"Sounds like you have some experience at this."

"I watch a lot of TV."

The couple strolled past the front of the house without being able to see anything. They turned left at the corner and walked to the alley, where they hung another left and approached the house from the back.

"Look at the fence! There's a board missing."

"It's not missing; it's standing up next to the opening."

"Yeah, but my point is that somebody skinny, like Timmy and Chung, could have squeezed through that hole."

"You don't think you could make it?"

"There's only one board out of place. It would take three missing boards for me to fit through there."

"I thought you weren't going to tell any more fat jokes."

"Sorry, Amy. It's just second nature now. I do it without thinking. Let's not worry about my sick sense of humor right now and instead take a peek through that hole."

They approached the fence, and Joe carefully poked his face partway through the opening, just enough so he could see the house.

"What do you see?"

"Not much. There are lights on, but the blinds are all closed, so I can't make anything out. Shhh!"

Ten seconds later Joe pulled his head back on Amy's side of the fence.

"A girl opened the back door and let a cat out. While she was holding the door open, I saw a guy with a gun."

"What was he doing?"

"Standing over Chung and gesturing wildly."

"Oh, my gosh. Should we call the police?"

"Normally, that would be the wise thing to do, but don't forget, Chung and Timmy broke into their house. The police are going to arrest them, not the real bad guys."

"That's true. So it's up to us to help."

"Looks like it."

"What's the plan?" Amy asked.

"I was hoping you'd have one."

"You're the guy."

"How come girls always want to be the planner until the time comes when the guy doesn't have a plan?"

Amy smiled. "One of those mysteries of life, perhaps."

"OK, let's think this through. We can't brute force them. I'm bigger than they are, but there are at least two of them and they have at least one gun. And there is at least one girl."

"Actually I counted three when they went in the house."

"Obviously we're outnumbered and outgunned, and it looks like outhoused."

"Outhoused?" Amy asked.

"Forget it. Not a term city girls know. It means we're in the...well, let me rephrase it to say 'out of luck'."

"What about a diversion?"

"Like what?"

"Maybe set their Pinto on fire?"

"Hello-o, do you know anything about Pintos and exploding gas tanks?"

"No."

"There's a reason that people never tailgate Pintos."

"How do you know so much? Oh, yeah, you watch a lot of TV. What plan can you dig up from a TV show you watched?"

Joe grimaced. "I don't watch *that* much TV!"

"What would Harry Potter do?"

"Send Peeves through the wall and scare the snot out of them."

"Or maybe Nearly Headless Nick would do the trick."

"Do I have to answer in rhyme?"

"If you're cool and are no fool."

"Sheesh. How about this? I'd don the invisibility cloak and in their eyes I'd poke."

"Pretty lame poem. Not a bad plan though, if you had the cloak," Amy said.

"Actually, Adam told me I need to take a serious and critical look at my affection for Harry Potter. So, probably we should look at different role models for figuring out how to rescue our friends."

"What would Jesus do?"

"That's more like it. What would he do?"

"Send a legion of angels to protect them from harm."

"I don't know any angels. Well, except for the one standing next to me. And I'm not sending her into danger," said Joe.

"First of all thanks for the compliment. However, let me inform you right now, I'm going where you're going, so you can ditch any ideas you have of ditching me."

"We'll see. In the meantime, let's pray."

The two sent up a petition to Heaven on behalf of their endangered comrades and then began the walk back to the front of the house. When they arrived, Amy said, "Did you figure out what we're going to try?"

"Only one idea came into my head."

"Can you get it out so I can see it?"

"It's pretty lame. I thought we'd just go up there and pretend we are looking for our missing friends and let slip that the police are on their way to investigate. That would persuade them, I hope, to not hurt them."

"You're right," Amy said.

"About what?"

"That is pretty lame."

"Go for it – if you have a better idea."

"If these guys aren't afraid of the police, this won't work. They maybe already called the police themselves," Amy said.

"If that's true, the only problem we have is the guys being in trouble with the law. If that isn't true, then we might save our buddies' lives. Worth a try and nothing to lose from what I can see."

"Whatever. Let's do it. I wouldn't want to hear a gunshot while we're standing here yakking," Amy said.

"Ditto. Hold my hand. I need some courage."

Like two lovers out for a romantic stroll the two teens approached the door with pounding hearts. "I don't think I'll need to knock on the door. They'll probably hear my knees knocking," Joe said.

Amy smiled. "Just remember that you're my hero." Joe didn't think it was possible but his heart started beating even faster.

* * *

Timmy was just pondering what it would be like to eat flies when a knock sounded on the door. Everyone looked up. The girl called Powaqwa went to the door and peered out the peephole. She turned around with an evil smile on her face. "Fatin, come answer the door and invite them in. Ahti, you have some more people to threaten with that gun."

He blinked and gave Timmy a push. "OK, Hiawatha. Get over by the wall and don't try anything stupid." Ahti positioned himself right behind Timmy so he could cover him with the gun as well as anyone who came in the door. He nodded to Fatin.

The girl opened the door. "Hi, come on in."

Joe stood there looking at her lightning bolt.

"Hello, are you coming in. We're letting in mosquitoes."

Joe finally answered. "No, thanks, we just wanted to alert you. A couple of our friends are missing. They left a note saying they were going to visit you."

"Oh, yes. They said you might be stopping by. That's why I asked you to come in. You think I'd just ask complete strangers to enter?"

Joe didn't know what to say. He never dreamed the occupants of the house would admit the two boys were inside. "That's really nice of you, but we can't stay. Could I talk to one of my friends for a minute?"

"Sure, come on in."

"No can do. My mother told me never go into strange houses."

Ahti poked Timmy in the back with the gun and pushed him forward. Fatin got out of the way.

"Hi, guys," Timmy said.

"Timmy! How you doing?"

"I've been better."

Ahti stepped right behind Timmy. "He'll stay alive, and so will you if you step into the house. Otherwise I'll be forced to shoot another pair of intruders. And I'll have four witnesses to prove it. So come on in and join the party."

Amy looked at Joe.

"Don't even think about running, fat boy. I could drink a cup of coffee before you could run out of range."

Joe sighed and nodded at Amy. When Timmy and Ahti stepped back to give them room, the two newcomers stepped into the house.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Powaqa said.

Amy whirled around in the direction of the voice.

"Roberta!"

"Not anymore. I'm now called 'Powaqa'. That means witch in one of the American Indian languages. I figure your friend, Sitting Duck, would appreciate the irony of that. All of the names we use are from the spiritual realm."

Joe came around the corner, and the door shut behind them.

"Hello, dough boy. Welcome to the revenge of the garbage," Roberta said.

"Do you know these guys, Powaqa?" Fatin asked.

"Does moss grow on the north side of a rolling stone?"

Everyone in the room stared at her.

"Maybe I didn't say that just right. Let me rephrase that. Yeah, I know these pukes very well, and I've been dreaming of telling

them how much I miss them. Thanks to the goddess of Mother Earth for delivering them to me." Roberta lit up a cigarette. "Why don't you have a seat on the couch, Mr. Pillsbury? I've always wanted to see how effective human flesh was at putting out a cigarette."

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that smoking is harmful to your health?" Joe asked.

Roberta smiled. "In this situation, I believe my smoking is going to be hazardous for you."

* * *

Shortly before the time for Chung and his team to spring into action, Pedro and EJ went down on their knees in prayer. After a few minutes, Pedro stopped right in the middle of a sentence. After the pause he finished the sentence and ended the prayer.

"EJ. I think there's trouble."

"Why do you think that?"

"I really felt it when we were praying."

"You're turning into Adam."

"No, I'm not even close to Adam, but I am starting to feel like God's Spirit is communicating with me at times. I think this is one of them."

He picked up the phone and dialed.

"Who you calling?" EJ asked.

"Adam. Who else?"

He got an answering machine. After leaving a message asking Adam to call, he hung up with a frown.

"I was hoping Adam could confirm my thoughts. Doesn't look like that is going to happen, and I don't think we can delay. Unfortunately, I have to bring Dad into this. There's no alternative. You stay home and keep praying. We'll give you a call from Dad's cell phone if everything is OK. If you don't hear from us within thirty minutes after we leave, you call the police and tell them about Chung's neighbors. Got it?"

"I got it. Do I call 911?"

"That's how you get the police."

"Thirty minutes and 911. I got it. Just don't throw any more numbers at me," said EJ.

Pedro walked into the kitchen where his dad was having a snack and reading Harry Potter.

"Hi, Pedro. Looking for a bite to eat?"

"No, actually I'm looking for a ride."

"Taxi time again?"

"Just you and me this time. It's urgent. Sorry to bother you like

this."

"What's up?" Sal asked.

"It's a long story. How about I tell you on the way over there?"

"Are you sure this can't wait?"

"Dad, someone might die if we don't arrive in time."

"Sheesh. I had no clue it was that serious. Suppose my snack can wait till I get back. Let me put my milk in the fridge, and we can take off."

"Perfect, Dad. Make sure you bring your cell phone."

On the way to the car, Sal said, "This better be good."

"Well, Dad, I'm not going to promise you it's good, but it will definitely be interesting."

After hearing the whole story Sal said, "Let me get this straight. You felt God was telling you that your friends, who happen to be involved in a criminal activity, are in trouble and you're supposed to rescue them?"

"Sounds crazy to me to when I hear it like that," Pedro said.

"Glad I'm not alone on this one. So, what's the plan of action?"

"You're not going to like that answer either."

"Somehow I was afraid of that. Lay it on me."

"I feel God is going to take care of it. I just need to show up and speak out in faith and authority."

"Authority?"

"That's the word I heard."

"You heard God talking to you, or maybe it was an angel?"

"I didn't literally hear it. The voice wasn't audible like yours right now. It was more like someone speaking into my thoughts."

"Excuse me for pointing this out, but how do you know you're not speaking into your thoughts?"

"I don't know for sure. We might arrive and find out nothing is wrong, and it was all my imagination. That would be nice. If it's not, it means that I'm receiving messages from the Lord. How cool would that be?" Pedro said.

"I have to admit that would be awesome. It would make it a lot easier dealing with the challenges of life if God was a personal coach, teammate, and cheerleader wrapped into one package."

"That's an interesting way of looking at it, Dad. It makes it easier when you can state an idea in sports terms."

"Yeah. You're right. Maybe God planted that thought in my head."

"Maybe. Oh, there's the house now, Dad. The bad guys are home. There's another car there as well. Drive on by and park in front of the house after it."

Sal slowed down and took a long look at the house that had been the cause of all the worry. He followed instructions and pulled the car into a spot along the curb.

"You stay here. If I'm not out here in fifteen minutes, call the police," Pedro said.

"I'm supposed to just sit here while you walk into the teeth of danger?"

"No. Start praying!"

"Hold on I can't –"

Pedro, ignoring his father, shut the door gently and began his walk to Chung's house. His attempts to summon a resident via the doorbell and knocking went unanswered. *Looks like my premonition is accurate so far.* He pushed the gate open at the house next door and walked up to the doorstep. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Lord, this is about the time I expect you to show up. I ask now that you cover me with the blood of Jesus." He knocked on the door.

* * *

Roberta had just finished her cigarette and was standing over Joe laughing. While she had been sucking the tobacco smoke down into her lungs, Ahti had ordered Timmy to tie Joe's hands and feet. The helpless boy sat, watching the cigarette moving toward his forehead.

"Now don't go moving your head, you big cow, or I might poke this thing in your eye instead of branding your forehead with the sign of the lightning bolt."

Joe sat still, awaiting his red badge of courage.

Just before the hot ember met Joe's flesh, Pedro's knock startled everyone in the room.

"I hate it when that happens," Roberta said.

"It might be the cops," Ahti said. "Check it out."

Roberta went to the door and peeked through the peephole again. She turned and gave Ahti hand signals to cover the door with his gun. Aubrey kept the rest of the prisoners under control during the process.

Roberta opened the door and threw her cigarette, which was just about ready to burn her fingers, onto the step. "Why, if it isn't precious little EJ's big brother. Come into my parlor said the spider maker to the fly."

Pedro noticed the hairs on his arms were doing a hulu dance again. "I think that verse goes 'said the spider to the fly.'"

"But that wouldn't be accurate in this case. You see, you are the fly, but I'm going to let one of your friends play the role of the

spider. Would you step on that cigarette for me and put it out?" As he complied with her request, she grabbed his arm and pulled him into the doorway. He was just about to resist when he saw a gun aimed at his nose.

Pedro grinned weakly. "Nice parlor you've got here. Looks like you're having a party. Sorry I had to crash it."

"Don't worry, dude. You're not crashing it. You might even be the death of the party," Ahti said.

"I hope you don't greet all of your guests like that. Might cut down on the number of people coming to your fiestas." He looked around the room. "Looks like you already have plenty of reasons to dissuade them from coming."

"Shut up! Get over there with your homies."

Pedro went over by the couch. He looked down at Joe and shook his head. "Looks like you're tied up this evening."

"Did you come over here to crack jokes or rescue us?"

"The thought of him rescuing anybody is the biggest joke I've heard tonight. He looks like a mama's boy to me," Aubrey said.

"Wrong, Aubrey," Roberta said. "Poor little boy lost his mom a while back. Maybe we could have a séance and speak to her. Would you like that, EJ's brother, whatever your face is?"

"It's Pedro, and you can't contact my mother. Your séances might communicate with someone, but it's not the people you think. You're just being led down a false trail by demons."

"Who does this guy think he is?" Ahti asked. "We gotta have some duct tape around here somewhere that will shut him up. Aubrey, go find some."

When Aubrey walked through the door, the cat came running into the room. Pedro looked right into the animal's eyes. Its back went up like a U and the feline made a mad dash up the stairs.

"I don't think your cat likes me. So, Roberta—"

"My name is Powaga."

"Yeah. So, Roberta, I understand you were going to cast a spell on me and turn me into a fly."

"That's right, bean eater."

"I'm waiting. Give it your best shot."

"You asked for it, turkey." She uttered some unrecognizable words and pointed at Pedro.

"Funny I don't feel like landing on some roadkill yet. Does it take a while for these spells to take effect?"

"I'm just a rookie at this. I'm probably in over my head here."

Fatin stepped over closer to Pedro. "I'm not a rookie. Let me have a shot at him." She uttered some more gibberish and stood

there looking around the room.

Pedro shook his head. "You know, guys, I think you should do some real magick. Why don't you turn that Pinto in the driveway into a real car? Or maybe into a real horse?"

Ahti strode over to Pedro's side. "I'm sick of this garbage. You're going down now. Fatin, hold this gun. If he wants magick, I'll give him a double shot of the mother's love."

Ahti got down on his knees and lifted his arms skyward. "You are the Great Goddess, the Queen of Heaven, You, Goddess, I adore. I call upon Your power, come. Make what I ask to be accomplished, and draw my thanks, Mother Earth, as you silence one of your enemies. Hear me, please, and favor me. This I ask of You, Holy Mother." Ahti then took his turn uttering a spell.

Pedro began to twist and turn and a look of agony came over his face. Moans came out of his mouth. He winked at Timmy as he turned toward the couch. He dropped to his knees, got back up and staggered toward Fatin. Suddenly he brought his hand down on the wrist that held the gun, forcing it from her hand. Timmy scooted across the floor and scooped it up. He whirled in a 360-degree circle pointing it at everybody in the room at some point.

Ahti, who had remained on his knees in prayer, looked up as he discovered Timmy had aimed the gun in his direction.

"Be careful with that kid, it might go off."

"Then you better be the careful one. I wouldn't want my finger to slip on the trigger because you reached to pick your nose."

The rest of the God Squad that could move hadn't remained idle. Amy was busy untying the binds on Joe, and Chung picked up a metal tennis racket that was leaning against the wall.

"What are you planning on doing with that?" Pedro asked.

"Have you ever stopped to think what kind of a redecoration job all the strings would do to a guy's face at about sixty miles an hour? Now girls, I suggest that you come sit on the couch. We got the seats warm for you. I'd advise you not to warn Aubrey. You might wish to have your nose tilted up such a little bit, but I'm afraid this tennis racket might overdo the effect slightly. You might end up breathing out of your eyebrow."

Using the bindings that had been removed from his own body, Joe tied Ahti up snugly. He was just finishing the job when they heard Aubrey returning. Pedro motioned Timmy to hide behind the door. Joe hid behind the couch.

"I got the duct tape. Had to go all the way to the basement to get it. It ought to taste really gross. Where's the fat boy? And where's—"

Timmy poked the pistol in Aubrey's back. "Drop the gun, slowly, or else."

"Or else what?"

"Or else I get to find out if this gun makes more noise than your Pinto, and if your back is bulletproof."

"I don't think you have enough guts to pull that trigger. And if you do, you'll probably hit one of your friends instead."

"I wouldn't count on the second part, buddy. I have a boy scout merit badge in shooting."

Aubrey was trying to prepare himself to turn quickly when a tennis racket made contact with his arm just above the wrist. He screamed. Chung was the one to scoop up the gun this time.

"You should have used the duct tape on your own mouth," Timmy said. He went into a John Wayne imitation. "That scream nearly parted my hair, pilgrim."

Joe popped up from behind the couch. "Here's the fat boy. Chung, could I borrow that tennis racket for a minute?" Chung handed it to him. He walked over to Aubrey. "Would you like the feel of cold steel, or will you kneel?" He turned to Amy. "How'd you like that rhyme?" She gave him a thumbs-up.

Joe put a finger to his lips. "Wait. Don't kneel yet, Aubrey. Please walk over here by the lamp and kneel down beside it."

"What are you going to do, sicko?"

"I wouldn't be calling people names if I were in your position, which I was a few minutes ago. Drop the duct tape on the floor, or I'll find out if your left wrist is more pain resistant than the right one."

The roll of duct tape hit the floor immediately. Joe grabbed it and began winding it around Aubrey and the huge floor lamp. When he had the man tied up like a calf in the rodeo, he tore off a small piece and placed it across the man's mouth. "Here, just so you know what it feels like. It's probably not too bad right now. I'd hate to be you when the police tear it off though."

Pedro's hands flew up to his head. "Oh, my gosh. I forgot all about the police. My dad was going to call them if I wasn't back in fifteen minutes. That was twenty minutes ago. I think we're going to have some more guests for this party."

"Nothing wrong with that. Maybe we can have the new arrivals help take out the trash afterward," Joe said. He and Amy dissolved into laughter. Pedro, Timmy, and Chung smiled.

A knock on the door interrupted the hilarity. "I'd guess that would be my dad about now. He probably called the cops and then rushed in here to do what he could."

He went to the door and peeked out. He nodded his head vigorously, almost like a bobble-head doll. The door opened for Sal, but no one stood there to greet him. He looked in shock at two boys standing there with guns and one with a tennis racket in one hand and a girl in the other. The sight of a man duct-taped to a floor lamp caused his eyebrows to go skyward.

Sal had never met any of Pedro's new friends, so he wasn't sure what the score was in the room. "Is Pedro here?"

Pedro leaped from behind the door causing his dad to jump. "Do you have an invitation to this party?"

Sal closed his eyes. "Remind me that I owe you one."

"One what?"

"One very dirty practical joke, pulled upon you at the most unsuspecting and vulnerable time of your life."

"What are you doing here, Dad?"

"I came to rescue you."

"From what?"

The sounds of a car pulling up in the driveway and another in front of the house caused Sal and Pedro both to look.

"Ahh. From the police it looks like. Stay here. I'll go explain to them why your friends are standing there holding guns and the occupants of the house are room decorations."

"Good idea, *padre mío*."

Sal walked down the sidewalk, identified himself, and gave the police the lowdown. Despite his insistence that everything was cool, they came in with their guns drawn.

Chung stood at the door holding out a tennis racket toward them, two pistols balanced on the strings. The first policeman through the door relieved him of his balancing act by dropping the guns into plastic bags.

One of the policemen looked at Sal when they got into the light. "Hey, you look familiar. Don't you work at the window in the post office?"

"Guilty as charged."

"OK, who are the occupants of this house?"

A muffled noise came forth from Aubrey's muzzled face. A similar noise came from behind the couch where Ahti had also received a gluey silencer.

One of the officers went over to Aubrey and looked him over. "Red Green would be proud of the imaginative use of duct tape here." He reached down and pulled the tape off Aubrey's mouth, causing another scream.

"Ooh!" Joe said. "Can I call them or what?"

"Arrest all of these kids!" he yelled through numb lips. "They invaded our home."

The policeman turned to Pedro. "Is that true?"

"Well, officer. Let me put it this way. First of all, that's my dad over there. He drove me over here because I thought there was trouble. I came up to the door and knocked." He pointed to Roberta. "This young lady, and I use the term loosely, pulled me into the house." He now pointed at Ahti. "That gentleman over there invited me to stay, using the barrel of one of those guns you put in the baggies."

"That doesn't sound like invasion to me. What about you?" he asked Joe.

"Pretty similar. We got the same Smith-Wesson invite, compliments of Ahti. By the way, that's a name that means god of Magick."

The policeman scratched his head. "How about you, young lady?"

"I was with him." Amy pointed to Joe. "We had a couple's invitation."

"How about you?" he asked Mohana.

"They're with the bad guys," Pedro said.

"Not exactly true," she said. "We were kidnapped. They brought us over here and had sex with us last week. They were going to do the same again tonight. Their plans got derailed because those two boys were hiding under a bed upstairs when we got home."

"Ah hah. So only two boys did the invading. Wait a second, young lady. You said you'd been kidnapped?"

"That's what I said."

"So last week you were kidnapped and then you went home and then tonight you got re-kidnapped."

"Yeah, kinda."

"Sounds to me like you came of your own free will."

"Well, maybe kidnapped was too strong of a word. Did I mention we're only fifteen?"

"Well, well, well. Now we have a real crime here. What's your story?" he asked Fatin.

"Pretty much what she said. These guys picked us up on the street last week and showed us a good time in their bedroom, and tonight they came back for seconds."

"And you?" he asked Roberta.

"I ain't talkin'."

The cop went behind the couch and pulled the duct tape off

Ahti's lips. He held back his scream.

"Have you ever heard the term jailbait?" the officer asked him.

"Those girls are lying. We never had sex with them."

Chung spoke up. "Officer, can I say something?"

"Why not? Everybody else had a chance."

"That man is the one lying. When we were under the bed, he asked Fatin if it was going to be as good as last week."

"That's true, your honor. I heard it, too," Timmy said.

"So now we finally know who did the invading." The officer started laughing. "Sorry. I've never been called 'your honor' before. Let me sort this out. We have two underage females who claim to have participated in consensual sexual acts with adults, and one who won't squeal. We have two minors who admit to breaking into this house. Am I missing anything here?"

Timmy waved his hand like he was in school.

"Yes, son?"

"Well, your...I mean officer, we didn't exactly break in. The door wasn't locked. We just opened it and walked in."

"I'm afraid that's still criminal trespassing. You never did tell me why you did that."

"We thought these guys were Islamic terrorists. This whole adventure was to find out if there was enough evidence for you guys to take action."

"We're not even Muslims. We're Hindus!" Ahti shouted.

Timmy shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry."

"How old are you, son?"

"Fourteen. So is my friend, Chung."

Chung raised his hand. "That's me."

The policeman turned to his partner. "What are we going to do here? I feel like hauling everyone down to the police station and sorting it out down there."

"Clearly the boys involved in the break-in are minors. And the two gentlemen that live here are not minors, but the women in question are. I say we get the boys' personal info and send them home. Let's have the other squad car take the girls home and inform their parents. We'll haul the men to jail."

"Whatever. I'm getting a headache thinking about it. It's worse than the *Who's on First* routine by Abbot and Costello. OK, I want the two young men who entered this residence over here, now." Timmy and Chung obeyed, and the policeman recorded their names, addresses and phone numbers. "We'll be in contact with your parents."

"By the way, I almost forgot," Chung said. "I think there are

some drugs upstairs."

"Why am I not surprised? Show me. Hey, partner, you want to start unwrapping the present attached to the lamp? Looks like it might take a while."

The two went upstairs and returned a few minutes later. The policeman carried something in a large plastic bag.

The other officer was still trying to untie Ahti when they returned. The leader of the two unwrapped Aubrey and slapped cuffs on him. He stood over his buddy and watched him rotate around the lamp until the last strand of tape fell off. The feeling of freedom was short lived for Aubrey as a set of handcuffs went on immediately.

"Let's go, gentleman. I'll be right back with some more officers to take you ladies home." They herded the two detainees toward their squad car.

"But what about my dad's car?" Fatin whined.

"How did it get here?"

"Ahti drove it over."

"I guess you'll have to ask your dad to drive it home."

"But then he'll know we took it."

"Yeah. I see your problem. Maybe you could wait until Ahti gets out of jail and have him drive it home? That'll probably be about 2050."

Fatin buried her face in her arms. "I'm busted big-time."

"Yeah, Sounds like it." The officers continued on their way to the car.

Timmy walked over to where Pedro stood near the couch. "Hey, Pedro, what caused you to show up tonight? That wasn't part of the plan."

"You're telling me? I have to say that God laid it on my heart. The sense of trouble and the word 'GO' was so strong, I had to obey."

Roberta and the other girls rolled their eyes. "Please, take that garbage talk about God out of here."

Pedro looked at Roberta. "You don't believe in God, do you?"

"What was your first clue?"

"Even after your spells failed to do anything, you're willing to cling to magical promises."

"Like I said earlier, I'm just a rookie at this stuff. It'll come with practice and experience. I'll still get my revenge on you and Joe and Amy."

"No, you won't." The authority in his voice startled the girls. A funny look came into his eyes. "God sent me over here to speak in

power and authority. I've not done that yet. It is clear the time has arrived right now."

"Speak, boy, speak!" Roberta said. Despite the predicament of the other girls, they laughed.

"Roberta Hannah Givens, you are oppressed by a demon of death."

She gasped. "How did you know my middle name? Nobody knows my middle name because I use a fake one."

"Joe and Chung. I want you to hold Roberta down."

"Wait, you can't do that. Take your hands off of me." The two boys did as requested. Roberta began to squirm.

"In the name of Jesus I command you spirit of death to come out." He continued to speak in authority.

Roberta shrieked and started to flail. Joe and Chung had to exert all of their strength to keep her down. Timmy ran over and held her feet together.

"I plead the blood of Jesus over Roberta's spirit, soul, and body."

A howl like that of a wild animal escaped from Roberta's lips and she went limp. Timmy let go of her legs and got up. Joe and Chung kept their grasp for a little longer but soon saw there was no more resistance. Roberta's eyelids fluttered and her eyes flew open.

"What happened?" she asked.

Two policemen entered the house. "What's all the commotion?"

"Nothing," Pedro answered. "One of the girl's was letting off a little...."

"Steam?"

"Yeah, that's it. A little pent-up steam," Pedro said.

"Are you girls ready to go home?" one of the policemen asked.

The other two girls nodded vigorously and jumped up. They flashed a look of disbelief at Roberta and Pedro as they went out.

Roberta got up slowly. Amy went over and gave her a big hug. Tears were coming down her cheeks. Amy wiped one off with her finger and then rubbed it on the lightning bolt on Roberta's forehead. The mark rubbed off instantly.

"Call me tomorrow, OK, Roberta?"

"Sure, Amy. I'd like that. Maybe you can tell me what happened here tonight. Everything seems like a dream that I'm just now waking up from. I'm not sure what's real and what isn't."

"I'll fill you in on all the details. Good night."

"Talk to you tomorrow," Roberta said.

They all watched her walk out the door.

The policeman jolted them from their thoughts. "Now, gentlemen, I hate to break up the party, but I understand that none of you live here, so you need to vacate the premises."

They all walked out the front door while the policeman locked the back door. He came out the front shortly afterward and locked it with a key that he had found. The members of the God Squad and Mr. Morales stood out on the front sidewalk.

"Hey, Pedro."

"Yeah, Amy."

"Will you tell me what happened here, this last part, so I can explain it to Roberta tomorrow?"

"Sure. As soon as I figure it out myself."

"Let me help you," Sal said.

"Dad. I forgot you were here."

"That's flattering as heck. Anyway, you were a little preoccupied. What you just did is called an exorcism. You cast a demon out of Roberta."

"That's what I thought, but I was having trouble believing it myself."

"I've read about them, but I've never been involved with one."

"She got pretty noisy. Or should I say the demon got pretty noisy?"

"That wasn't bad compared to some I've read about. This one was pretty quick and quiet. And now I'm totally blown away," Sal said.

"Maybe I'd better get you home, Dad."

He laughed. "OK. Who needs a ride home?"

"Not me," Chung said. "I live next door."

"Me either," Timmy said. "I'm only a block down the street. Thanks, anyway."

"We'll take one, Mr. Morales," Joe said. "I think we've had enough excitement for tonight. It's getting close to our curfew time too, so we'd really appreciate a lift."

"You got it. Let's get going. This was too much excitement for me for one night."

They were almost to the car when a vehicle pulled up next to them.

"Pedro!"

Pedro turned and looked at the car.

"Adam?"

The car door opened and Adam jumped out and ran over to

his friends. "Are you guys all right?"

"We're fine," Pedro said. "And Chung's neighbors will be moving into a cozy jail cell."

"No kidding?"

"None at all right now."

"I sensed there was danger. Unfortunately, I was with my dad on a visit out of town. We just got back now. I've been praying like crazy. My spirit was really agitated. I knew something was going on over here, but I didn't know exactly what."

"Just a another beautiful evening in the neighborhood," Chung said.

Everyone except Adam laughed.

"Take it away, Mr. Rogers. I wanna get the lowdown on every single thing that happened, but not tonight. I convinced my dad to stop by because it was an emergency, but now I see that all is well. See you on the bus tomorrow."

Adam ran back to the car and jumped in.

"Hard to believe we have to get up and go to school in a few hours. After tonight, life will seem pretty boring in comparison," Timmy said.

"Yeah, it's not every day you look death in the face," Chung said. "Maybe boring isn't so bad after all."

After dropping off Joe and Amy, the Morales men continued home for a well deserved and needed night of sleep.

"So these people at this house tonight were all witches?"

"That's right, Dad."

"Did you ask them how they got into it?"

"Just the girls. They started out reading Harry Potter. Later they hit the Internet and hooked up with some practicing witches online. I think the guys had been witches or warlocks for a long time. Funny, Adam knew that house contained danger but couldn't say exactly in what form. He was right, but we got off on the wrong track thinking they were terrorists."

"Sounds like a little track workout."

"What do you mean?"

"You were high jumping to conclusions."

"Ooh. That's bad, even for you."

"Yeah, probably. That exorcism tonight was a like a splash of cold water in the face."

"Sorry I got you wet, Dad."

"Don't be. I needed to be shaken a little. I can see now that Barbara has been pulling me along in her wake. I compromised my principles and then almost let her sweet talk them out of me

altogether."

"I know, Dad. I was far enough away from it that I could see it happening."

"And you didn't say anything."

"I didn't know exactly how to approach it. You know what you said about kids usually doing the opposite of what they're told?"

"Yeah."

"I think adults do the same thing. You just had to figure this out for yourself."

"True. I think I'd better take that Harry Potter book back. I'm not quite done with it. I did get the part where Ginny is possessed by what's his face."

"Voldemort."

"Yeah, except he went under a different name when he was younger. Anyway, I'll have to explain to Barbara that I didn't finish, and I don't want to hear any more about Harry."

"She might drop you like a bad habit."

"True. I'll have to take that chance. If she loves me, she'll make an effort to see this from my side. If not, I guess it's time to move on."

"I think you're right, Dad."

"Yeah. But that doesn't make it any easier."

Chapter 11

Friday afternoon and the first football game of the season for Lincoln Middle School arrived. The team chattered noisily about the approaching game as they strapped on their pads and covered them up with pants and jerseys. The God Squad members dressed in a group.

"Hey, Joe," Pedro said.

"Yeah?"

"Sorry for bringing up this topic, but are you losing weight, by any chance?"

"I have to admit there is less of me to love."

The boys all laughed.

"Are you on a diet or something?" Timmy asked.

"Something like that. I'm still eating three hearty meals a day, but I'm not doing any snacking. Instead of eating couch-potato chips and watching TV, I've been going for long walks with Amy and helping her with her homework and stuff."

"That's all?"

"I've started eating healthier foods. I'm eating more fruits and vegetables and fewer fatty foods. I feel great. Now if I could only get thinned down enough so I can be quick enough on the football field to get into a game, I'll be set."

"Keep at it. You'll get there," Adam said.

"Thanks, Adam. Coming from you that means a lot. Of course, even if I was good, I might not get to play because of our prayer activities."

"That's true. However, if we get the whole football team into our prayer circle, the coach won't have much choice. We've had a bunch of guys join us since the word of our little adventure with the witches made the rounds."

"That's true. I wonder who spread the story," Pedro said. "I didn't tell anybody." He looked at his friends.

"I'm afraid I told one of my buddies," Timmy said.

Joe went red in the face. "Me too."

Chung let out a sigh. "At least I wasn't the only one. I'm guilty too."

"It's no big deal," Adam said. "Maybe God wanted the story on the streets to influence people's lives. So don't feel bad."

"The only problem I see with it is that people are treating me funny right now. I have a suspicion it has something to do with Roberta," Pedro said.

"Yeah, you're a celebrity," Chung said. "Not many people can claim to know someone who cast out a demon."

"But I didn't do it, God did."

"Right on, brother," Adam said. "Don't ever forget that. If we start thinking we're doing it and we're something special, our ministry days are over. We start promoting ourselves instead of Christ."

"I'll try," Pedro said.

"It's not easy to resist. The pride of man is really hard to overcome. You always need to have someone to keep you accountable and down to earth."

"I think you're doing a fine job of that."

"I hope so. I need the same from you. And when you and I are no longer together, you'll need to find someone else to be your partner in ministry."

Pedro nodded. "Joe, do you have any idea what's going on with Roberta?"

"Yeah. Amy talks to her every day. She's a totally different person. I actually like her now. She wants to visit the church on Sunday and find out more about God."

"Cool. That's the kind of news I like to hear."

The whistle blew and the team gathered together, waiting for the coach's signal to take the field. As the God Squad trotted past the coach, he summoned them to his side with a finger wave. "What a novelty. You guys get to come to football without running laps. You probably won't be doing any running today except in pre-game warm-ups. Have fun boys."

"At least one person seems unimpressed with your supernatural deeds," Chung said.

"You got that right. I wonder what makes a person like him tick. Why does he have to keep us out of the game and then rub our faces in it too?" Pedro asked.

"Eternal mystery," replied Adam. "Man's inhumanity to man. The opposite of the golden rule."

Pedro and Adam watched the entire first half from the bench, as they expected. The opponents racked up four touchdowns while the home team failed to score at all. The visitors weren't very successful trying to kick the extra points, making only one of four attempts. Thus the score was 25-0 when they gathered at one end of the field at halftime.

The coach was enraged. He bellowed at them generally for about five minutes, telling them how pathetic they were as a team. Then he started targeting problem areas and individuals.

"The way the offense is playing right now we might not score all year! I swear this unit reminds me of the joke about the team that heard a train whistle and thought it was halftime. They ran off the field and the other team scored – four plays later. That's how you guys look out there. Like a bunch of girls."

He walked over to the quarterback. "Krueger, you're killing us out there. You've fumbled twice now and you couldn't hit water falling out of a boat with your pass attempts. Do I need to stand out there and hold your hand when you're taking the center snap? Two of those touchdowns on the scoreboard are your fault. You gotta do better the second half."

"It ain't gonna happen."

"What? What did you say?" The coach ran over and stood toe to toe with his young quarterback.

"I'm not going out there the second half. Pedro is lots better than me and everybody on the team knows it. The only reason you're not playing him is because he does his prayer thing and you don't like it."

"You mind your own business. I'm the boss here and you're the slave...I mean player. You do what I tell you to. Understand?"

"I understand, but I'm not going out there."

"Fine! Fine! You're off the team. Get outta here. We don't need any cancer on this team eating away from the inside."

The young boy started walking to the locker room. Two other players joined him. The coach just flung his hands in the air toward them. "Good riddance to bad rubbish. OK, Burleson, I want you to go in at quarterback."

"Coach, I'm not even as good as Krueger. And you might want to know that I joined the prayer circle this week."

The coach looked at the sky and clenched his jaw to keep further emotion from spewing out of his mouth. The jaw dike didn't hold back the flow and a torrent of four letter words spewed out.

The assistant coach walked up to Darwin and grabbed his arm. "Coach, come over here, and let's discuss this in private."

The two men got out of earshot of the players.

"So, what is it you want to say that the players can't hear?"

"Coach, you've got to calm down. These are just kids, not NFL players who earn their living, and yours, by winning ball games. We're supposed to teach these kids fundamentals, good sportsmanship, and allow them to have some fun. Winning is just

the frosting on the cake."

"You want to finish this sermon ASAP. There's only a few minutes left till the second half starts."

"OK, if you don't want to listen to reason, here's the deal. After the game today, I'm going to tell the principal everything that went on out here. He'll be replacing either you or me as a coach. I'm not going to work under these conditions. The principal might decide that the kids shouldn't have to either. So either get your head on straight and do this right or find out which one of us will be hanging up our whistle tomorrow."

Coach Darwin looked at the clock. One minute remained on the scoreboard clock. He stormed back toward the players, who flinched when they saw that his anger level had increased since his last tantrum.

"OK. Listen up. We gotta get back to the sideline. Morales in at quarterback. Barnet, I want you in as one wide receiver. I want that Korean kid in as the other wide receiver."

"You mean me, Coach?" Chung asked.

"Are there any other Korean receivers on the team?"

"No, sir. My name is Chung, by the way." He strapped on his helmet.

"Yeah, whatever. Let's go. We get the ball first this half. We need a score or it's over."

The team ran over to their sideline with much less enthusiasm than they had before the game. As the teams lined up for the kickoff, the coach approached Pedro.

"OK, Morales. This is your chance to show me you've got the right stuff. On the first play from scrimmage I want a 98 Z stop and go. Understand?"

"That's where the Z receiver on the right side runs at out pattern, I fake a throw to him, and he turns upfield and runs down the sideline."

"That's it. It should be open. Make a good throw and Barnet might score, if the line gives you time to throw."

The coach wandered away to talk to Adam. Pedro bowed his head. *Lord, I wouldn't mind a little help right now.*

The kickoff team fumbled the ball but managed to fall on it to keep possession. Pedro trotted out to the huddle and called the play authoritatively. He looked over the defense. On the snap count Pedro felt the ball smack into his hands; he dropped back and found the laces. Meanwhile, Adam went downfield five yards and broke to the sideline. When Pedro faked the throw to him, the defensive back came up fast to make the breakup or interception.

Adam blew past him down the sideline.

Pedro's pass wasn't perfect; Adam had to stand and wait for it, but he had gotten so far behind the defensive back he was able to make the catch. The DB had recovered and was catching up with the wide receiver. As soon as he had tucked the ball away, Adam put on a burst of speed. The DB threw himself at the faster boy as he began to pull away, and he just grazed one of Adam's legs, causing him to stumble. Somehow he kept his balance and motored down the field away from the safety, who had come over to help.

The Tigers were on the scoreboard. The hometown fans, who had something to cheer about for the first time all day, went bonkers. The coach pumped his fist in the air and screamed, "All right!" as he raised two fingers in the air.

A running back brought the play from the sideline. It was an option run where Pedro would hand it off, keep it himself, or pitch to a back trailing the play. After taking the snap, Pedro started to his right. He saw there was no hole for the fullback, so he kept it. There were two men on the outside who could stop them. Pedro faked the pitch and the man who had him covered went for the fake. Pedro cut up inside and danced into the end zone. 25-8. Only twenty seconds had elapsed off the clock.

"OK, defense, we gotta stop them. We're back in this ball game if we can hold them here. I want Morales at cornerback, Barnett at outside linebacker, and that Indian kid at safety."

"His name is Timmy, Coach," Pedro said.

"Whose name?"

"The Indian kid."

"Timmy, huh? I'll try to remember."

Pedro nodded.

The kickoff team made the tackle at the forty-yard line, and the defensive unit that wasn't on the kickoff ran out.

After three plays the opponents had only picked up seven yards. The Lincoln punt returner lost five yards after he caught it and ran backward trying to get around the defenders. His coach threw his clipboard on the ground.

Pedro eyeballed the players leaning in to hear his call. "OK, guys. Let's take this thing down the field and score. Everybody carries out his assignment, and we succeed." He called the play that the coach sent in, a run by the fullback. They broke huddle, and Pedro looked over the defense. The man whom Adam had just beaten for a touchdown was fifteen yards off him. The coach didn't want his quarterback changing the plays that were called by

him, but Pedro and Adam had worked out their own signals, just in case. Without much time to think about it, Pedro decided this was the perfect time to risk irritating the coach and flashed a signal in Adam's direction.

On the sideline the coach was scratching his head. "What's he doing? What *is* he doing? Can anyone tell me what he's doing?" Nobody answered.

As soon as the ball was snapped, Pedro rose up and threw it toward Adam, leading him just enough that he caught it in stride. He was at full speed against a defensive back who was on his heels. Adam made a cut to the middle of the field. The defensive back committed himself to that direction, and Adam cut back hard to the right just in time so that the DB had no chance to counter react. Adam was loose down the sideline for another long touchdown.

"Nice call, Coach," the assistant coach said as he watched Adam run into the end zone.

Coach took off his cap and wiped his brow before putting it back on. "Yeah...thanks."

He held up two fingers again and sent in the play.

Pedro smiled when he heard the play call. He conveyed it to the rest of the offensive unit and they lined up. On taking the snap the play developed exactly like the last extra points attempt. This time, however, Pedro dropped back from the line of scrimmage. All eleven defenders had pursued to the right. The tight end on the left had thrown a block and then drifted into the left side of the end zone. Pedro stopped and lofted a pass in this direction. The closest defender was fifteen yards away. It was like playing catch in the backyard. The tight end secured the ball and the score was 25-16.

"Same defensive unit as last time," the coach yelled as they huddled on the sideline before the kickoff. "If the other team punts, Barnet, I want you to be the punt returner." Adam nodded.

The opponents had more success this possession. They picked up three first downs. On third down Timmy made a diving deflection of a pass to end the drive and the visitors were forced to punt. Adam took the punt and started to his right. After eight yards, he made a quick cut to the left against the grain. The defensive players who had congregated on the right to stop Adam either ran into each other trying to change directions or encountered a Tiger blocker with a perfect angle. Adam broke the tackle of the two players who had a shot at him and rumbled into the end zone for a third time. All of the Tigers, including the coach,

were jumping up and down on the sideline.

The cheering stopped when they realized a yellow flag lay on the ground. A holding call erased the touchdown and moved the ball deep into Tiger territory. The coach's clipboard survived another meeting with the turf.

When the offense lined up for their first play after the penalty, Pedro discovered that Adam was double-covered. They began to run the ball with success; Pedro making some key plays on a bootleg, an option, and a quarterback draw. They drove the ball down the field inside the redzone to the opponent's sixteen-yard line on the final play of the third quarter.

On the first play of the fourth quarter, the coach called a screen pass. Pedro made a perfect throw and the wall of blockers formed in front of the runner. He was three yards from the goal line and fighting to reach pay dirt when one of the defenders punched the ball out of his hands. A mad scramble for the ball followed. Several players on both teams had it squirt out from under them. Finally one of the visitors captured the elusive pigskin, and the scoring threat was turned away. This time the clipboard broke in half when it encountered the ground at warp speed.

"Come on defense. We gotta have the ball back."

The visitors moved the ball again. Timmy finally stopped their drive with a beautiful interception at the Tiger thirty-yard line. Unfortunately, a lot of time had run off the clock. On the first play, the coach called for some trickery. Before the ball was snapped, Adam went into motion back toward the quarterback. Pedro took the snap and rolled to the right. He pitched the ball to Adam going left. All of the defenders flowed to the left to stop Adam. Suddenly he stopped, raised the ball and threw a left-handed rainbow back toward the right sideline. After pitching to Adam, Pedro had taken off downfield and now stood by himself near the Tiger bench. He gathered in the pass and won the footrace to the end zone, narrowing the gap to 25-22.

As expected, Pedro saw the two raised fingers on the coach's hand. He was a little winded from his long run, but the play called was the option. This time the hole was open for the fullback. Pedro left the ball in his breadbasket and carried out a fake as if he had kept it. Unfortunately, the fullback didn't secure the ball and it dropped on the turf where a defender fell on it.

"It's OK. It's OK," the coach yelled when the offense came to the sideline. "We can still get them with one touchdown. We just need to get the ball back. I don't think they can stop our offense."

One of the defensive backs came up limping on the kickoff. "We need a safety. Hung, get in there."

"Do you mean Chung, Coach?"

"Yeah, that's it. Chung at safety."

After one first down, the visitors broke off a long run. Chung grabbed the ball carrier after a long gain but couldn't bring him down. He was holding on for dear life when Adam arrived and punched the ball from behind. Timmy alertly scooped up the ball and started running toward the Tiger goal. He was slammed to the turf just before he reached midfield.

Three minutes remained in the game. After two plays the team faced a third and long situation, and the clock was down to two minutes. The coach sent in the call for a double reverse, and Pedro's eyes lit up when he heard the play. He took the snap and headed to the right. He pitched the ball back to Adam. Pedro started downfield, but this time a defender stayed home and was on him. Adam pitched the ball to Chung coming back to the right. He cleared the line of scrimmage and nobody was in front of him but Pedro and the defensive back covering him. The quarterback hit the man. The defender tried to shed him but couldn't. Pedro hit him again as he was shifting his weight, and the man went down. Not quitting on the play, Pedro turned back and hit another defender just as he was about to make the tackle from behind. Chung was in the clear, his touchdown putting the Tigers ahead for the first time at 28-25.

This time the coach held up one finger and the kicking team lined up for the extra point. After catching a wild snap from the center, the holder got the ball down just in time for the kicker. The ball hit the upright and caromed through for the score. The visitors had to score a touchdown to win.

The coach called time-out and gathered his team together. "OK, guys, they have under two minutes to beat us. We need to cover this kickoff. Do not allow them to break this one, or I'm going to pull the rest of my hair out. Don't get out of position. After the kickoff I want a prevent defense. Dime package with six defensive backs. Both safeties playing twenty yards off the line of scrimmage. Nobody gets behind you guys. Understand?"

Everyone nodded.

"Wait. I want a change. I want Barnet in on kickoff coverage instead of Jackson."

Adam lined up on the right side and flew down the field after the kick. The man who tried to block him whiffed. Adam got in behind the wedge and tackled the ball carrier from behind. The

Cougars had seventy-five yards of green turf to negotiate to avoid blowing a game they had led at halftime by twenty-five points.

The offense went into no-huddle mode with the first play being a screen pass that picked up nine yards. They quickly lined up again and ran the fullback for a five-yard gain. The clock stopped while the chains moved for the first down. On the next play Adam blitzed from his linebacker position and sacked the quarterback. The Cougars used a time-out, and the next play gained the ten yards they had lost on the sack. On third and ten the quarterback threw a strike to the tight end, but he only got nine yards before a gang of tacklers took him to the turf bringing up fourth down and one. A stop would ensure the victory for the Tigers. Again the fullback took the handoff and ran into a brick wall after a short gain. The referees brought the chains onto the field to measure for the first-down. The post holding the chains came down with the point of the ball touching it. First down at midfield.

The quarterback bobbled the snap on the next play and had to dive on it to keep possession, and a clipboard on the other side of the field bit the dust. The Cougars used their last time-out with twenty-eight seconds remaining. The quarterback faded back to pass on the next play. He found a receiver about fifteen yards down the field cutting toward the middle. All of the defenders closed in on the ball carrier. Adam, from his linebacker position, turned around and pursued the play although it was far away from him.

Just as the first of the Tiger defenders reached out to make the tackle, the receiver flipped the ball to a teammate who had come from the other direction. It was the old hook and ladder play. All of the defenders had taken themselves out of the play by chasing the receiver to the middle. Nothing but green grass and white chalk stood between the runner and a victory. Adam was still ten yards behind the play when the pitch was made. He only had to make a slight change in direction to draw a bead on the guy with the ball. The only question was whether or not he could reach the ballcarrier before he reached the end zone.

Both sidelines and bleachers were going crazy. Adam narrowed the gap between himself and the runner. He launched himself into the air at the seven-yard line and impact occurred at the three. The momentum of the boys carried them to just inside the one-yard line. Only nine seconds remained when the whistle blew, stopping the clock for the first down. The offense lined up while the chains were being reset. As soon as the whistle blew to initiate the play, the quarterback took the snap and threw it into

the ground. They had seven seconds left to score and no timeouts. They formed a huddle as one of the Tigers, one of their interior linemen, limped off the field.

The coach signaled for a time-out and then paced the sidelines trying to figure out who he was going to put it in for the injured lineman. With less than a yard to negotiate the defensive line had to hold up. "Who's the biggest guy we've got?"

"Curly."

"Where's Curly?"

"Ain't no Curly on the team anymore. Only a Joseph," Joe said.

The coach ran over and grabbed his arm. "I don't care what you call yourself. I need you to get in there and push that offensive lineman right into the backfield. Do you understand? Plug up that hole so nothing gets through it. Got it?"

Joe nodded and plodded onto the field. The defense lined up and waited for the offense to break huddle. The defensive backs lined up wide to prevent an outside run. Just as expected the Cougars ran their hard-charging fullback to pick up the half-yard that lay between them and victory.

At the snap Joe pushed off and met the offensive lineman doing the same. Joe's thrust was more powerful and the offensive lineman was pushed backward just enough to bump the fullback coming through, slowing his momentum. Joe reached around and grabbed the fullback with one arm. He was hanging on when Adam dove over the line of scrimmage and knocked the ball carrier to his knees. With no way to stop the clock the Cougars frantically tried to get lined up for one more try. The horn blew before they could even get lined up and the Tiger's victory was secure.

The coach ran across the field to shake hands with his counterpart on the Cougars bench.

"Nice game, Coach," the Cougar coach said.

"Yeah. Great game."

"Why'd you hide your stud players in the first half? Disciplinary action?"

"Yeah. That's it. Had to show them who's boss, even if they are the stars."

"Wish I had them on my team. Good luck for the rest of the season."

"Yeah. You too."

The coach turned and walked back to the sidelines where his players were celebrating with their parents and friends.

He walked up to Adam. "You played a helluva game, son."

"Thanks, Coach, but I'd prefer you referred to it as a heaven of a game."

"Yeah, right." He shook his head as he walked away.

Next he found Joe. "You did it, Curly. Just like I told you."

"Joseph. Yeah, Coach."

"Are you losing weight, boy?"

"I've dropped about twenty pounds in the last two weeks."

"That's good. You were a little on the wrong end of the scale, but don't be getting skinny on me. We're going to need you the rest of the year."

"I don't think there's much danger in reaching the point where the wind blows me away, Coach. My goal is to replace fat with muscle."

"I'll second that motion."

When the coach was finished congratulating his players, he encountered the assistant coach. "Walk with me a second, Paul."

The two walked onto the field, away from the celebrants.

"About your half time...ultimatum."

"Sorry about that, but--"

"Don't be. You were right. What I was doing wasn't fair to any of these kids. I was taking away their chance at winning. That Barnet kid may be the best athlete I've ever coached, or in this case, made run laps."

"We got some good kids."

"Yeah. I won't be keeping them on the bench anymore if they deserve to play."

"That's good to hear," the assistant said.

"Let me ask you this: what do you think about this prayer thing they're doing?"

"I've seen athletes who partied heavily, used drugs, were on big-time ego trips, you name it. To have some kids meet before school to ask for a blessing on their school and classmates and teachers is pretty refreshing to me."

"You're not one of them, are you?"

"Them?"

"Christians."

"Nah. Not yet, anyway. Watching those kids has made me wonder about what it is that makes them like they are. The stereotype propaganda I hear all the time just doesn't seem to explain it."

"You can explore options like that. You teach government. I teach science and have to stick to facts."

"Actually, there are quite a few Christian scientists. The door isn't shut if you want to look for answers."

"I think I have all the answers I need right now. Anyway, thanks again for the good advice."

"No problem. That's why they give me the big bucks."

Both men laughed.

"I was recently doing some shopping at a bicycle store. The amount of money they pay us to coach the football team isn't enough to buy a decent bike."

* * *

The Barnet, Morales, and Nelson families were all gathered together along with Joe, Chung, Timmy and Amy.

Barbara had arrived just in time to see the end. She was gushing about how excited she was.

"Mom, cool your jets," Matthew said. "It was just a stupid football game; not a cool game like Dungeons and Dragons."

She looked around to see what effect that remark had on the assembled group of friends. Only Sal seemed to notice. Everyone else was looking elsewhere, but Sal probed her eyes with his.

"Everybody here contributed to the victory today," Sal said. "I'd say that the God Squad pulled coach's chestnuts out of the fire."

Pastor Barnet nodded. "It's a good thing he let them play that second half. I might have had trouble remembering I'm a pastor if I had to watch our kids sit on the bench the whole game while we got clobbered."

Sal crossed his arms. "That was pretty painful for me too. Maybe winning games is suddenly more important to him than pressing his personal agenda."

Pedro laid his shoulder pads on the ground next to him. "I think Coach Johnson had something to do with that decision. He pulled Coach Darwin aside and had a little talk just before the half ended."

Pedro's dad smiled. "Interesting. I'll be curious to see what happens during the next game."

Pastor Barnet turned and grabbed his wife's hand. "We'd love to talk some more, but I promised the kids I'd take them to the high school game tonight. Some of the kids on the team go to my church. If we're going to get anything to eat before, we have to leave right now."

Sal laughed. "Nothing like watching football to work up an appetite."

"Wanna bet?" Adam said. "What about playing football?"

Several of the group laughed as they bid farewell to the Barnet family.

Joe's father arrived to pick up Joe, Amy, Chung, and Timmy. After another farewell, the Nelson and Morales families were left alone.

"Sal," Barbara said. "Could I talk to you for a minute – alone?"

"Sure. Kids, hang on just a few minutes, and we'll be right back."

The two strolled toward the football field.

"I hope they're not going to kiss in public," Matthew said. "Eww!" He walked away from the rest of the kids and started throwing stones at squirrels.

When they were out of earshot, Barbara said, "You haven't called me all week. I was wondering what was up. Maybe you've been busy reading Harry Potter."

Sal grimaced. "Actually, no. I stopped right in the middle."

"You're not going to finish it?"

Sal shook his head. "Afraid not."

"Why? Don't you like it? It's actually better than the first two."

"The writing is just as good, if not better. But I've had a change of attitude."

"What do you mean?"

"I've had a spiritual experience that has rerouted my life a bit. You remember my original position on the Potter books?"

"How could I forget?"

"I'm back to square one. Right where I started."

"Are you hinting that now I'm back to having to choose you or choose freedom?"

"I never said you have to give up your freedom."

"No, you didn't phrase it like that. But you'll dump me if I don't dump Harry, that's taking away my freedom to choose."

"I don't see it that way, Barbara. You have the freedom to choose me or Harry. You just can't have your cake and eat it too."

"What if I decide I don't like some author you like to read? Can I issue an ultimatum to you not to read them anymore?"

"I see your point, but there is a difference here. It's not that I don't like Rowling. The problem is that the writing poses dangers to our spiritual walk and to our children."

Barbara shook her head.

"Barbara, take Matthew for instance."

"What about Matthew?"

"Well, I don't know how to say this without...."

"Without what? Getting me extremely angry?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe I'll just fast forward to the angry part and save you some breath."

"Barbara, be reasonable."

"OK. Fine. Tell me about Matthew."

"My kids said—"

"Your kids said! I'm supposed to be concerned about what a couple of kids think?"

"My kids are pretty sharp. And more importantly they are trying to be led by the Holy Spirit."

"I won't tell you what I think about that statement. So what are they saying about Matthew?"

"They think the occult is sucking him in."

"He's only twelve years old!"

"Exactly. That's not going to stop evil spirits from messing with him. It does mean that his parents need to help shield him from it."

"Well, in this case there is only me. Their dad lives far away and won't see them until next summer probably. So you're saying I'm a bad mom if I let him play Dungeons and Dragons."

"And Ouija Board," Sal said.

"How about Monopoly? Clue?"

"Oh, come on, Barbara. There's a huge difference here."

"Maybe they should invent a new game for you, Clueless. You'd be a master at it."

"You're getting emotional on me."

"I'm getting emotional? What a novel concept! A guy tells a woman her son is perverted, and he's surprised when she gets emotional?"

"I didn't say he's a pervert. I said he's being influenced. For all I know perverts might have the same problem manifested in a different way. We need to avoid evil at all costs."

"If I'm allowing my son to dabble in evil, then I must be evil too. So you need to avoid me at all costs."

"Not my words."

"Maybe not, but that's what you're getting at here. I think this little conversation – and our relationship – is over."

She turned around and stormed back toward where the kids were hanging out.

Sal caught up to her but said nothing. She glanced at him with a look of fury and kept walking in silence. Matthew saw them coming and rejoined his sister. When the adults reached the kids, Barbara stopped.

"Listen up, Faith. I'm going to tell you this once and once only."

I don't want you hanging out with Pedro anymore. Do you understand?"

Faith shook her head in shock.

"Well, I'll make it more clear on the way home. I just want the other parties involved here to understand the rules."

"Does that mean she can't join the prayer circle anymore?" Matthew asked.

"If Pedro is there, I don't want her around. It's probably not a good idea for her to be praying in public anyway. Come on, let's go home. I need a breath of fresh air!"

The Morales clan watched the Nelsons trek to the parking lot.

"Sorry, Pedro."

"What happened, Dad?"

"Harry Potter and Matthew."

"In that case, don't worry about it. You have to stand up for what you believe. God will work things out between Faith and me – if it's in his plans."

"I like your attitude, kid." He turned and watched Barbara spinout on the loose gravel near the street. "She's a beautiful woman, but beauty only goes skin deep."

"What's that mean, Dad?" EJ asked.

"That means that people can be beautiful on the outside but rotten on the inside."

"Like a shiny red apple with worms inside?"

"That illustration works."

"Then there's the flower lady. She's not so attractive on the outside, but she's beautiful on the inside. Kind of like an oyster with a pearl."

"I like that picture, EJ. Except Rachel is much more attractive than an oyster."

"Rachel? You're on a first-name basis already?"

"I remembered hers. She probably won't remember mine. Her job as a greeter is to be friendly to everyone who comes to the church."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Come on. I'm starving. We can continue our conversation in the car on the way to Frosty's. I'm in the mood for an old-fashioned hamburger and fries and a chocolate malt. We need to celebrate the Tiger's victory," Sal said. Pedro grinned. "I think the congregation will add a big 'amen' to that, Dad."

Ten minutes later they pulled up at the restaurant.

"Do you want to get take out or dine in?"

"I want to soak up all the atmosphere of eating out," EJ said.

"That means we sit in a booth."

"Pedro?"

"Cool with me."

They parked the car, entered the front door and got into line to order. The lady in the line in front of them turned around.

The kids were surveying the menu on the wall when they heard their dad say, "Rachel Schwartz! What a pleasant surprise!"

"Salvador Morales."

EJ grinned and elbowed Pedro in the ribs. When he glanced over at her, he saw her head bobbing up and down. Then she made the sign of the thumbs-up.

"Are you here alone, Rachel?"

"Yep. I guess I'm the Lone Stranger tonight."

"Well, in that case, we'd love to have you join us," Sal said.

"Are you sure? The kids probably don't want to share their time with their father with an old fuddy-dud like me."

"We'd love to give our dad away," EJ said.

Sal coughed. "Hey! What did you just say, EJ?"

EJ's face did an imitation of a radish. "I meant, we'd be glad to share you."

Sal looked back at Rachel, who was trying to hold back a laugh. "See."

"That's one out of two. I think it's important to hear from all parties," Rachel said.

Everyone turned to Pedro. "I've got no problem at all with it, as long as you don't try to snitch anything off my plate."

Rachel laughed. "I can guarantee you there is no danger of that."

Sal frowned. "Pedro, that wasn't exactly a polite way of answering."

"Dad, I was just trying to be funny. Like you do most of the time."

Sal grinned weakly as Rachel laughed again. "OK, I'd better quit while I'm behind. It's unanimous. We'll be a foursome tonight."

EJ whispered into Pedro's ear, "Let's hurry up and finish our food so we have an excuse to leave these guys alone. So that means we let them do all the talking."

Pedro looked at the older couple and nodded.

They placed their order and Pedro and EJ found a booth big enough for the four of them. The two kids slid in on the same side.

"Well, it looks like we'll be sitting next to one another," Sal said. "Do you want the window seat? You'll be able to look outside if you get bored with my company."

Rachel smiled. "I really don't think there's much danger of that happening."

The kids happily answered Rachel's questions about school, friends, and church. When the food arrived, they became eating machines, only coming up for air when necessary.

Rachel and Sal carried the conversation. Their food was barely touched when Pedro jumped up from the booth and stood beside his dad. "We need the keys to the car. We're going out to do some homework."

"I didn't know you guys were in a hurry. I could get a doggie bag and take my dinner home so you can do your thing in the house."

A terrified look came over EJ's face. "No hurry, Dad! We're just going to be reading, so the car is fine. Take your time."

"OK. Who am I to argue with teenagers?"

"I'm not a teenager, yet," EJ said.

"Maybe not in years, honey, but you've matured early for your age."

"I'm not sure that's a compliment with the bad rep that teenagers have, but I'm going to accept it that way. It was so nice to see you again, Ms Schwartz."

"Call me Rachel, please. And the pleasure was all mine."

"Have a nice evening, Ms...Rachel," Pedro said. "See you at church on Sunday?"

"I hope so. Thanks for sharing your dining adventure with me."

The Morales kids got a lot of reading done before their father appeared in the parking lot. He escorted Rachel to her car where they talked some more. His smile dominated his face when he returned to his own car. The two kids stared at him expectantly when he got in.

"What?"

They didn't answer him but instead went back to their books.

When the Morales car came around the last corner approaching their house, Sal blurted, "What the—?"

EJ looked up from the book she was reading. "What's the mat—" Her eyes got as big as Oreo cookies.

"Holy cow!" Pedro said. "What in the world is going on at our house?"

Chapter 12

EJ counted to eleven as the car reached the entrance to their yard. Two of the eleven people inhabiting their sidewalk blocked the driveway. Sal honked but got no response from the intruders.

One of them had a lightning bolt on her forehead and held a sign saying 'Witches are people too'. The other was older and held a flag instead of a sign picturing a witch flying on a broomstick. After a few seconds of tension, the pair cleared the sidewalk in front of driveway so Sal could reach the garage and park.

"Dad, what are you going to do?" EJ asked.

"About what?"

"Oh, come on. You know what I'm talking about. Those people are trespassing on our property."

"Actually, EJ, the sidewalk belongs to everyone. That's public property, so technically they're not trespassing as long as they stay on the cement."

"So you're not going to call the cops?" EJ asked as the family walked into the house.

"Yeah, Dad. Maybe the police could do something because those people are loitering."

"They could try to just scare them off too, but I think the police have more important things to do than play scarecrow."

Pedro grinned. "You mean scarewitch?"

"In this case."

"So you're just going to let them walk up and down our sidewalk all night?"

"When it gets dark, nobody will be able to see them, especially with all that black they're wearing, or their protest signs. Then they'll probably go home."

"Why are they picketing our house?" EJ asked.

"I'm not sure. It could have something to do with our little altercation with those witches next to Chung's house. These could be people from the same coven. Maybe they're out for revenge."

Pedro peeked through the front blinds. "One of the girls, the one called Mohana, is out there. I guess they might have declared war on us."

Sal walked over to the window and looked out. "In that case, perhaps we should declare peace on them."

"What do you mean?" EJ asked.

"That means we attack – with love. Pedro, get a couple of jugs of apple cider out of the pantry and some plastic cups. EJ, put some of those cookies we just baked on a plate. We're going to make a social call."

"Wait," Pedro said. "You're going to give away our chocolate-chip cookies to trespassers? Witches, no less?"

"Pedro. We can bake more cookies. We might have a wonderful opportunity to minister here."

"Whatever. Just be advised that God hasn't given me any inspiration to do an exorcism tonight."

"I hear you. That reminds me of something. When you guys come back, we'll say a prayer, and then we'll go onward, Christian soldiers."

"Dad, sometimes I just have to wonder where you come up with this stuff." EJ turned and walked into the kitchen.

With the goodies gathered, the trio of hosts knelt together in the living room. Sal took the lead. "Father in Heaven, we're not sure what's going through the heads of those people out there, but we know that you love each and every one of them. You want them to know you and love you like we do. We just ask that you be with us as we engage them in loving conversation. You have to help us with that love because these people are probably going to make us mad. So be with us and let us speak your words."

"And we pray the blood of Jesus over us and our home," Pedro said. "Protect us from all evil intentions. In the name of Jesus. Amen."

Sal stood up. "OK, here goes nothing. Let's go talk to Sabrina."

"Do you mean, Mohana?" Pedro asked.

"Forget it. I was just trying to be funny."

"Bad timing. I don't think this is a situation that calls for humor."

"I disagree. Humor is wonderful at disarming conflict."

"Yeah, except when you're involved in humor, Dad, it works pretty good at inducing vomiting."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. Come on, kiddos."

The sun was reaching the horizon as the trio exited the front door bearing their peace offering. All of the picketers stopped and stared as they approached.

"We have a right to be on this sidewalk," one man declared.

"Of course you do," Sal said. "Would you like to sit down on the grass and have some cookies and cider?"

"Are you trying to bribe us? Or maybe poison us?"

"If that was true, what would I get out of the bribe?"

"Ahhh...I don't know. Probably just trying to sweet-talk us into leaving."

"Why would I do that? The party is just starting," Sal said.

"Party?"

"Yeah. Can't let you get all dressed up for nothing."

"I don't know what you're trying to do here, but I don't like it. We've dealt with your kind before," the man said.

Sal scratched his head. "My kind? Exactly what is my kind?"

"Fanatical Christians."

"And who told you I was one of those?"

"We just assumed you were since your son is. No doubt a chip off the old block. Been crusading lately to stoke up the bonfire at homecoming this year and burn a couple of witches at the stake while the rabid mob celebrates?"

"I think you've mistaken me for someone else."

"Oh, come on. We know what you Christians are like. Look at Salem. Look at the Inquisition. Look at the Crusades."

"First of all, tell me what a Christian is. For example the people involved in the Inquisition and the Crusades were Catholics. They usually did their dirty deeds in defense of an organization, not the Lord Jesus."

Sal noticed that the man winced when he used the Lord's name.

"The people at Salem weren't Catholics."

"True. They were Protestants. There is some evidence that the people burned in Salem were actually Christians who were accused by people who might have been involved in the occult. In any case, here again, an isolated group of people was doing what they thought was right."

"Yeah, because the Bible tells them to. Exodus 22:18. Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

"You know, you have a point – I mean besides the one on top of your hat. But also in Exodus it says that we shall not kill. That does seem to pose a little dilemma."

"You're darned straight it does."

"I've heard a few Christians saying we need to be careful about witchcraft, but I've not heard any advocating that we kill people."

"You're just not listening to the right sources. Christians hate us."

"Oh, come on. Jesus taught us to love our enemies. That

means we can't hate you and still obey the one named Christ. John said in his epistle that a man who claims to be in the light, but hates his brother, is really in the darkness."

"What's your point?"

"By definition a Christian can't legally hate. So if people really do hate you, then they're out of line and really aren't Christians at all," Sal said.

"But we're your enemies."

"The Bible says that we fight against powers and principalities, Satan and his demons. You're just hapless people caught up in the trap of deception."

"We don't believe in Satan."

"Fine, but he believes in you. If the Bible is true, then witchcraft is an abomination in the eyes of God. Who would lead you away from God's will into an abomination? I'll give you three guesses; the first two don't count and the answer has the same letters as the word Santa."

"We don't accept the Bible. We worship Mother Earth."

"And who created Mother Earth?"

"Some covens believe The Great Spirit did."

"Are you saying that different groups of witches believe different things?" Sal asked.

One of the female witches standing by broke in, "You find that unusual? Don't different Christian churches believe different things?"

Sal nodded. "That's true. I can't argue that point."

All conversation ceased as a police squad car drove up.

"Did you call the police?" the leader asked as they watched the policemen get out of the car.

"Not me," Sal said, peering at the house across the street. "I have a pretty good idea who did though."

The first man out of the squad car happened to be the same officer who conducted the investigation on Monday night. "Mr. Morales."

"Good evening, Officer Sutton."

"Are you having a problem here?" He surveyed the group of strangely dressed people who were staring at him.

"Not really. I was just discussing religion with my new friend here."

"Friend? What's his name?"

"Ahhh. I never asked." He turned to the spokesman for the witches.

"Andrew Hargreaves."

"I see. Someone called in and said that the neighborhood was being menaced."

"Not at the moment. I think the real menace of the neighborhood is at the high school football game. Of course the people who called you probably didn't mention him. It's very likely they're his parents."

"Did you want to file a complaint about him or about these people?"

"Not tonight, Officer. We were just about to have some cider and cookies. Would you like to join us?"

"No thanks. I never drink on the job." He looked at Andrew. "That's a joke, your witchiness, or whatever term I should plug in here. I do have to move you off this sidewalk. It's not lawful to obstruct the sidewalk since it does belong to the public."

"So you're running us out of here?" Andrew asked.

"Andrew, if you'd like to direct your people to step up on our lawn here and take a seat, we can fix the problem. EJ and Pedro, go into the house and get those blankets we use for picnics. And turn on the outside yard lights while you're at it."

"Are you sure you want to do that, Mr. Morales?" Officer Sutton asked.

"Yep. I don't want these people on the sidewalk when the neighbor boy comes home in his hot-rod. They won't be safe."

The policeman shook his head and then scratched it. Andrew in the meantime was talking to his group. He came back to Sal's side. "We will accept your invitation, Mr. Morales."

"Call me Sal. That's short for Salvador, the Spanish word for savior."

Andrew winced before motioning his people onto the grass. Pedro and EJ spread out three large blankets and the most of the group took a seat on the lawn.

"Looks like we've got an unobstructed sidewalk now, Officer Sutton."

"I hope this doesn't come back to bite you in the butt, Mr. Morales. If any trouble comes up, you know where to reach us."

"Indeed I do. I have that three-digit number imprinted in my brain. Have a nice evening, Officer."

"Yeah, right. Football game at home tonight. Kids will be partying all over the place."

"I suppose. Let me rephrase to say, I hope you survive the evening."

Sutton laughed. "That'll work. And speaking of work, I better get back to it. See you later."

"Bye."

"Why did you do that?" Andrew said, as the police car drove away. "I thought you'd jump at a chance to get rid of us."

"Andrew, let me be perfectly honest and blunt with you. I don't know. When I had to fight through you to get to my garage, my first inclination was to try to get you out of here, ASAP. My heart softened before I could take any action. I think it's a God thing. It seems he caused you to come here for a purpose."

"I don't get it. You Christians are fighting us tooth and claw. Everywhere we turn we're being slammed by you people."

"Andrew, please let this soak in. Number one, a lot of Christians get very defensive because they themselves are under attack. Witchcraft is an abomination in their eyes. What they are slamming is not you as people, but what you're doing. Same with homosexuality or abortions or whatever. We have been commanded to hate the sin but love the sinner. Sometimes Christians forget that last part. And also people on the other end misunderstand their motives and think they are hated."

The noise of a screen door slamming across the street grabbed their attention. Sal looked up to see his neighbor coming toward them. He watched as she stepped down from the curb on her side of the street and continued toward his driveway. Andrew gazed at Sal's face. Sal shrugged and stepped out to meet his newest visitor.

"Good evening, Mrs. Kravitz."

"I'm not here for a polite social call. What did you call me?"

"Ahh. Oops. I think I just suffered from a Freudian slip, Mrs. Kincaid."

"I hope you don't throw your back out."

"Indeed. Thanks for thinking of me." Sal grinned at Andrew.

"I'm here to see what you intend to do about these...people. I thought the police were going to disperse this riot. Somehow you must have sweet-talked them out of it. Exactly what is going on here? Is this like a service or ceremony or whatever you call it – for witches? Do I need to keep my pets in the house to keep them safe?"

"Or maybe you could keep your son in the house to keep us safe."

"How dare you! If you don't clear this rubbish out of your yard immediately, I'm going to circulate a petition around the neighborhood."

"And what will that petition say? Are you against lawn parties in general or just ones that don't take place in your yard? After all,

we're being quiet, and it is still a decent hour. I don't see where you have any beef."

"Fine. Try to be funny. We'll see who gets the last laugh." She stormed back to her house without looking back.

"She's probably worried about her property value going down," Andrew said.

Sal laughed. "Maybe. She should be worrying about her blood pressure going up. Someday that woman is going to blow her top like Mount St. Helens."

"Can I sit down? My feet are killing me."

Sal looked across his lawn. Pedro sat on one blanket and conversed with the people sitting there. EJ did the same on another blanket. "Of course. Let's use the blanket over here." He led the older man to an open spot and helped him sit down.

"It's been a few years since I did this. I hope I'll be able to get up again."

"Don't you people use levitation?"

Andrew laughed. "Can't you people raise me from the dead?"

"Not me. I don't belong to the dead-raisers union. Now, my son might be able to do that."

Andrew looked over in the near darkness. "Yeah. He's the reason we're here tonight. We heard he's starting up a group called the Witch Busters."

"What?"

"That's the story going around."

"First of all, that's not true. Where do people come up with this crap? Secondly, if it were, you coming here to picket wouldn't stop him. In fact, you'd be making it easy for him by coming right onto his home court. He wouldn't even need to make house calls."

"We're not afraid that he's going to demote any *real* witches to Christianity. Powaga was just a beginner. He's not going to do something like that to a seasoned witch. Oh, by the way, some witches are Christians."

Sal shook his head. "That's like being a Green Bay Packer fan and a Chicago Bear fan. Hello-o! They're enemies. You can't be both or you aren't really either."

"Maybe you don't realize that there is black magick and there is white, or good, magick. A real witch never deals in black magick. It's not a good versus evil rivalry. Perhaps it's good versus good. Perhaps there is a white and a black Christianity. People at Salem participated in the black. You, sir, seem to be a decent chap. Your Christianity seems to be white. Maybe white witches and white Christians are on the same side."

Sal ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't know what to say to that. In a way what you say is true. Some people have done things in the name of God that makes him angry and sad. Of course, sometimes there are tricks being played to deceive people. For example in the old west, people would dress up as Indians and pull off a raid to make other people angry with the Indians. Could the devil cause some people to dress in the name of Christianity and do bad things to ruin its reputation?"

"I suppose it could happen, if there was such a being as the devil," Andrew said.

The discussion went on for an hour. When the sun went down, the temperature began to drop quickly. With the coolness came hordes of mosquitoes. After much slapping, Andrew told his troupe that it was time to depart. Sal helped him up from the ground.

"Can you tell me why your God created those little monsters we call mosquitoes?"

Sal laughed. "Sorry. That one is beyond me."

"Thank you, sir, for a stimulating conversation. It's too bad that we seem to be on opposite sides. I like you."

"Ditto, Andrew."

"Does that mean that your anti-witchcraft crusade will stop?"

"There are literally millions of different ideas out there that put us at odds with other humans. A lot of them are open to discussion as far as I am concerned. However, one thing I don't budge on. God sent his Son down to Earth as a baby born to a virgin, he was cruelly tortured and put to death, and he rose from the dead. I will always give testimony that my redeemer lives and where that conflicts with anyone, I'm afraid I have to speak out."

"So, despite liking each other, we find ourselves on different sides of the fence. The Packers and Bears are like that. After a hard-fought game, they shake hands."

"You're right, Andrew. I have nothing personally against anyone who I consider fighting for the wrong causes. I'd just like to see them find the key to eternal life." He held out his hand and shook Andrew's.

"Did you realize that your Jesus never mentioned witches or witchcraft by name?"

"I didn't know that. But that doesn't change the situation. Sorry."

"Me too. Take care of yourself."

The Morales family watched as the group of witches packed themselves into two large vans and drove away.

After the guests left, Sal, Pedro and EJ picked up the blankets and empty plastic cups from the yard. "So, did you kids have any fun tonight or hear anything interesting?" Sal asked.

"It was certainly different." Pedro said. "The hair on my arms was doing 'the wave' all night long."

"There were some nice people there. Others weren't so nice. Are the nice ones going to go to Hell, Dad?" EJ asked.

"First of all, God is the judge of all people. I'm not going to tell you what the eternal fate of any person is. All I know for sure is that it is clear that God doesn't like witchcraft, and that he let Jesus die a horrible death for some reason. He said that no man comes to the father except through him."

"God's number one commandment is to love him with all we have," Pedro said. "Jesus said even the heathens love those who love them, so just because people are into loving other people doesn't mean squat. They're still heathens if they deny their creator."

EJ frowned. "It's sad to think about people missing the boat to Heaven."

"I know EJ. That's why lots of people in the world become missionaries. So they can tell those that won't get a chance otherwise that Jesus is Lord, and he died so that we may live."

"By the way, one of the young witches was telling me about how their group is growing. They have a website and stuff. She said lots of people are calling or emailing them for more information. She said just today they got a request from a local twelve-year-old boy for membership."

Sal shook his head. "Where are these kids' parents?"

"By the way – his name is Matthew."

* * *

On Sunday morning, Joe's mother arrived with Amy, Joe, and Roberta. It was Roberta's very first time at a church service. The kids all took special pains to make her feel welcome, giving her more hugs than she'd had in her entire life.

After the service, the youths gathered in the corner.

"How did you like the service, Roberta?" Pedro asked.

"It was interesting. I was pretty scared when I got here. First of all I thought I was going to be like a circus freak or something. Buy your ticket and come see the girl who once had a demon."

Some of the kids laughed. "Hardly anybody knows about it here at church," Adam said.

"Anyway, that night is far behind me. I can hardly remember what it was like to be the old me."

"Except, if you're troubled by a demon, it's not really you," EJ said.

"I want to know how many people are impacted by demons," Joe said. "Do they cause sickness in addition to strange behavior?"

Adam nodded. "You're wondering how much of the world's trouble we can blame on the devil and his elves. You'll need to get in a long line for that answer."

"Some people go way overboard on this stuff," Pedro said. "Packer fanatics think we need to exorcise all Chicago Bear fans."

"And the ones in Chicago think that all Green Bay fans are in need of deliverance, along with the Lions and Viking fans."

EJ shook her head. "Why is it that every conversation eventually gets around to football with you guys – even when we're talking about spiritual things?"

"Sorry," Pedro said.

"No you're not."

"OK. You're right. You remember that book Dad had us read called *Everything I Need to Know About Life I Learned in Kindergarten*?"

"Yeah," EJ replied.

"I'd substitute the word football for kindergarten."

"Oh, please!"

"Sorry to break up this brother-sister love spat," Roberta said. "Some of my ex-friends warned me that if I went to church I'd be bombarded by pressure to be born again. Instead, no one has even brought up the topic."

"Maybe we were waiting for you to introduce the subject," Adam said.

"Consider it introduced."

Adam looked over the group. "Do we have time for a conversation?"

Joe nodded. "My mom's waiting for me to call before she comes to pick us up. So we've got all the time you need, right, Amy?"

"Right, Joe. In fact, I'd like to hear the conversation myself. I gave my heart to Jesus when I was seven, but I'm not sure that was really a born-again experience."

"OK, ladies. Follow me to the prayer room. Anybody else that wants to sit in is welcome, but it would probably be better to keep the group small. The rest of you can chill out here and talk about—"

"Football," EJ said.

Everybody laughed as Adam, Tammy, Amy, Roberta, and Joe

walked away.

The rest of the group excused themselves, leaving EJ and Pedro alone.

EJ glanced to the back of the church. Her father and Rachel were sitting and smiling together. She elbowed Pedro. "Check that out." She pointed to the happy couple. "When's the last time you saw Dad smile so much?"

"Like never!"

"Exactly. Maybe I should be a matchmaker when I grow up."

"Or a match girl out on the streets selling matches in the cold."

EJ spoke through clenched teeth. "I'm not going to hit you, Pedro. It's just not right to go around slapping people in the house of God. When we get back to the house of Morales, you better watch your step."

"I'm just playing with ya, EJ."

"Hello-o. Coming right back at you. You think I want to risk breaking a fingernail on you?"

"Enough of the fake tough talk. What are we going to do now? All the kids are gone, and we don't want to interrupt what's going on with Dad and Rachel. I wish Faith was here."

"Oh, man. I forgot about Faith. It's only been two days since her mom put the Berlin wall between you two."

"That's a good way of putting it." He sighed. "It's not fair."

"I know. If there was anything I could do to help, I'd be glad to."

"Really?"

"I mean it," EJ said.

"There is one thing we could do."

"Kidnap her?"

"Don't get silly. We can pray."

EJ nodded. "Yeah. We can do that. I'm not sure that's going to change anything."

"You might be right as far as Barbara's heart is concerned. Adam told me that prayers always have an impact even if they aren't answered. He said that prayer always changes the person talking to God."

EJ thought that over for a moment. "I get it. It does change me when I pray. Somehow it softens me up or something. I don't know exactly how to describe it. I get relaxed inside."

"The peace that passes all understanding."

"What does that mean?" EJ asked.

"An inner peace knowing that everything is going to end up OK even though things look really bad at the time. For example, I

was watching this football game—"

"You're like a broken record."

"Bear with me here. This is good stuff," Pedro said.

"Fine. Continue with your gridiron gospel."

"This team was behind by six points. They had the ball on their own twenty-yard line with three minutes to play. The situation looked desperate, but the coach was smiling as if his team had the six-point lead. He smiled as if his team had won the game. They drove the ball down the field, overcoming some tough situations. The smile never left his face. He acted as if the outcome of the game was a dead certainty."

"Did they win?"

"Of course."

"What if they didn't?"

"But they did. And the coach acted the whole time as if they had. It might be called a self-fulfilling prophecy."

"You're losing me here. Exactly what is the point?"

"Sister, dear, the point is that we know how the game of life ends up. We all die, and we will face God to determine our seating assignment for the rest of eternity. Why don't we smile through all the trials and tribulations that come along, knowing they're temporary? Troubles in life can be like a fourth down and twenty yards to go. How do we cope? Even if we don't pick up the first down, we still know we're going to win. A fumble or interception. No problem. We keep our joy and peace, knowing the victory is secure."

"So, are you saying we should be happy all of the time? If I can use a football comparison – like the cheerleaders at a football game, smiling and cheering even when their team is hopelessly behind."

"Good analogy. Yes and no."

"Oh, brother. Are you going to be a politician when you grow up?"

"No. I'm not speaking out of both sides of my mouth. I simply mean if someone comes up to us and says their mother died, we shouldn't smile and rejoice. There is a time for mourning."

"Yeah, it's called AM."

"No, not that morning. With a 'U'! Grieving. We can grieve on the outside, but our heart is still smiling on the inside, knowing that despite the sadness involved, God still wins in the end. All the little owies of life are overcome."

"I get it. OK, You've convinced me. I'll try to keep my heart smiling. I don't think my stomach is smiling though. Maybe we can

convince Dad to take us and Rachel out to lunch after we pray," EJ said.

"We just ate out Friday night."

"True, but it can't hurt to try. When people are under the influence of love, they sometimes loosen up a bit."

"You think Dad's in love?" Pedro asked.

"Don't know. But I know when love is doing some influencing. Rachel appears to have a lot more love to give than Barbara. I really think Barbara loves herself and doesn't have room to give Dad any real love."

"And now you've brought the conversation 360 degrees right back to Barbara, and now I miss Faith again."

"I know, Pedro. But practice what you preach. Keep your heart smiling. Everything will work its way out eventually, right?"

"You're right, and I'm busted. Let's go pray. We have a whole laundry list of people to pray for, starting with Roberta and Faith."

The two were just finishing their prayer when Roberta and company emerged from the prayer room. Both Pedro and EJ were bursting with curiosity, but they knew better than to ask personal questions. If Roberta had something to tell, she'd do it on her own.

She was smiling. Pedro couldn't suppress the vision of her standing on the doorstep, cigarette in hand and lightning bolt on her forehead and comparing it to what he saw now. She was radiating something.

Roberta went right up to Pedro. "May I hug you, brother?"

"Brother?"

"You are a son of God, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"That makes you my brother because now I'm a daughter of the King of Kings."

"Ahh. Cool. Hug away." She threw herself into his arms and squeezed. He was a little embarrassed.

"Thank you so much!"

"For what?"

"For rescuing me from what I was and where I was going," Roberta said.

"I didn't do that, Roberta. God did that."

"But he needed your help. Thanks for being faithful."

She released him and then embraced EJ. "Welcome to the family of God, Roberta."

"Thank you, EJ. It feels so good. All my life I wanted to feel special and feel loved. I did all kinds of stupid things to try to get that, and now here it is, *poof*. The answer was right in front of me

all these years, but I just didn't see it."

"Why did you get into witchcraft and all that other stuff?"

"If you can't be loved and respected, you sometime go for feared and respected. It might sound lame, but it's true."

The other four kids joined them.

"I have an idea," Roberta said.

Adam laughed. "Why does that not surprise me? Lay it on us."

"The thing that got me into the whole Goth scene and suicide and witchcraft was loneliness and lack of direction. If someone like you had come into my life earlier, you could have kept me from going down the wrong paths."

"Maybe," Adam said.

"Yeah. Nothing's guaranteed. Anyway, I know there are lots of kids at school who are lonely and depressed and messed up. They need to know someone cares about them. You don't have to preach to them, just love them. Your love will cause them to go looking for Jesus because the love is so attractive."

"We know that, Roberta."

"So what do you do about it? When you're on the playground, do you search out those people and encourage them and love on them. Or do you stand around and talk with your friends? Or play basketball or something?"

Adam nodded. "You're right. We can do more. We pray for people, but then we do our own thing. Prayer is very good, but it's not the only thing we can do. If a man is hungry and begging for food, you can say that you'll pray for him to get a meal somewhere. Does that help his stomach? I don't think so. God said that we need to feed the hungry. We still need to pray, but we need to do something which directly impacts the problem as well."

Joe cleared his throat. "I've had discussions about this kind of thing with my mom. She said a lot of the school shootings are caused by kids who are disconnected. They don't feel they're part of the school family. Perhaps they're being bullied, or stuff like that. Maybe one kind word or one attempt by somebody at standing up against the bullies for them would have prevented them from going postal." He looked over at Pedro. "Oops. Sorry, Pedro."

Roberta nodded. "Good point. I go to high school, so I can't team up with you guys. I'll be looking for people who have the same heart there. I'm going to make a difference in people's lives – like you guys did in mine."

"Good for you, Roberta," Pedro said. "We can definitely take action at the middle school. And next year we can join you."

"That'll be awesome!" Adam said. "In the meantime that gives me an idea. I think it's time we start a youth group here at church. We've always had one at our previous churches, but this one didn't have enough kids when we arrived. I think we have enough now – if we combine middle school and high school. Maybe someday we'll break it into two groups, but for now, we can work together."

"Booya!" Joe said. "Great plan!"

After a few more minutes of planning, the group split up. EJ and Pedro walked toward where their dad was enjoying Rachel's company.

"Roberta has a great idea. Why didn't we think of that?" EJ asked.

"Because we'd never been where she was. We've always been loved and been believers. We take Jesus for granted sometimes when we've always had him around. She knows the difference between the night she used to have and the day she has now."

"I guess. The difference between nightmares and daymares."

"Daymares'? You can't come up with a better word?"

"Can you?"

Pedro thought for a minute. "I guess 'daymare' will have to do."

"Thank you very much for your vote of confidence."

"Don't let it go to your head," Pedro said.

* * *

On Monday morning the God Squad got off the bus and headed for the flagpole.

"Hey, Adam," Pedro said. "Don't look now, but it appears we have some trouble."

"If I don't look, how would I see the trouble?"

"Ah, good point. Sometimes those phrases we use really don't work well. Looks like we have some competition for our spot."

Matthew burst past them and ran up to the group that was gathered in their normal prayer spot. One of the girls took something out of her purse and started drawing on his forehead.

The prayer team soon saw firsthand what the artwork consisted of. Pedro had figured it out long before he could see it. A gleaming lightning bolt reflected the morning sun. Pedro shook his head.

"Sorry, Jesus freaks, the flagpole is ours today," Matthew jeered.

The God Squad pulled into a huddle away from the flagpole.

"I'd like to take that little squirt and teach him some manners," Pedro said.

"Yeah, we all probably do," Adam replied. "But that's not how God wants us to instruct people."

"Yeah, I know. So, what are we going to do?"

A noise of chanting arose behind them. They turned and saw the group of kids holding hands and marching around the flagpole. Pedro saw Faith standing at a distance, watching her brother's participation.

Adam rubbed a finger across his forehead. "We have enough people, we could make a circle around theirs and pray."

Pedro grinned. "That would be interesting. Maybe we could exorcise while they exercise?"

"That's not really a joking matter. I think God prefers we don't do something confrontational like that. Let's just pray quickly and go find some of those lonely kids that need a boost."

"Fine."

After a prayer lifting up the kids who were marching around the flagpole and asking for a blessing on the hurting kids all over the world, the God Squad scattered to carry out their mission. Pedro chose Faith as his first contact.

"Hi, Faith."

"I'm not supposed to hang out with you."

"I'm painfully aware of that. You're not with me. I'm with you. You had nothing to do with that. If that's not sufficient, you could walk away and I'll follow while we talk so you could tell your mom you tried to get away from me."

"I'd just like to get out of sight of my bratty brother. He's driving me crazy. Did you see him over there with those zeros?"

"I saw him."

"He's getting away with murder at home. Mom believes everything he tells her and won't accept anything I say. I'm thinking of going to live with my dad."

"In Arizona?"

"Yeah."

"Hopefully that won't happen. I miss you like crazy and you're still here. But I suppose I'm being selfish. If I really care for you, I should want what's best for you. I'll keep you in prayer."

"I appreciate that, Pedro."

"Time for me to scoot. I need to encourage somebody before the bell rings."

"You just encouraged me if that counts."

Pedro looked at her and nodded. "That counts big-time. Bye."

After walking away from Faith, Pedro saw a kid leaning against the wall all by himself. With no small amount of nervousness, he walked up to face the solitary student. "Hi, my name is Pedro Morales."

"So? That's your problem, not mine."

Pedro was speechless. *How can I respond to that greeting?*

"So what are you trying to sell today, jock? Tickets to an athletic banquet? Or are you running for some school office and you want my vote?"

"Neither. Why do you ask that?"

"Not that it matters, but because the only reason any of you people talk to me is when you want something."

"Who is 'you people'?"

"Jocks, popular kids, rich kids, smart kids."

"Well, sorry to disappoint you, but I don't want anything from you. I just came over to be friendly."

"Take your friendly talk and shove it. It's too late!" He pushed away from the wall with an angry scowl and distanced himself from the stunned Pedro.

What did I do to deserve that, Lord? Is this a case to support the statement that no good deed goes unpunished? Pedro wandered up to the front of the school. He had no desire to talk to anyone else. The taste of rejection was too strong in his mouth and gut.

Adam joined up with him. "What's the matter? You looked like someone just kicked you in the stomach."

"Or a little lower. I just tried to befriend some dude, and he basically ripped me to shreds."

"Bummer. I hate it when that happens."

"It happens to you sometimes too?"

"Sure. People are such jerks sometimes. Who was it?"

"I don't know his name, but I'll never forget that face."

"Dude, you gotta shake it off. You're acting like *you've* been rejected."

"I was."

"Hello-o. The reason we're doing this is to reach out to people who live in rejection. Now you know what it feels like and that was just one occurrence. And you're surrounded by kids who like you. Imagine what it would be like if that happened every day, and you felt nobody here was on your side."

Pedro looked at the sky for a minute. "I'd probably get mean and nasty like a cat that everybody kicks. My claws would come out, and I'd hiss at anybody who got close."

The bell rang, and the boys starting lining up to enter the school.

"Hold that thought. When someone hisses at you, remember what caused it. It's not easy to win someone's confidence after they've gone through that kind of hell. They might reach a point where only God can touch them. Point the guy out if you can. I want to give him a try."

Pedro turned around and looked at the line behind them. "Don't look...I mean look now. See the kid behind us with the long black hair hanging over his glasses?"

"The one in the brown shirt?"

"That's the one."

"This might sound stupid to you, Pedro, but I think when a person comes into your life in any way, you shouldn't dismiss them as being unimportant. God might have put you together for a very specific reason. It's important to ask God to reveal that type of relationship to you."

"Do you feel called to speak to that guy?"

"I do. Pray for me." Adam walked away.

Pedro was watching Adam when the kid behind him said, "Hey, Morales, the line is moving." He closed up the gap between himself and the line and rode the wave of humanity into the building. The prayer he was supposed to say was forgotten.

He waited for Adam at his locker. When he finally approached, Pedro flung the question at him immediately. "What'd he say?"

"That boy definitely has a problem. I didn't have a prayer."

"Ooooh. You're right. You didn't, from me anyway. Sorry."

"Forget it. We'll try again. This is exactly what Bub needs – even though he doesn't know it."

"Bub?"

"That's what another kid told me he's called. I think it's a nickname. The kids make fun of him all the time just to see him lose his cool. I saw Matthew walk by and call him a freak."

Pedro shook his head. "Matthew? Again? That kid pokes his head into whatever hornet's nest he can find. Someday someone's going to punch him out. Or worse."

"He seems to be asking for it. Nobody's afraid of Bub because he's so skinny. One guy told me he looks like a golf tee with hair. So it'll probably be someone else who wreaks damage on little Matthew the Mouth."

"I wouldn't mind being there to see that," Pedro said.

"Be careful what you wish for. You might get it. By the way, I want to lend you this book." Adam handed him a small paperback

with a young black boy on the cover.

"Samuel Morris. That's the title?"

"Yeah. It doesn't sound like much, but that book is awesome. It's the life story of the most interesting person I've ever run across."

"Is Samuel a Christian?"

"Was. He's been dead for a long time. He's one of the most outstanding ambassadors for Christ that ever walked God's green Earth, and he walked a lot of it. Halfway across Africa, in fact."

"If you think that highly of him and the book, I guess I better check it out."

"You won't be disappointed."

* * *

On Friday afternoon, Barbara showed up at the football game. She didn't speak with Sal, much less sit with him. He kept looking at her, trying to figure out why she was at the game if she was ignoring him. EJ was watching with some of her girlfriends, leaving Sal alone on the edge of a group of parents. Adam's parents had to conduct a funeral at the church and hadn't arrived yet.

One of his gazes was interrupted by a female voice saying, "Is this seat taken?"

"Rachel! What are you doing here?"

Her almost perpetual smile disappeared. "Am I not supposed to be here?"

"No. That's not what I mean. I'm just surprised to see you, that's all."

"Pedro invited me to come watch him play."

"Ahh. Now the fog is starting to clear. Looks like my kids have started another operation."

"Operation?"

"You know, like in the military. Operation Desert Storm, etcetera."

"Oh. I get it. You think they are involved in military maneuvers?"

"In a way. They probably call this one something like Operation Matchmaker. Oh, my gosh. I left you standing. I'd be honored to share the seat next to me with you."

"Share it? I thought I was going to sit in it all by myself."

Sal bit his finger. "OK, Ms Keep-me-on-my-toes, let me share the bleacher with you."

She laughed as she sat down. "I know it's none of my business, but who is that blond over there you seemed to be eyeballing?"

He coughed. "That would be my ex-girlfriend."

"Ex. Are you sure?"

"I'm one-hundred-percent convinced that what we had is in the past."

"She's beautiful."

"Tell me something new. That's not exactly the most important ingredient in a spouse. A rose is beautiful but those thorns can raise hell...Cain with a man's skin. Now, can we change the subject?"

"To what?"

"Anything but her and the weather."

"That leaves me a few topics to choose from."

Sal jumped to his feet with some of the other parents to cheer for a touchdown pass from Pedro to Adam.

* * *

After another win by the home team, the parents mingled with the kids. Rachel tagged along with Sal. After enough celebrating, Sal said, "Hurry up and shower, Pedro. Looks like we need to reload your carbs."

"Cool beans!"

They watched him run toward the locker room. The coach walked toward the locker room as well. He was accompanied by Barbara, who had her arm threaded through his. Their route to the locker room took them right past Sal and Rachel.

Barbara looked up in surprise. "Well, I see you didn't take long to find a replacement."

"You'd never think of doing such a thing, would you, Barbara?"

Sal heard the coach say, "Who's that?"

"That's the father of your quarterback."

The coach turned back and looked. The two men stood staring at one another until Barbara pulled him away.

"One-hundred-percent sure?" Rachel asked.

"Nah. One-hundred-and-ten-percent. Coach doesn't realize that the second hurricane of the season is brewing."

"Hurricane Barbara?"

"Exactly."

"What was the first one called?"

He motioned toward a boy in a football uniform. "Hurricane Adam. Our lives have certainly been turned upside down since he moved to town."

"He's a great kid, isn't he?"

"Wonderful. I'm so glad Pedro got hooked up with him. This is the age when kids start going south because their friends are

getting caught up in trouble. They need a magnet to help keep them on the right path."

"Like gravity, keeping something in its orbit."

"Yeah, I like that analogy. Adam is like Jupiter revolving around the sun."

"Is that s-o-n or s-u-n?"

"Both. And Pedro and his friends are moons revolving around Jupiter."

"Hmm. That analogy has a problem. If we revolve around a person instead of Jesus himself, we're in danger of spinning out of orbit if something happens to that person?"

"You just had to ruin my perfect picture, huh?" Sal asked.

"Sorry. I was into realism a long time before reality TV became popular. As our old pastor used to say, 'God doesn't have any grandchildren.' We all have to make the choice."

"Speaking of pictures, I've had this idea rolling around my head for years. I've never shared it with anyone. It sounds kind of silly."

"I'd be honored if you shared it with me."

"I'm not so sure you'll feel honored afterward, but here goes. Ever see a beautiful picture of a nature scene where people are having a picnic?"

"Maybe. Keep going," Rachel said.

"We look at that picture, and we think what a beautiful scene it is. It's perfect. And in the painting it is. But, if that was real life, there would be ants getting into the food, flies and mosquitoes dive-bombing the picnickers, and a hot sun causing sweat to get people wet and sticky. You get the picture?"

"And the pun. You're right. Nothing is ever perfect. We just learn to put up with the problems as we enjoy the good stuff. Kind of like in marriage."

Sal blushed. "Meaning?"

"You know the stars-in-your-eyes attitude about love. People look so perfect, but when you really spend time with them you discover they have bodily functions, illnesses, odors, quirks of behavior, tempers, addictions, etcetera. The perfection is gone. Some people never recover from the shock of discovering that fact. They're unable to enjoy the good stuff because the imperfections bother them too much."

"I see what you mean. In the picnic scene, somebody might get fed up with the bugs and stuff and pack up and head to the nearest restaurant and eat looking at a wall. In marriage they head for the divorce court. And single people just stay single so they

don't have to put up with the hassles."

"Very nicely put," Rachel said.

"So, is that what you are doing?"

"What?"

Sal gently brushed a strand of hair out of Rachel's eye.
"Avoiding the imperfections of marriage."

"Thank you. In a way, maybe. You have to wait for a person to come along that offers more good than bad. Who'd want to be up at that picnic scene on a cold, rainy day?"

"Exactly. You've now totally deflated my view of romance."

"Good. Sounds like your bubble needed to be popped." There was an awkward silence for a moment. "Suppose you'll have a coven in the oven when you go home tonight."

Sal laughed. "I doubt it. The mosquitoes at our last picnic carried off lots more people than broomsticks ever have."

Rachel laughed. EJ came up to them while they were still enjoying the shared expression of humor.

"What's so funny, Dad?"

"I think you had to be here, EJ."

She shrugged. "I guess that means that only an adult would get it."

The adults both giggled.

"You guys sound like teenagers."

"Thanks, EJ."

She rolled her eyes. "Hurry up, Pedro."

* * *

After another meal with the Morales clan, Rachel excused herself, turning down an invitation to continue the party at the Morales' house.

On the way home from the restaurant, EJ asked, "Dad, are you in love?"

"Gee, EJ, why don't you quit beating around the bush and say exactly what you mean."

"I just did."

Sal laughed. "I was being sarcastic, honey."

"It's not nice to be sarcastic."

"Sometimes it's OK. It depends on the spirit with which the sarcasm is delivered. Sometimes sarcasm is just funny. Sometimes it's cruel."

"Yeah, don't let Matthew get possession of any sarcasm. He'll refine it into a tool of torture."

Pedro signaled a time-out. "You're on Matthew's case a lot lately. And you've changed the subject. Dad was just about to tell

us if he's in love."

"I was."

"Yeah. You were."

"I don't know," Sal said.

EJ shook her head. "Well, neither do I. But I do know that you're different. It's like at the football game the other day. When we were getting out butts kicked, you were pouting. In the second half you were a new man. That's how it is when Rachel's around. Your face lights up, and you're kinda bubbly like Seven-up when you first pour it."

"Really. I'll have to look in the mirror next time and look for bubbles."

"Dad. I think you're being sarcastic again."

"Guilty, EJ."

"Dad, can I ask a personal question?"

"Sure, Pedro. If it's too embarrassing, I'll duck it."

"I understand how another person brings joy into our lives, but how do you tell what you feel is love and not just...hormones."

"Ahh. You're going to get really personal, huh?" Sal pulled into their driveway. There was no witch parade on their sidewalk today. "It's a good thing we're home. I'd have trouble driving and finding the right words for the conversation that we're going to have when we get in the house."

"You're going to talk about the 'S' word, aren't you?"

"I think it's time to bring up the topic, EJ. Maybe too late for Pedro."

They exited the car and plopped themselves on the couch.

"This isn't going to be easy. I wish your mother was here to take care of this, but she's not, so here goes. Man populates the Earth through having babies."

"Duh, we know that!"

"Don't interrupt, EJ. Go ahead, Dad."

"God created this method that most of the living world uses, a seed or egg is united with...ahh...."

"Fairy dust?"

"Not quite, EJ. Something just as magical though. In humans we call the agent 'sperm'. That little guy merges with the egg and it creates a baby."

"But how—"

"EJ, let him talk."

"How does the sperm reach the egg? Well, God, in his infinite wisdom, knew that he had to make the process for creating babies something pleasurable. People are so lazy and irresponsible that

they might have failed to populate the Earth if making babies was work. He created our bodies to enjoy coming together to produce the sperm and send it on a marvelous journey to find the egg."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. There's a lot of complicated stuff goes on behind the scene biologically, but there are also a lot of complex emotional and relational factors to take into consideration."

"Like what?"

"Like love. Why do you eat?" Sal asked.

"Because I'm hungry. And sometimes because I like the taste."

"Same with sex. Sometimes people have sex just because they're hungry, and it tastes good, if we follow the food analogy. They're not married, and they don't love each other. They might have just met. They're just physically attracted to one another maybe."

"That's what I was talking about," Pedro said. "I wanna know how you tell love from that physical attraction."

"That's a very good question, Pedro. Here I am, forty-one years old, and I still struggle with this. I thought I loved Barbara. Now after I'm away from her and with Rachel, I see that I had the male-female attraction thing going on."

"But you're not supposed to have sex with someone if you're not married to them," EJ said.

"Exactly. Well, that's the way it is for people who accept waiting until marriage as a commandment from God or a social requirement. Not everybody follows that rule. It's not easy to follow, even when you want to."

"So if you really love someone, you don't have that magnetic pull of sex involved?" Pedro asked.

"That pull seems to be there even when you love someone, and maybe it's even stronger. The thing is that it's easier to prevent if you really love that person, and you know they really want to reserve their sexual activity for marriage only. Take Rachel, for example. She likes and respects me right now because I honor her commitment to God to not give herself away to any man but her husband. If I was to try to get her to break that commitment, it would make her angry at me."

EJ made a face. "We don't want that."

"No. Certainly not. Also, I don't want to break my commitment to God, so I don't want her starting anything either. Make sense?"

"Yeah, I think so. And with Barbara?"

"Barbara doesn't think the same way that Rachel does. She

thinks Christians can have Harry Potter and sex."

"Dad, I've got a dumb question."

"EJ, the only dumb question is one that's never asked."

"I don't believe that, but I'll take your word for it. If you have this commitment to God to avoid sex until marriage, and Barbara doesn't have the same commitment, wouldn't it be kind of dangerous for you to be around her."

"Your twelve-year-old mind amazes me sometimes. You're absolutely right, EJ. Barbara was a temptation to me. If we'd continued going down the path we were, she probably would have gotten her way sometime. When a man is primed for sex, he enters a state of temporary insanity. He can do things he regrets later. We would have probably had sex. I'd have felt guilty and asked her to marry me. She might have accepted. And then we'd be married and possibly not in love. Trapped by our hormones, in a way, because Christians aren't supposed to get divorced. That's why they say till death do us part in a wedding."

EJ nodded. "I'm glad you broke up with Barbara."

"Actually she broke up with me, but that's OK. The result is the same. I'm now very happy getting to know Rachel. When you really love someone, you can talk to them about anything."

"Even sex, just like we're doing?"

"Exactly. It is such a joy to be able to share all the thoughts and feelings that we have inside of us with someone else. It makes us feel more valuable as a person. It makes this life make more sense. Am I making sense?"

Pedro shook his head. "You're starting to get a little deep for me."

"OK. I'll stop here. Anyway, I have one last thought. Most people in the world never know how special it is to find that special love I'm talking about. They're too willing to accept the physical part of the relationship and forget the spiritual and emotional needs. Does that help, Pedro?"

"I think so. If I really want to have a special life, I need to control my sexual appetites. Just because I'm hungry, that doesn't mean I should eat."

"You've getting it. I've tried to make it simple for you guys, but it's complicated. There are groups at churches where kids are taught about the importance of chastity."

"I heard about a girl in England who was threatened with being expelled from school because she was wearing a chastity ring," Pedro said.

"One thing I haven't mentioned is that the people in the world

who don't accept chastity are often attacking it. Sex is big business."

"Chastity?" EJ asked.

"Not having sex until marriage. It won't be easy. People are going to think you're weird because of this. You might someday think your dad is weird. Just remember I told you that it's worth all the effort to succeed in that battle."

"I don't think I'll ever forget. And I'll never consider you weird, Dad."

"I'm glad, EJ." He blew out a sharp breath. "There, that's taken care of. I feel much better now. I feel like I just took a tough test and it's over. I hope I passed."

"You did just fine, Dad," Pedro said. "Now that we're through here, I want to get back to reading the book about Samuel Morris."

"Maybe I can read it when you finish."

"Sure. Just don't take forever. I need to return it to Adam."

"Well, get cracking on it then," Sal said.

"I should finish tonight or tomorrow."

"Perfect!"

* * *

Two weeks later the Tigers had another home football game, their last of the season. Sal sat in the stands with Pastor and Mrs. Barnet and Rachel. A familiar voice behind the bleachers caught his attention. He turned around and saw Barbara and Matthew.

"Why did you make me come to this stupid game? You know I hate football."

"Matthew, I already told you. I am not going to leave you alone with your sister, at least for a while. I want to see Robert's team play, so you're stuck with it."

"I'm not going to sit in the bleachers."

"Fine. Just don't cause any trouble, or you wish you had."

She turned to find a seat. Matthew stuck his tongue out at her retreating figure. He caught Sal looking at him through the bleacher openings. He sheathed his tongue and elevated his middle finger instead.

Sal shook his head. *No wonder Pedro wanted to teach the kid a lesson.*

After Sal turned away, Matthew began to stomp on ants that were feverishly trying to escape his happy feet. He was enjoying himself immensely when a skinny kid wearing a long coat approached him.

"Hello, Babyface Nelson."

Matthew turned. "Oh, my gosh. Aren't you supposed to be at

the circus getting ready for the freak show?"

"I figured I'd sit in on *this* freak show. The brave little tailor all over again. Matthew the Mouth kills seven with one blow – of his clumsy foot."

"You just stepped over the line, buster. I'm gonna reroute your nose through your ear."

"Promises. Promises."

Matthew started toward him. He halted immediately with a shocked look on his face as Bub pulled a pistol from his coat pocket and aimed it in his direction.

"What's the matter, Matthew? Second thoughts. Getting cold feet even after all that stomping? I came down here today to shoot a few football players. Little did I dream I could be so lucky as to have you fall into my clutches."

"What do you want me to do? Put my hands up or something?"

"Yeah. Put your hands up – someplace the sun never shines."

The team was huddled up along the sidelines getting ready for the start of the game.

Someone shouted, "There's a kid with a gun over there."

People turned around to look and a few screams filled the air. Several spectators ducked down in the bleachers. The football players heard the screams and they either hit the ground or ran across the field to get away from the gunman. Sal realized immediately that Matthew was the target of the assailant. Barbara must have realized it too because he heard her shout Matthew's name.

Sal grabbed his cell phone and dialed 911. He quietly explained what was happening at the school and hung up. "Police are on the way. Whether they can get here in time is the big question."

The scene was almost a tableau. Hardly any movement was perceptible except for a flash of black and white streaking from the football field to the scene. The muzzle of the gun moved to cover Adam, who slid to a stop near Matthew's side.

"Bub, take it easy. Put the gun down before someone accidentally gets hurt."

"Oh, don't worry, jock. Nobody is going to get accidentally injured. Everything that happens here will be on purpose."

"Why you doing this? He's just a kid."

"He's a punk."

"So am I. We all are. We all do stupid stuff that we need people to forgive us for. Matthew, tell him you're sorry for calling

him names."

"It's too late for that, Sambo. I don't want to take you down. You're the one person who has tried to be nice to me. But I'm not going to let you stop me."

Sal whispered into Rachel's ear. "You stay here and keep down."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to try to sneak around him while his attention is focused on the kids."

"You could get killed!"

"If somebody doesn't stop this kid, lots of people might die here today. On second thoughts, I suggest you start getting people to exit the bleachers and run for it. This kid probably can't shoot very straight unless he's at point-blank range. If we all just sit in the bleachers, he might just blow people away left and right where they sit. In case anything happens to me, I want you to know that I think you're a very special woman, Rachel."

"Thank you, Sal. Please be careful." She gave him a gentle push and both made their way down the bleachers. Rachel started whispering to people on the far end. Some of them started to depart before Sal got close to the gunman. Some people refused to budge.

Matthew looked right at Sal as he tried to sneak up on the troubled boy. His look coupled with a slight sound gave Sal away. The boy whirled in his direction and aimed the gun at him.

"Trying to crash my party, mister?"

"Son, I don't know what's bothering you, but we can talk it out."

"Talk? Talk! Can we talk about my problems and make them go away? Can a few words change me from a ninety-eight-pound weakling to someone people respect? Can they make me attractive to the girls? Your words don't do squat, mister. I'm going to let this gun do my talking for me from now on."

Matthew started to chant.

Bub turned back toward the boys. "What are you doing, moron?"

Matthew ignored him and continued his chant.

"Stop it! Stop it right now!"

Matthew's voice became even stronger and faster.

"For the last time, quit it, or I swear I'll shoot. I'll draw a lightning bolt on your forehead in lead."

The chanting continued and the sound of a gunshot caused loud screaming. Matthew dropped to the ground, blood spurting

from his chest. Adam came out of his stance and burst to Matthew's side. Sal took a few steps closer to Bub. The boy turned back to him and Sal slammed on the brakes again. Adam bent over Matthew, trying to stop the bleeding.

"Leave him alone!" Bub yelled.

Adam looked up and kept on working.

"You heard me. Are you going to disobey me? Don't you realize the guy with the gun calls the shots? Ha, I just told a joke. You do what I say, and it might be cool. Now get away from him and let that blood soak into the ground. And then I have more people to get revenge on."

Adam shook his head.

"What do you mean 'no'? Are you crazy? This kid is a troublemaker. I heard about what he was doing at the flagpole. Why you trying to help him?"

"Because God loves him just like he loves you."

"Yeah, right. God didn't seem to love me before, and he certainly won't now after I blow holes in some of his precious creations. For the last time, move away."

Adam continued working on Matthew.

Sal started to advance again. When Bub started yelling again, he took off sprinting.

"I told you. It's your own fault."

A bullet whizzed by Adam's face and slammed into one of the supporting legs of the bleachers, causing a reverberation throughout the metal structure. More screams and crying echoed in the bleachers.

A second shot made contact with Adam just before Sal's leap allowed him to cross body block the unsuspecting shooter. The boy lay on the ground gasping for the air that had been forced out of his lungs upon impact. Sal picked up the gun, and ran to Adam's side.

Some of the crowd who had witnessed the drama ran toward the fallen boys while others seized an opportunity to run away. One of the parents who arrived at the scene was a doctor. He examined Matthew first, but he just shook his head and moved to Adam. After pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he put the material up against the wound. The white cloth immediately turned red.

Barbara wasn't far behind. She had seen the doctor shake his head. The coach had seen Barbara leave her seat. He sprinted up and gathered her in her arms as she began to wail.

"How's Matthew?" Adam asked.

"I'm afraid he's gone. We need to worry about you now. An ambulance is on its way," the doctor said.

"Doesn't matter. I'm not going to make it."

"Sure you are. Your wound's serious but not that bad."

"Believe me. My Father in Heaven told me that this was the end for me. I have one thing left to do before I go."

He reached over and put his hand on Matthew's head. "Matthew, come forth and be healed, be delivered, and rise in the name of Jesus Christ."

"Son, you have to lie back down. I can't stop the bleeding this way."

The sound of sirens blasted through the fall air. Adam collapsed unto the ground just as Pedro arrived. "What's going on?" he asked his dad.

"Matthew is dead. Adam is trying to raise him up. Also...."

"Also what?"

"Adam said he's going to die."

"No!"

Matthew sat up. "What happened to Adam?"

The doctor just stared.

Coach Darwin let go of Barbara, and she bent over her son. "Are you OK, honey?"

"I'm fine, but what happened to Adam. Why's he lying on the ground?"

"He's been shot."

The doctor shook his head as if trying to drive cobwebs out. He knelt back over Adam. "I don't believe it. Now this one is gone."

Adam's parents had been standing behind the doctor trying to give him room to work. Pedro heard the pronouncement and fell down on the ground next to Adam. "No, you can't leave us!" He put his hands on Adam's head and began to command him to rise. He tried to duplicate the resurrection scene that had played out just feet away from him moments earlier. He had no success. Pastor Barnet and Sal finally lifted the sobbing boy away from his friend's body.

"It's not fair. It's not right. Why should Adam have to die because of that scumbag?"

"Son," Pastor Barnet said. "I have to get back to console my wife, but God is impressing me to say one thing to you: Samuel Morris."

Pedro looked back and saw Rachel hugging Mrs. Barnet tightly. Suddenly he tore himself out of his dad's grasp and

sprinted away. He made the only tackle that would be made that day by a football player, nailing Bub attempting to escape. Sal caught up with Pedro and prevented him from taking out any more of his anger on the frightened shooter.

The police arrived a few minutes later and relieved them of guard duty and the gun. They were all required to give the police a statement on what had happened.

The football coaches were given instructions to tell their players to get dressed; the game was cancelled. The majority of the crowd melted away from the scene. An ambulance crew loaded Adam into their vehicle and departed for the hospital with Adam's parents right behind them.

Matthew got back on his feet. The doctor was shaken to his core. "How am I going to tell my peers about this? A fourteen-year-old kid raises a twelve-year-old from the dead, and then expires himself. Obvious my original diagnosis was wrong. He couldn't have been dead."

Barbara wouldn't let that answer go unchallenged. "Doctor, I can understand how you might have mistakenly thought he was dead, but in that case wouldn't he still have a bullet hole?"

The doctor expelled the air from his lungs slowly. "You've got me there. He's covered with blood that came out of a hole that doesn't exist. I'm really glad that I have lots of witnesses on this one, or I'd be going in for mental competency exams."

"How do you explain it, Doctor?"

"I can't – scientifically. Only the 'M' word applies here."

"M?"

"Miracle."

Barbara seemed stunned. "A miracle. You're absolutely right. God performed a miracle on my son. He was dead, and then he was alive and even unhurt. Adam brought him back to life."

"If that was true, why couldn't he heal himself?"

"I have no clue, Doctor. Maybe the same reason Jesus could heal others, but did not heal himself. Perhaps he wasn't supposed to."

The doctor shook his head. "I gotta get out of here. Officers, are you through with me?"

"Yes, sir. We'll contact you if we need any more info from you."

"Great. I have a bottle of whiskey at the office with my name on it. I might not be able to get to the bottom of this mystery, but you can bet I'm going to get to the bottom of that bottle."

Matthew came over and stood beside Pedro, who was still in

his football uniform. "I'm sorry about Adam."

Pedro didn't answer. He just studied Matthew's face. It looked different to him. After a few minutes of conversation, he could sense that Matthew wasn't the same boy who had taken a bullet in the chest.

The coach had returned to be with Barbara, and he kept trying to get her to leave. Finally she turned to him. "Robert, one of your players died here a few minutes ago. Actually my son did too, but here he stands right in front of us. There is no answer in the world that I can come up with here except God. It appears I have been the recipient of a great blessing. For you to talk like that makes my blood boil. Do I make myself sufficiently clear?"

"Crystal. I'll leave all you God lovers here together. Ciao."

She didn't bother saying goodbye. When he was out of earshot, Barbara turned to Sal. "I think I owe you an apology?"

"For what?"

"For rejecting you when you were trying to keep me on the straight and narrow. I was so bound and determined to do things my own way. Now I see I was on a dead-end course. I have no clue why God would perform a miracle like this for me, but I'm truly grateful. It's my goal to follow him and serve him for the rest of my days."

Matthew put his arm around his mother. "Me too, Mom. I'll be like Adam and raise people from the dead and cool stuff like that."

"You're a little young for that."

"Adam was only two years older."

"Yeah, but he was a pastor's son. You're the son of a sinner."

"My dad is close to the Lord."

Barbara frowned. "That's true. Wow. Maybe the miracle was really for Peter. I'm going to call him when we get home and tell him about this. By the way, where's EJ, today."

"She and Adam's sister, Tammy, are on a field trip. I am so thankful they weren't here today to see this." Sal put his hand on his forehead. "Oh, man. Tammy is going to be ripped up by the loss of her brother."

Pedro, who had been staring at the grass for several minutes, interrupted their conversation. "Dad, can we go home? I don't feel good."

"Sure. Barbara, we gotta go. Let me know if there's anything you need."

"Thanks. We're fine. If Adam's family needs anything, tell them I'm available."

"Will do. Pedro, do you want to wear your uniform on the ride

home?"

"Yeah. I'll get my street clothes later."

"Let's go then. Rachel, could you do me a big favor?"

"Sure. Just name it."

"Tammy and EJ were scheduled to be back at five p.m. If you could pick them up for me, I'd be eternally grateful."

"Glad to help. Shall I bring EJ home, or do you want me to entertain her for a while?"

"Excellent question. It would be nice if I could deal with Pedro alone. Do you mind?"

"I'd be glad to help out."

"Thanks. You're an angel," Sal said.

"Last time you said I was a peach. Did I get a promotion?"

"Nah. I meant you're a peachy angel."

"I'll take that. See you later."

The ride home was quiet. Halfway home Pedro broke the silence. "This is so weird. A couple of hours ago Adam was laughing and telling jokes and now he's dead. *Poof*. The sky looks the same. The town looks the same. You look the same. But life can never be the same again."

"I know it feels that way now. And maybe it never will be the same. Life is like a boxing match sometimes. You get knocked to the canvas and you either get up again or the fight is over. Tough people get up again. People who rely on God get up again because they do it in his power. I think you have both going for you."

"This is even worse than when Mom died. I was right there when it happened."

"I hear you. What did Pastor Barnet say to you?"

"Samuel Morris."

"Isn't that the name of that book we read a couple of weeks ago?"

"Bingo."

"I wonder what he meant by that."

"I don't know either, but I intend to find out. He said God laid it on his heart. Dad, could you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Ask Pastor Barnet if I can speak at Adam's funeral."

"That's it?"

"That's all."

"Consider it a done deal."

"Thanks."

Fifteen minutes after they arrived at home the phone rang.

Pedro had sat on the couch since they got home staring at the wall.

Sal popped his head out of the kitchen. "That's probably Rachel. I'll get it. Hello."

"Yes. He's here. May I ask who's calling?"

"Ohhh. Hi. Just a second."

Sal walked into the living room and handed Pedro the cordless.

"Who is it?"

His dad made a motion of putting the phone to his ear. Pedro took the hint.

"Hello."

"Hi, Pedro. This is Faith."

"Faith! You're not supposed to call me."

"That rule has been thrown out. Mom is on some kind of spiritual high. She's lifted all the restrictions on me. I'm worried about her. I think she's gone off the deep end. She said that Matthew died, but then came back to life. He does seem to be acting different."

"She's telling the truth. I saw it with my own eyes."

"Then the rest is true? Adam really is dead?"

"That too."

"I'm so sorry," Faith said as she began to sob.

"Me, too."

Faith sniffled. "I don't know what else to say. My mom says it's hard for adults to come up with words when someone dies. How are kids like us supposed to figure out what to say?"

"We have enough trouble saying something meaningful in normal situations," Pedro said.

"Exactly. Anyway, I know people use a cliché that everything happens for a purpose. I don't know about that. It's a nice thing to believe I guess. We watched a movie a while back with Robin Williams. It was called *Patch Adams* or something. Anyway, this girl Patch likes gets murdered. He's torn up and is searching for answers. Then he sees a butterfly, reminding him of the process of changing from a caterpillar to a butterfly, and he knows that everything will be OK."

"Do you suppose that God made caterpillars like that for that very reason? To show us that life is transformed?"

"Maybe, Pedro. I have a suspicion that God has all kinds of neat little things tucked around in the world for people to discover. Kind of like a cosmic Easter egg hunt. If we just open our minds, eyes, and hearts, we can discover them."

"You could be right. I'm just not in much of a mood right now to go looking."

"It takes time to heal from something like this."

"I don't think it's really hit me yet. Monday when I get on the school bus and there's no Adam to talk to and going to football practice without Adam is when it will really sink in."

"You're probably right, Pedro. You're going to miss him, aren't you?"

"Boy, you got that right. I don't know quite how to explain it all. I was almost ashamed of my faith until he came along. He made it cool to be a Christian. Now I see that if I walk by the Spirit, being a follower of Jesus is more exciting than anything – even playing football."

"I know what you mean. Anyway, I just wanted to help cheer you up. My mom wants to use the phone to call Daddy. This ought to be interesting."

"No doubt! Thanks so much for calling."

"Good night, Pedro. I'll pray for you."

"Cool. God bless. Bye."

He walked the phone back out into the kitchen. "That was a pleasant surprise, to have Faith call you I mean."

"Yes, it was. It's funny. Adam died, but other things seem to be coming to life."

"Such as?"

"Matthew for one. And his mom. And now my relationship with Faith."

"Do you have a relationship with Faith – I mean beyond just ordinary friendship?"

"Yeah. I do, Dad. It's time everybody knows about it."

"Congratulations, son."

"Thanks. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to get ready for a speech. I have to say something fitting for the best friend a guy ever had."

"You go it, guy."

Chapter 13

The church was packed for the funeral. Pedro and his family sat in the second pew, right behind the Barnet family.

Adam's father stood up and walked to the microphone. "It's a bit of a cliché for the pastor to say at a Christian funeral that we are gathered not to mourn but to celebrate the life of the deceased. In this situation, however, those words are not easy to speak. For the one who lies still in that coffin is my own. We only had him for fourteen years. He blessed our lives more than we can ever tell you. Now I understand that he wasn't really ours. He was just on loan from Heaven, and the Lord has called him up to the major leagues. The Celestial Coach must have decided that he needs Adam in Heaven more than we need him on Earth. And I think we really needed him badly."

A chorus of 'amens' rang out.

"I'm going to have several people speak for a few minutes today and share a little of what Adam meant to them. Some of these people knew Adam for only a few weeks. Others had the privilege of knowing him his whole life."

A procession of friends and family shared a favorite Adam story or memory.

"Now I want to turn the microphone over to a young man who is very special and was very close to Adam. Pedro."

Pedro got up and stiffly walked to the podium. He fiddled with the height of the microphone until it met his satisfaction. He then sighed loud enough for everyone in the congregation to hear.

"I'm going to do something strange today. This is Adam's funeral, but in keeping with Adam's spirit, I'm going to do what I think Adam would have wanted. I'm going to talk about another young black man who died much too young. Samuel Morris died in 1893. Over a hundred years later, his memory continues to motivate people. He was a prince in his tribe, the son of the chief. His tribe was poor and when the prince was captured by a rival tribe, his father couldn't pay the ransom. His captors beat Samuel mercilessly and forced him to do slave labor. One day a bright light came out of the sky, blinding his captors. At the same time, the ropes around his hands fell away. A voice told him to run. He did and continued running for weeks until he ended up in a far

away country called Liberia, the land settled by freed slaves from America. There he learned English and learned about Jesus Christ. After hearing the story of Saul on the road to Damascus, the prince realized God had set him free. With the knowledge God had spoken to him, he embraced Jesus and grew in his faith.

"One of the things he kept hearing over and over was the importance of the Holy Spirit. He had to know more. The person who had the answers was a man from New York City. Despite having no money or other means, Sammy landed a job on a ship bound for New York. After passing through many trials, Sammy won the hearts of almost everyone on board the ship. Most of the men on that boat became Christians as a result. The story of that voyage is worth an hour itself. When he arrived in New York City, Sammy walked for a while and then asked a man to take him to Stephen Merritt. The population of New York City at the time was about three million. Unbelievably, the first man that Sammy asked was able to take him to Stephen Merritt's doorstep. And Sammy asked to learn of the Holy Spirit.

"In the following years, Sammy taught Merritt and others about the Holy Spirit. He healed the sick, including himself whenever necessary. He spoke to his Father and about his Father just like he was there. Before he reached his twenty-first birthday, Sammy died of a common illness. He had healed himself of similar illnesses many times in the past. However, this time he told people that his Father had told him that he was being taken home. This time there would be no healing. And that is exactly what happened. Sammy's grave became a place where people continued to receive miracles. Even though he is dead, his work continues.

"Adam was much like Sammy. He was very close to his Heavenly Father. God did mighty works through this willing servant. We'll miss that influence. When Sammy died, three people volunteered to go to Africa as missionaries. Later seven more did the same. I've already seen lives changed by Adam's death. He has brought light into places that were dark and love into places of hate. He has brought hope into places of despair, and now he has brought life into places of death. Sammy was special because he was near his Heavenly Father. Adam was special for the same reason. I look out on all of you gathered here today and wonder what is stopping you from drawing near to your Heavenly Father. Sammy was called the 'Angel in Ebony'. Adam is worthy of a similar title. My second favorite Sammy Morris story was the day he arrived in New York City. Mr. Merritt sent him over

to the rescue mission to get something to eat. There he encountered seventeen homeless guys who were freeloading a meal. They complained to him that they had to listen to preaching after they ate. Sammy got up front and before he was done talking, seventeen men lay on their stomachs weeping and asking for forgiveness for their sins.

"At the time Sammy had no formal education. He was black in a white man's world. And he was just a kid, like Adam. But he changed people's lives because of the touch of the Holy Spirit, and the love he had for people. God has said that we shouldn't despise the small things of the world. And kids are small things in an adult world. God also promised he would pour out his spirit in the latter days and young men will have visions and daughters will prophesy.

"My favorite story about the African prince renamed Samuel Morris concerns love. Aboard the ship one vicious killer had a tremendous dislike for Sammy, and he waited for a chance to kill the young black man. One day that opportunity arose. As the man brought back his cutlass to hack Sammy to pieces, the victim stared into the eyes of the killer with love and compassion. The man walked away without finishing the blow. Later he became one of the men on ship who adored Sammy.

"You might wonder what it is that I'm trying to accomplish with this tale of a boy who died over a hundred years ago. It a nutshell my message to you is 'give love a chance.' As Christians we often stand up to fight against those we perceive as opponents of our Lord. That is a good thing, but we have to do it in love. First Corinthians 13:1 says 'though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.' Sammy didn't want to be a sounding brass. Adam didn't want to be a tinkling cymbal. And I don't want to be either. My prayer today is that you will evaluate your life here today. Adam is gone, but yet he lives on in each one of us. Can you help spread the message of love that he would have if he were still here? I want to play a song for you right now and have you meditate on what I've said here."

Pedro knelt down and bowed his head as the strains of music came over the loudspeaker. It was First Corinthians 13 set to music.

One by one people began to kneel around the room. Weeping was heard over the music. When the song ended, the sound of people crying filled the room. Pedro returned to his seat, and Pastor Barnet returned to the microphone.

He stood there in silence letting the tears of the people around him wash over him. When silence returned, he spoke again. "I believe we have just witnessed something extraordinary. This is supposed to be a funeral, but I feel that God has bigger plans than our honoring of Adam. Some of you are prepared through Adam's death to honor God. I want all those people who have never turned their lives over to the Creator of the universe and are ready to do so now to come up here and let us pray with you."

A few people approached the front. Some plunged to their knees.

"Perhaps you've been a Christian for years, but you're holding back. God is speaking to you today. Football players have an expression that they don't want to leave anything on the field. They want to expend all they have for the victory. Christians need to have that same mentality. You don't want to leave anything on Earth when your time comes. If you've been sandbagging on God, now is your chance to let him release the ties that bind. If you want to love people like God has asked, but you can't bring yourself to do it, come on down."

Pedro looked up and watched the steady stream of humanity approach the altar. Matthew was among the throng followed closely by his mother and father, whom Pedro had met before the funeral.

"I want all of you that are not up here for prayer who feel led to do so to come and pray with someone."

Pedro stood up and walked over to Matthew and his family. He put a hand on Matthew's shoulder and began to cry out to God for a blessing on Matthew's life. A touch of a hand on his back diverted his attention for only a second. When he finished praying, he turned around and saw it was Faith. He put one arm around her waist and lifted his other hand to place it on her mother's shoulder. Faith put a hand on her father's shoulder and they prayed over them. When they were finished praying, the Nelson family shared a group hug with Pedro. The Nelsons, like others who had received prayer, returned to their seats.

Pedro looked over the people remaining in the front to see if there was anyone else he felt led to pray for. With a small amount of shock, he recognized Bub. He was with a couple who appeared to be his parents and a police officer. It was the same officer who had visited their house the night of the witch parade. Fighting back revulsion at the sight of the young man who had caused this funeral, Pedro pushed himself to approach the group. He noticed his father praying over a gray-haired man who reminded him of

Andrew.

Bub looked at him and hung his head. "I'm so sorry."

Pedro felt something in him break. He placed his hands on the top of Bub's head and began to pray out loud. Visions of kids shooting kids ran through his head as he felt the pain of others, both shooters and victims. He began to sob to the point he could barely get his words out. He felt strong hands grip his shoulders. His father's voice picked up the thread of the prayer as Pedro let his sobbing have full reign.

The prayer moved to the boy's parents. They were both weeping like babies before it was over. Sal approached Officer Sutton.

"I assume you're just here to keep a watch on the boy?"

The policeman wiped a tear from his eye. "Yeah. I was – originally. But if you want to throw some of those prayers my way, I wouldn't mind it."

When everyone had been prayed for and had returned to their seats, Pastor Barnet took the microphone one more time. "I believe that God's done here. You now can return to your former lives. Perhaps you got caught up in the emotional surge today and you made promises you can't or won't keep. Maybe your life has changed forever. God spoke to me that Adam's legacy is represented right here in the hearts of every one of you. The ripple effect of lives touching lives will increase the impact that the fourteen years of my son's life had upon his world. Remember you are the clay. Jesus is the potter. If you soften your heart, he can mold and shape you into something very beautiful. I pray you carry out the mission that God has called you to – Operation Love Your Neighbor. Go in peace."

He stepped back to the front pew where he, Tammy, and Mrs. Barnet locked in a tight embrace. After the family hug, the pastor turned to Pedro and hugged him. "Son, I want you to come back with me and greet people as they leave."

Pedro nodded and threaded his way through the crowd, which didn't seem to be in a hurry to exit the church. He took a post just outside the front door of the church and received the thank-yous and congratulations from people who had been touched by his words.

Faith ran up to him and hugged him. "You're not going to believe this."

"Believe what?"

"My dad asked my mom to marry him again. And she said yes!"

"Oh, my gosh. That's awesome!"

"We owe it all to Adam and his faithfulness to the Lord."

Pedro nodded. "He brought life where there was death."

Matthew came up to Pedro and gave Faith a playful bump. She gave him a hug. "I know the God Squad is missing one of its members now. I was hoping you'd let me join?"

"Let you join? I hadn't thought about the future of the God Squad. Adam started it. I thought it was probably over."

Matthew's face had a serious look. "You can let it die if you want, but I think Adam would want you to take over as leader. I'm ready to follow."

"So am I."

"Me, too."

"Count me in."

"Don't leave me out."

Pedro looked up to see Amy, Joe, Chung, and Timmy.

"Well, this looks like a no-brainer decision. See you at the flagpole Monday."

"Can high school kids join the God Squad?"

"Roberta! Of course. You better not be cutting school to join us at the flagpole though!"

"No worries there! We better clear the area folks, so other people can talk to Pedro," Roberta said.

The group of young people moved down the stairs, and Pedro watched with a lump in his throat.

"A penny for your thoughts."

Pedro whirled around and looked up into the face of an old man. "Andrew! That was you I saw."

"Yes, it was. And yet it wasn't me you saw. It was a new me. I've been born again."

"And witchcraft?"

"I finally get it, Pedro. We were trying to worship the creation and ignored the creator. Maybe what we did wasn't evil in itself because we weren't hurting people. But your dad explained it to me this way. If I was a father, and I gave my son a toy so that he would honor me, but he honored the toy instead, that gift would be a bad thing. Something to be avoided. All the idols of the world, whether Mother Earth or money or power or even sports cause us to spend our worship on the toys. All of them have to be cast down for us to truly worship the one who created them and us."

"Wow. I'm impressed," Pedro said.

"Don't be. I've still got a lot to learn about this whole thing."

"Andrew, I have to ask why you were here today?"

"The boy who shot Adam is my grandson."

"Oh, my gosh."

"I feel some responsibility in this affair, so I figured the least I could do was come and pay my respects. I better take off to have a long talk with my wife, who refused to come with me. And I have a whole group of people that I want to talk to about witchcraft."

Pedro nodded. "Go for it!"

Just about everyone had left. Pedro was getting ready to find his family when Officer Sutton and Bub walked through the door.

"Can I talk to Pedro for a minute?" Bub asked.

The policeman nodded and the two approached Pedro.

"Pedro, I just wanted you to know how sorry I am. I understand things a whole lot better now. The reason people do crazy things like I did is clearer. The feeling of being without power sucks. We want to feel we have some control in life. Now I see we need to give that control to God. I was able to take power into my own hands for a few minutes. That power was destructive. Now I've seen what real power is, a power to rock the world for good and not for evil."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Also I wanted you to know that I've decided to become as much like Adam as I can. I don't know what's going to happen to me, but no matter what jail or juvenile detention center or whatever, I'm going to try to be Adam for those people I come in contact with."

"That's wonderful. I'll be praying for you. Maybe someday you'll help someone to avoid the problem you caused. If people who fantasize about killing others would also fantasize the funeral scenes and the grief they cause, maybe they'd choose to find another outlet for their anger or seek help."

"You're right. I think it would have helped me."

"We've got to get back now," Officer Sutton said.

"Bye, Pedro."

"Take care, Bub. You too, Officer."

Pedro watched the policeman escort the young man to the squad car. He shook his head. *What a sad affair! Yet, through it, God has worked mighty things. Amazing!*

The door opened again and Sal, EJ, and Rachel exited.

"Are you ready to go home, Preacher Pedro?" Sal asked.

He nodded. They began the long walk back to the car with the grownups leading the way.

"Why is Adam being buried in Michigan?" EJ asked.

"His parents want him to rest next to some of his family

members," Pedro said, putting his arm around EJ.

She smiled up at him. "Way to go, bro. Nice job today."

Rachel stopped Sal and pulled him off to the edge of the sidewalk, and the two waited for EJ and Pedro. She unwrapped her hand from Sal's and put her arm around Pedro. Sal did the same with EJ, and the foursome walked down the sidewalk together.

EJ sighed. "I wanna know how come God let Adam die when he'd given him those gifts that the world needs so bad."

"God's ways are not our ways," Rachel said. "There have been a lot of good people who died young. It doesn't make sense to us sometimes, but we need to trust that God knows what's best. It's his game plan, after all."

"Gosh, Rachel. Now even you're using football to explain life."

"Sorry, honey. I'll try to talk more lady-like from now on." She smiled at Sal, who returned a grin.

"Hey, Pedro," EJ said. "It looks like God is blessing you with some of the gifts that Adam had. Maybe you'll do great things like prophesy the future."

"Maybe, EJ, but remember this: 'Not by might nor power but my Spirit says the Lord.' If I do, it won't be me doing it."

Rachel squeezed his shoulder. "Very nicely said, young man. It doesn't hurt to have some prophetic help from the Lord, though. Did you know there are actually schools you can go to for developing God given supernatural gifts?"

"You mean like a Hogwarts for Christians?" EJ asked.

"Not exactly, but close enough to give you an idea."

"Interesting. I think Pedro should go."

"I don't know, sis. Seems weird to go to school to learn how to do things only the Spirit can do. Speaking of Hogwarts, now I really want to tell people about Harry Potter. Trouble is, he's so popular that nobody wants to listen, even Christians."

Rachel smiled at him. "Pedro, I'm not sure I can help you with non-believers. You'll have to rely on the Holy Spirit to guide you there. With believers you can use the argument I always have."

"What's that?"

"I simply ask them, if Harry Potter isn't evil, what harm will it cause them to avoid him anyway. And if Potter is demonic, what harm is it going to do to their Father in Heaven and his kingdom on earth if they embrace Harry?"

"That's good, Rachel," Sal said. "Wow, even mind-boggling if you think about it. God called us to fight the devil. How embarrassing would it be to actually stand face to face with God

and have to confess you were helping the enemy? It's just not worth the risk. I wish I'd seen that earlier, but better late than never."

EJ playfully elbowed her father, "Way to go, Dad. Pedro and I figured out the Potter thing – with Adam's help." The smile vanished from her face. "What I really wanna know is when these shootings are going to stop."

Sal squeezed EJ's hand. "I'm afraid until love shines in the heart of every man, this sad funeral scene is gonna be played over and over."

"I don't think it's going to stop until Jesus comes back," Pedro said.

Sal nodded. "You might be right, son, but in the meantime we have to do all we can to love others and share the source of that love."

