

Inappropriate Behavior



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Prologue

Living by faith imparts God's grace to me each day. Walking by faith brings blessings – heavenly delights that are the assurance of my salvation and my security in Christ – each day. The Apostle Peter and John the Beloved wrote of these things too.

“To those who believe in the name of the Son of God...you may know that you have eternal life...you are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Also related to these daily delights is protection from the devil – through faith.

“Be sober, be watchful; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith.”

Living by faith demands spiritual awareness. I must be sober, and watchful. My spiritual awareness does not nullify my joy and peace in the Lord. Spiritual awareness is, however, a real responsibility – because of this enemy I have. My adversary, the devil, walks about. He is a real, intimidating and committed spiritual opponent, with an organized army of fallen, rebellious, demonic followers. As the Apostle Paul warned the church in Ephesus,

“...we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

This battle has not changed in thousands of years. My spiritual enemy is a deadly foe. His

goal is not merely to frustrate me or make me miserable. He wants to devour me – to devastate my life. Jesus put it this way: “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill and to destroy.”

Today, I go forward again, challenging the boundaries of my sworn enemy. It has to be done!

Chapter One - 2008

Thursday Morning - July 14, 2008

The church building stood silent and empty in the cool early hours of that mid-July Thursday morning. No cars waited in the parking lot. No signs of life gave any indication at all of the occupants watching silently as she drove onto the property. But she knew they were there. Waiting. Just inside the doors. Hovering in the darkness of the sanctuary. Or sitting arrogantly astride the roof. She could sense them. She could *feel* their eyes burning into her soul. She could smell their rancid breath tainting the gentle breeze that wafted along the concrete walkways and around the children's playground.

This was no ordinary Thursday morning for Lee Langston. This Thursday marked the beginning of an ordeal that would change the lives of everyone she knew. She could sense that, too.

The very idea of opening the doors to this empty building sent a cold chill skittering down her back. But it had to be done.

She reached across the pickup's front seat, taking the keys Simon had given her out of the zippered inner pocket of her bag, where they'd been safely tucked away for the past week. Somehow Lee knew that if, no...when, she used those keys, opened that particular door, walked across the foyer and into that pitch black sanctuary, nothing, not one single thing in her life, would ever be the same again. But it had to be done.

A shudder of apprehension shook her again, leaving her feeling as though the cool metal of the keys was burning against her hand. Then she resolutely opened her door, stepped out of the safe confines of her old pickup, and drawing a deep breath, strode across the walk toward the double glass doors.

The flower beds flanking the walks, lush and green just a few weeks before, were filled with dying reminders of July's heat, but more, of the neglect and division that was tearing this place apart from the inside out. The glass offered no welcoming view of the foyer inside, but instead reflected the ugliness of the drooping, dying maple trees and browned flower beds surrounding her. For a moment Lee was aware of her own reflection in the glass – an older woman, sturdily built, not unattractive – wearing an expression of grim determination. Behind her reflection and slightly to the left she could see the straw colored grass and sagging gate of the Tot Lot. Once a source of pride to the entire congregation, filled with happy laughing little folks. It had been tenderly cared for by the grandmotherly head of the children's ministry department before. Now the dilapidated swing set and weeds springing up under the slide spoke clearly of the state of mind developing within the few remaining members of this group.

Lee literally jumped as she caught a flash of something streaking past her reflection in the doors. Her mind suggested it was simply a wind-blown leaf or some small animal, but her heightened spiritual awareness told her differently.

“They know I'm going through with it,” she thought. Half aloud she told herself, “They can tell I'm prepared to go through with this, in spite of all the opposition they can muster.”

Two weeks earlier Pastor Simon Gundersen and Lee Langston had been closeted in his office for the better part of three hours. Sally Youngman, who was acting as temporary church secretary and currently holding all of Simon's calls, was feeling overwhelmed with curiosity. The snatches of their conversation coming through the closed office door had run its course from loud to soft, angry to soothing. And now, for perhaps the past forty-five minutes or so, there had been a steady hum of both voices blended together in what Sally felt certain was prayer. Just as she was about to roll her chair across to the file cabinet closest to the door the voices stopped and the clump clump of Lee's boots walking across the hardwood floor warned her their meeting was over. She picked up a pen and was busily minding her own business when the office door opened and Lee stepped through.

Sally had always been fascinated by Lee and considered her a “real character.” A woman of strong opinions. Not a regular member of their congregation. Lee came and went in a battered red pickup truck, acquired sometime in the last century. Her wardrobe, Sally guessed, might have been updated in about the same era. Far from fashion forward, Lee lived in jeans, boots, soft shirts and, depending on the season, either a worn denim jacket or long denim coat lined in shearling wool. Her hair, cropped short, was a tousled mass of blonde streaked curls. Her eyes, always enhanced with a frame of thick, dark lashes, were a deep piercing blue that some declared could “look straight through you.” She had a mellow voice, not unpleasant to hear, that could turn stone cold and or extremely intense depending on the situation. Today's meeting was,

apparently one of those intense situations.

Holding on to the office doorknob, as if thinking about her farewell words, Lee closed her eyes for the briefest of moments then spoke softly and, Sally thought, somewhat sadly, to Simon. “I know you're still not convinced I'm right about this Simon. But I can almost guarantee you, if something isn't done, and done soon, you won't have a church left to fight for. I'm sorry.”

As Lee pulled the door closed behind her, she twisted the knob holding it open to soften the sound of the latch clicking into place. Hardly a whisper made its way across the room to the listening girl, but Sally would have sworn somewhere inside Lee's head that door had been slammed with wood splintering force. As the older woman left the room she looked up from the faux notes she had been writing and caught Lee's eye. There were tears, whether of anger or pain Sally couldn't be sure, but there were tears rolling down Lee's cheeks. Brushing them away with the sleeve of her jacket, she took a step closer to the girl. Then, surprisingly stopped, turned and looked directly across the desk at her.

“Sally, I don't know what you overheard, and I don't really care. This much I do know. If you, and Simon Gundersen, and the Board and anyone else who still cares about this church doesn't prepare to do the stiffest kind of spiritual battle they've ever done, there won't be a church, or a congregation, or even a building left here by the end of summer.”

With that Lee Langston turned on her heel and strode across the foyer leaving a blinking and bewildered Sally staring after her with eyes the size of owl eyes and not a single word of comeback.

Leaving Sally Youngman, without a word of comeback was quite an accomplishment and Lee chuckled to herself as she crossed the parking lot to her pickup. “It’ll take about twenty minutes for that to make the rounds of everyone in her clique. Then the fat will for sure be in the fire. But it has to be done.”

Lee climbed into her pickup, backed out of the parking slot, spun a rubber-burning one-eighty toward the exit and turned left onto Laurel Avenue, headed for the local diner and coffee. She was exhausted from the battle she’d just waged with the pastor. And deep within her soul she knew it would be just the first of many such battles to come.

This wasn’t the first time Lee had taken on a spiritual leader to save a congregation from destruction, and she supposed it wouldn’t be the last. Sometimes, and especially as she’d grown older, Lee Langston questioned whether her gift of spiritual insight was really a gift or if it was, in fact, a curse.

In the diner, Lee slipped into one of the back booths, ordered coffee and a slice of apple pie à la mode, then resting her elbows on the scarred Formica table-top she dropped her head into her hands, closed her eyes and quietly began to pray.

Across the street from the diner, in the back room of the town’s small mom and pop hardware store, Margery and Bill Whitmore were also engaged in a battle. But their battle was far from spiritual. Margie had blown through the front door with fire in her eyes, and Bill knew without hearing her first words they were in for it.

As was her Thursday morning habit, Margie had spent a couple of hours over at the Community Church, volunteering on the clean-up crew. Her mood was never especially sunny after one of those sessions, but she considered the time spent to be part of her Christian *duty*, even though she usually spent the rest of the day tired and cranky.

This Thursday Bill could tell her mood was far, far beyond tired and cranky. She was armed for all out war, and he was smack in the middle of the cross-hairs.

His lone customer must have picked up on the electricity following Margie into the back room because she quickly counted out exact change for her purchases, gave Bill a pitying little sideways smile and hurried away as if she were escaping a coming attack.

“Bill. Back room. Now.” Margie's voice boomed through the aisles and echoed off of the racks of nails and screws.

Margery Whitmore was a formidable woman on a good day. In her current frame of mind she was a force to be reckoned with. And her gentle, quiet husband wasn't about to add to her wrath by even so much as a little. He resolutely walked around the cash-register counter to the front door, turned over the “Out To Lunch” sign even though it was barely eleven-thirty, and followed the sounds of Margie's slamming her purse and cellphone into the drawer of her rickety desk to face the music.

“What's the matter, hon? You seem upset.” Bill ventured as he slipped into one of the vintage yellow plastic and chrome kitchen chairs facing Margie's desk.

“Upset!” Margie howled. “Oh, I'm way beyond upset! I've never been so angry in all of my

life. Do you know what that crazy old cow has done now, Bill?"

"No...honey. Can't say as I do." It was a testament to his good sense that he refrained from asking the obvious, "What crazy old cow, honey?"

"Well, she's just ripped open the whole ridiculous "spiritual warfare" conversation with our interim pastor. And Bill! Simon didn't even disagree with her." She paused for breath and admitted, "Well...he did at first. But after awhile I think the man actually began to listen to her. Did you ever hear of anything so preposterous? Sally was right there. She heard the *whole* thing!"

Bill Whitmore stared at his over-wrought wife with blank disbelief. "You're talking about that Langston woman aren't you, Marge? The one who stirred up everybody about *evil spirits* causing people to leave the congregation before the board let Pastor Renwald go and half the congregation went with him?"

"Exactly! The batty old witch is at it again. I was cleaning in the empty classroom next to the pastor's office this morning when she came in. I was able to hear quite a bit of what they said myself. Bill, she's trying to convince Simon that there is something going on in our church besides just normal everyday Christian fellowship and worship. She's still saying there are evil spirits working in our church. In *our church*, Bill! I've never been so angry. She's crazy, I tell you. Crazy!"

"Well now Hon...the Bible does say there are...." Bill's words died away regretfully as the full force of her fury exploded in his direction.

“Bill Whitmore, I don't *care* what the Bible talks about when it comes to that. You *know* it also says *all* of those things will pass away. And after thousands of years I can guarantee you they *have passed*. Susan and I were just talking about that Langston woman at lunch on Monday. Susan said she influenced our last pastor to start preaching about things nobody even wanted to hear. Eternal salvation. Grace. The devil and spirits! My eye! I still can't believe Renwald listened to her. It's just a good thing we got rid of him as quickly as we did. If it had continued he would have been changing the worship music and the Sunday School curriculum, too. Can you imagine any minister advocating that sort of teaching for little children?”

Bill listened as her tirade increased in volume with every imagined threat to her church and its little children. He knew from experience what was coming. He also knew he could do little or nothing to turn Margie off before she had worked up a full head of steam and started dialing Board member's phone numbers. He was very much afraid Pastor Gundersen was in for big trouble.

Thursday Afternoon - July 14, 2008

By two o'clock Lee had finished her lunch and the few errands she'd planned for her trip to town. She'd driven the five miles to her small farm, hauled in the groceries, put away the perishables and run her pickup into the shed where it was protected from the sun. As she walked back toward the house, she heard the phone in the kitchen begin to ring. She was hot, tired and in no mood to talk with anyone. “Let the answering machine get it,” she muttered.

She crossed the porch, tossing her worn denim jacket over one of the rockers, as her own recorded voice stated, “leave a message. I'll get back to you.”

The machine beeped and Sally Youngman's high pitched, obviously over excited voice filled the kitchen. “Lee! Lee...We need to speak. Are you there? Pick up! Lee...”

She strode to the counter, picking the receiver off its cradle just as the line went dead and the message light started to blink “7” in pulsating red.

“Seven messages? What's all that about? *Nobody* calls me!”

She lifted the phone to her ear, pushed the “play” button, and listened with ever widening eyes as the device gave a run-down on her morning's activities. Margie Whitmore had called twice, leaving terse, accusatory comments, ending with demands that Lee call her back before “this mess you've created gets out of hand.” There were three hang-ups, spaced thirty to forty-five minutes apart, time-stamped between ten and noon, but with no caller ID she had no clue who had been so anxious to talk with her yet refused to leave a name or number. The final call, a few minutes before Sally's, was from the Pastor of the United Fellowship Church in Granger, the county seat forty-five miles west, where she had attended church for a few months during the previous summer. His message was curt and to the point. “Lee? Call me. We need to talk. Now.”

“Hmm... Seems I've stepped in it yet again.”

She jotted down a few words on a note pad kept next to the phone. Tearing off the sheet, she reached across the counter for her ancient, well-worn Bible, tucked the note inside its cover and went into a small back room lined with bookshelves she referred to as her library. As Lee left the

kitchen the machine continued to blink a reminder of the seven unanswered messages but she firmly closed the library door with no more concern for them than if there had been, as usual, no new messages.

At her desk Lee sank into her swivel chair, leaned her head back and closed her eyes, making a conscious effort to relax and clear her mind. The events of the morning had left her preoccupied and more than a little tense. The barrage of phone calls added a layer of dread. She knew, from years of experience, the battle for the soul of Brenner County had begun. And once again she was going to be right in the middle of it.

Lord, I know my enemy is relentless, but your grace is so much greater, your mercy so much stronger. Lord, I know your answer is simple and effective. "Resist him!"

How can these, your children, miss that?

You have said we are to stand against him. And NOT in our own strength. Never in our own strength. We can only effectively stand against the enemy "steadfast in our faith."

We must trust in Your Word.

Christ is victorious over the enemy.

Lord, give me guidance and direction. Give me Your Words in this situation.

So be it...

As Lee prayed—closeted in her tiny library, one hand resting on the Bible, the other upraised in supplication to her God—Pastor Simon Gundersen paced his office in the Ridgeview

Community Church struggling to make sense of the controversy swirling around him, and now throughout his congregation. In the two weeks since the Langston woman had visited his office things had gone from bad to worse. How, he wondered, was it possible for an ordinary, sixty-something, woman to create so much chaos in such a short time?

Simon was not exactly a young man himself. Besides, sixty was the new forty, or so he'd heard. He had been in the business of church leadership for a couple of decades and figured he knew his way around religious circles fairly well.

After moving to Ridgeview, with his wife Rosalyn and their two sons, he had picked the Community Church as a place to worship and get acquainted with the area. The first few months had been pretty much what he'd expected, even though the congregation seemed to dwindle by a few more members every week. He'd heard rumors of divisions and disagreements, but it was not particularly surprising when it came to small towns and small congregations. Then suddenly, almost without warning, Pastor Noel Renwald had resigned and moved away. That's when the President of the Church Board had paid him a visit.

Reluctantly Simon had agreed to accept the role of "interim pastor" while this small group of people decided how to handle the crisis left behind because their previous leader gave them ten days notice and moved out of town mid-week, leaving no forwarding address.

True, the situation was bad, but Simon thought probably, with prayer and time and good humor, he would be able to turn it around. Now it seemed the whole thing had gotten worse. Much worse. During this mid-summer morning Simon's phone had not stopped ringing.

For two weeks Simon's phone had not stopped ringing!

There were calls from members of the Church Board. There were calls from loyal members of the congregation. And, there were calls from Margie Whitmore and several of her followers.

None of the callers were happy.

Not one of them offered support or agreed with the decisions he'd made over the past two weeks. In fact, he was detecting a theme in their conversations. Apparently if Simon was unwilling or unable to stem the interference from that "crazy Langston woman" they were prepared to find a pastor who could.

Simon's pacing took him, for the fifth or sixth time, past the large office window overlooking the parking lot. On this trip by he was just in time to see his wife's Suburban pull to a stop near the front doors. He could tell from her jeans and tennis shoes she hadn't come to the church for a meeting or conference. That could only mean she was looking for him. Obviously she hadn't taken time to change, freshen her make-up or arrange her long blonde hair in anything resembling what she considered "pastor's wife perfect." He watched as she dashed across the lot toward the hallway door nearest his office. He could see the distraught set of her mouth and the dark blaze of her green eyes.

"Uh oh....Looks like they got to Roz too."

She threw the door open so hard it banged against the wall, then threw herself into his arms in what could only be described as terror. Simon smoothed his hands down her arms and held her away from his chest to study his normally unflappable wife. Her breathing was rapid, her face

streaked with tears and her hands shook where she held on to his shoulders, as if for support.

“Oh, Si!” She wailed. “Oh Si, what have we gotten ourselves into?”

“Come on into the office Roz,” he soothed. Too many eager ears and loose tongues out here in the hallway he thought. He guided her to one of the two over-sized leather chairs lined up in front of his desk, eased her into it and pulling a clean handkerchief from his back pocket proceeded to smear tears all over her face. He hummed comforting words and massaged her shoulders. Slowly her sobs calmed into uneven hiccups. Eventually she wore out her hysterics and on a final ragged inhale, leaned back in the chair, closed her eyes and spoke.

“I spent the whole morning fending off angry phone calls. Expect you did too. After lunch I had a murderous headache so I took a couple aspirin and laid down for a few minutes. Guess I must have dozed off...dreamed.... Awful! Si, it was awful!” She reached for his hands, for his support, then continued, “Si, I believe Lee must be right. Maybe she *is* a prophet! Or maybe Margie is right and she's just crazy. But today, in my dreams, I saw it all. There were angles and demons. There were people we know doing horrible things to hurt the elders and the members of our congregation. People *we know*, Si! They had the faces of demons, Si! The faces of demons covering over their own faces like transparent masks. And the only thing holding them back were the prayers you and Lee kept repeating over and over.

“I saw you two kneeling here in the office. There were angles behind both of you. Then you were each praying alone. At home and at the church. And there were angels with you then too, standing in her office and in yours. I saw angels guarding the church and our cars and our house.

But Si, if what I saw was a vision and not just a bad dream...Lee's right!"

Thursday Evening - July 14, 2008

Lord, we'll simply continue trusting in the great truths of Your Word which declare that Christ is victorious over the works of darkness. "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil...Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the cross." By faith we renounce the enemy and submit to You, Lord, for by Your promise the enemy must flee.

"Therefore we submit to you, God. We resist the devil, in the name of Christ, and he must flee."

After spending nearly two hours writing in her journal, pouring over Bible verses and praying many of them out loud, Lee felt stronger and better prepared to face the phone calls she knew would be required. Taking the journal and a pen to the kitchen, she pulled a chair away from the small round breakfast table, played back the morning's messages, noting phone numbers as they came up and then reached for her cell phone. Her first call was to Noel Renwald. She waited, doodling around the numbers she'd written down, as it rang. Once...twice...again.

"Pastor Renwald's office." The overly sweet voice Lee knew to be Noel's wife Charlotte sang over the line.

"Is he available?"

"Oh! Lee. Hello. Yes, just a minute and I'll get him." The sing-song was gone, Lee noted. And in its place, impatience and perhaps even mild hostility.

Left on hold, without further conversation, Lee thought, *Okay...I'll just hold on here for a minute and see what gives.* While braced for the chilly reception, she had hoped it would play

out differently.

One minute turned into five. The sounds of a muffled conversation came through the line and eventually Noel's voice, briskly announced, "Lee. Finally!

"What's going on over there, Noel?"

"I'd guess about the same thing that's going on in Ridgeview. All hell's broken loose, Lee."

Chapter Two - 2012

Friday Night - September 7, 2012

A bone chilling wind swirled around her ankles, sending the hem of her long denim coat whipping against her boots. Lee Langston shuddered, more from apprehension than from the cold, then purposefully strode across the parking lot toward the bright patch of light pouring through the church doors. The light seemed to be warning her someone, or some thing, had unlocked the building and was already inside awaiting her arrival.

“It's been four years since they gave me the left-foot-of-fellowship,” she muttered. “Four years! And *now* they want to make peace and hear my thoughts on it?”

“Yeah, right? As if.”

She paused for a moment, hand resting on the crash bar, as the memory of that long ago Thursday in the summer of '08 played itself out in her spirit. Resigned – drawing in a deep breath and exhaling a brief prayer – she pushed the heavy glass doors open and stepped inside the Ridgeview Community Church.

The foyer was brightly lit, and probably warm but, in the Spirit, Lee sensed a mind-numbing cold and a darkness deeper and more penetrating than the night wind forcing its way through the doors behind her.

“Nothing's changed,” she whispered. “This building, this congregation, all of it...it's still just a stronghold of evil. It's still the territory of the enemy, controlled by people who willingly adhere

to doctrines of demons. And they *still* don't even recognize it!”

Across the foyer, the hallway door leading from the offices, storage and staff lounge opened abruptly. Margie Whitmore stepped through into the light, pausing just an instant, she glared at Lee, leaving no question as to her opinion regarding this meeting. She moved forward, allowing the door to slam noisily behind her. She stood silent for another few seconds, then spoke in a deep, throaty voice. “So...Langston...you finally managed to finagle a meeting with our pastor did you? Well...just let me warn you right now, it won't do you any good. Simon answers to *us* now.”

Involuntarily, Lee took a step back from the voice, a voice that sounded very much as though it originated from just inside the pit of hell.

She forced herself to stop the quick mental inventory she'd begun. “*Hasn't changed at all. Still self-righteous, self-absorbed, over-bearing and just plain mean. Considers herself a better Christian than everyone else and makes it known at any opportunity. And those are her good qualities.*”

“*Judge not, Lee*” she reminded herself. “*What is it about skin-deep religion puts my back up so?*”

“Hello Mrs, Whitmore. It's nice to see you again, too.” As she crossed the foyer toward her old adversary the Spirit within cautioned her, “*Sarcasm won't work on this type, Lee. No sense of humor, either.*”

“Oh it is so *not* nice to see you here Langston. You weren't wanted here four years ago, and you aren't wanted here now. And if Simon Gundersen hadn't slipped his leash and gone running

over to Granger to whine to that Renwald character none of this would be happening.

“Follow me.” And turning on her heels Margie marched – the only possible word for it, marched – across the foyer to the hallway leading to the kitchen and Fellowship Hall.

Lee was left with little choice but to....follow her.

As they approached the kitchen, Lee heard snatches of conversation and picked out at least two familiar voices. Apparently both Simon Gundersen and Noel Renwald would be attending tonight’s meeting. As she looked into the Fellowship Hall, Lee recognized several people from the Ridgeview congregation, about equally divided between those who had supported her and those who followed and upheld the Whitmore's doctrine. Interesting to note Bill Whitmore standing in the kitchen with the two Pastors.

“Wonder if that means the camp is divided?” Lee thought.

When the men in the kitchen noticed her standing there in the hall, obviously wondering where she fit into the situation, both pastors moved toward her, hands extended in greeting.

“Lee,” Simon spoke first. “We're so pleased you could join us tonight.”

“Yes, Lee.” Noel beamed in agreement. “Thank you for making the trip. I know you've been working in Brennerton City and driving back and forth. That's some trip. Almost thirty miles each way. Every day! We do appreciate you making this time to be with us tonight.”

Lee could hear the “humph” Margie Whitmore blew out from clear across the room.

“Lines clearly drawn here.” she thought, and holding out her arms she embraced both of the younger pastors as a warm and loving sign of solidarity.

“Well...’spect we should get this show on the road.” Simon ventured. Placing his hand at the small of Lee's back he guided her to the head table, pulled a chair out for her and graciously offered “Coffee, Lee?”

“Coffee sounds great, Simon. Thanks? Light, one sugar. Please.”

While Simon crossed the hall to the kitchen to fetch her coffee, Lee smiled acknowledgments to a couple of the Board members and a few others she recognized from four years ago. She thought it interesting that neither Margie Whitmore nor the four women seated nearest to her were willing to even so much as turn their eyes in her direction.

“*Oh yeah. Lines clearly drawn here.*” crossed her mind again.

For the next twenty minutes, as Lee nursed a cup of really terrible coffee, Simon brought the meeting to order; introduced Noel Renwald, his wife Charlotte, then Lee. He read public minutes from the last Board meeting, and finally changed gears, getting down to the meat of the meeting.

“As all of you know, we called this gathering tonight to discuss several changes....”

“And those *changes* are *exactly* the reason Ridgeview Community Church is on the verge of bankruptcy. Those *changes* are the reason we have become a laughing-stock....” As she spoke Margie's voice rose to fever pitch. With her fists clenched, eyes burning into Simon's, she stood to her feet, prepared to take over the show.

“Mrs. Whitmore.” Simon cut across her impending tirade with a firm and authoritative quiet.

“We will, at the appropriate time, allow comments from the congregation. I would respectfully ask that you hold your comments until that time. Thank you.”

“Simon Gundersen, you don't know who you're dealing....”

“Mrs. Whitmore...I respectfully request that you hold your comments until they are appropriate. Or retire until the meeting is adjourned. Shall we continue?”

Lee watched as Margie struggled to control her wrath. It was obvious she considered Simon beneath her in every possible way. She had just made it vividly clear she had no respect for either his position or his opinions. Obviously she did not intend to give way to his authority now or at any time in the future.

Taking her hands from around the cup of terrible coffee, Lee reached under the table, tapped Noel on her right and Rosalyn Gundersen on her left, on their thighs, then firmly grasped both of their hands, dropped her chin to her chest and whispered, “*Lord Jesus, join us here. Holy Spirit, give Simon your power and authority. Spirit of strife...BE Silent!*” Adding a soft squeeze, she let go of the others hands, raised her face to the group and spoke clearly.

“Simon. Pastor Gundersen. Please go on. I'm certain none of us has anything more important to say than what you were about to tell us. We're anticipating the changes you plan to outline with great excitement.”

The old saw, “if looks could kill,” flashed through Simon's mind as he glanced toward Margie, but he smiled warmly at Lee, shuffled his notes together and prepared to resume the meeting.

Noel and Charlotte Renwald, Sally Youngman, Bill Whitmore and perhaps a half dozen of the others nodded and smiled. Margie, and those flanking her, glowered and squirmed. Throughout the remainder of Simon's outline it was unmistakable, they were not listening to learn, but

listening and planning to form their rebuttal. The atmosphere, while not openly hostile, remained charged with strife and impending conflict. Unity of spirit would not be won this night, Lee knew. As the meeting drug on it seemed to her many of the faces assembled at the table melted into macabre masks, barely concealing the spirits hiding beneath.

Saturday Morning - September 8, 2012

Thunder, rolling along the ridge above the farm, woke Lee from a fitful sleep a little before four o'clock. It had been a very short night. She kicked back the blankets, stretched hugely and sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, listening to the wind and distant thunder. "Sounds like a doozie of a storm blowing in," she commented to the room at large.

Another crash of thunder, closer this time, had her heading for the porch to check for open windows and adjust a shutter now banging rhythmically against the kitchen wall. As she stepped outside the screen door, hurrying toward the south end of the house, before the offending shutter tore itself loose, a spatter of huge raindrops blowing down from the north pelted her, soaking her thin cotton pj's, and chilling her to her core. Remembering that her coat was just inside the porch where she'd tossed it, on her way inside at well past midnight last night, she turned around intending to grab it. And the door slammed shut! Barely missing her outreached hand. Jumping back, just in time to save herself from broken fingers, Lee was suddenly shaken by a strong sense of reason-less dread. She reached out again, turned the knob, and to her amazement found the door was locked.

“Great! Front door's locked too 'cause I know I closed up the house before I turned in.”

Always the practical one, Lee started toward the shed where a flashlight and extra keys were kept in the pickup for just such emergencies. A quick dash across the yard should solve her problem. But as she turned toward the shed a bright flash of lightening illuminated the yard and Lee saw, clearly, two hunched figures moving between the shed and the barn. In that same instant she was aware of her pickup leaning ridiculously to the left on what could only be two very flat tires.

Lee had never considered herself a coward. Having lived alone for more years than she cared to count, and being convinced of strong angelic protection around both her and her land, she had, nevertheless, years ago purchased and become proficient with both a handgun and a rifle. Right at the moment, however, *both* were locked inside the house and she was standing outside, in the middle of the yard. Soaking wet. In her pj's.

Most people considered her a wacko, Lee knew. It didn't bother her overmuch because, after more years than she cared to count of walking in the shadow of the Almighty, Lee Langston knew what she knew. In her present situation, when most older women would have panicked, Lee calmly walked to the shed, opened the door of her pickup, wrapped a heavy blanket she kept folded up behind the seat around her wet self, and laying her forehead on the steering wheel, began to pray.

“Lord, you know what's going on here. I think I do, too. But in any case, Lord, your Word says you have given your angels charge over me, to guard me in all of my ways. I ask you now

to empower those angels to surround me. I ask your Spirit to guide me and direct me, Lord, And to make sure that no weapon formed against me can prosper. I ask your protection over Simon and Noel and their families. I ask your guidance and for them, too, Lord.

“Please give us the tools we're going to need as we move forward along the path you have laid out for us.

“And Lord, please, send those sneaking, sniveling little spirits back to the pit they came from. They have no right to be skulking around my place in the dark, Lord. So send your Light to defeat 'em.

“Amen! So be it.”

With her final Amen Lee cocooned herself across the seat in the warmth of her blanket. There she slept soundly until a few rays of sunlight broke through the clouds and, shining in the windshield, fell across her face.

Later, with a cup of strong, black coffee, a notebook and her ancient Bible in front of her, Lee sat at the little kitchen table doing business in her usual straightforward manner. She ordered two new tires for the pickup, to be delivered and installed by a local mechanic she trusted – new ones on the front, worn ones on the rear – since the two flats were slashed to the rim. She contacted a locksmith who would come later in the afternoon, even though it was Saturday, *as a personal favor to you, Ms. Langston*, to change locks on both cottage doors and install a new lock on the barn. From now on the pickup would be parked inside, despite the inconvenience of having to open and close the heavy barn door.

Her next call was to Simon Gundersen and after twenty minutes of discussion regarding Friday night's meeting she told him about her early morning adventure. Normally the expected response would have been, "Who?" Simon wanted to know, "What? What did you see?"

"Simon, I'm not saying what I saw was *not* human. What I am saying is whoever, or whatever, was prowling around here this morning had nothing but malicious mischief in mind. I ended up with two flat tires. Jimmy, from the garage, said he'd guess I ran over something on the way home. But if that was the case I should have noticed 'em before I pulled into the shed. I didn't. I know it was late and I was tired, but I was not *that* tired.

"The wind may have blown the door shut. It was whipping things around pretty good. But I'm positive I would not have turned the dead bolt to self lock just so I could step outside and fasten down that shutter.

"Simon, I know you're pretty new a this business of taking God's Word as absolute truth. And I know there are a good many people in this county who think of me as just another crazy old woman. A religious fanatic. But, Simon, I've be walking this path for a good long time, and I know spiritual opposition when it steps up and smacks me in the face.

"We're in a battle for the soul of Brenner County, and for its churches in particular. I know there are forces in play here that aren't even considered plausible in the twenty-first century. Most of your congregation wouldn't know an evil spirit if it walked right up and spit in their eye, Simon. And some of them actually embrace what the Apostle Paul referred to as "doctrines of demons."

“Lee, you know I've changed my opinions considerably in the past four years... but demons?”

Simon's concern and doubt couldn't have been more clear.

“Simon, some darkness is not just the absence of light. It is the presence of a being of evil. It is possession. Satan's minions are infinite. All you have to do is open the door just a little bit and they swoop in. Spiritual well-being comes from keeping the door *closed*. Closed tightly. Denial of God's Word and the power of it – that's *always* an opening for wrong believing. And for evil.”

Monday Evening - September 10, 2012

Margery Whitmore sat in front of her computer with a cup of hot chocolate and a few chocolate cookies. In front of the computer was a place Margie was prone to sit for a major portion of every evening. Except Sundays and Wednesdays, of course, then she sat in the front pew of the Ridgeview Community Church, exactly three spaces over from the center aisle, where she could keep an eagle eye on the goings on.

This evening she was deeply involved in a “chat” session with three of her closest friends. These *friends* were not women Margie had actually ever met in real life. Instead they became friends after she *liked* them on her social media page. She liked them after they'd commented on a few of her scathing comments on posts by some nut calling herself “living-in-grace.” In Margie's view revealing the *truth* to any poor deluded soul who “liked” such a post was her calling in life. Her *friends* agreed with her completely.

On this cold, rainy Monday evening Margie centered the chat around *her* Church, Lee

Langston, Simon Gundersen, and the weekend just passed. Her friends wholeheartedly agreed with her; it *was* terrible for *anyone* to suggest the Bible was the only true source of wisdom. As usual, Margie basked in their support and empowerment.

Julianne, an ex-pat currently living in Dubai, was appalled that a spiritual leader could be so narrow minded. Monica, a practitioner of Wicca from Appalachia, suggested tolerance, but agreed spirituality could not be limited to a belief in Jesus Christ – who was undoubtedly an ancient prophet and a good man, but nothing more. Vivian, the newest member of their wide-spread, yet close-knit, little clique, and herself a devout agnostic, thought probably Margie was right – the Langston woman was a member of some off-the-wall religious cult and therefore held a fascination and possibly esoteric power over the weak and unenlightened pastor, Simon Gundersen.

As Margie's chat session approached its third hour, Bill Whitmore laid aside the book he had been drowsing over and shuffled into the kitchen for his normal bed-time snack. As he reached for the light switch a the flash of a bright yellow glow streaked past the window, seriously startling him.

“Somebody out by the back fence with a flashlight. But how'd they get in the yard? Dog's out there. Gate's closed and latched!”

Bill dropped his book on a side table and moved quickly through the kitchen to the back door. He flipped on the yard light, and stepping out on the patio yelled for his big German Shepherd. Normally the dog would be barking its head off if someone so much as approached the gate. So

how come he was lying quietly in his doghouse, looking at Bill with questioning eyes and a slowly thumping tail?

“Hey, Trev! What's up out here?”

Trevor, the fierce and loud protector of Bill's domain, whined softly, and crouching, approached his master, slinking on his belly as if expecting to be greeted with a rolled up newspaper, not a doggie treat.

“What's the matter boy? D'you see somethin' out here, Trev?”

Bill laid a loving hand on the dog's shoulders and found, to his astonishment, the valiant Trevor was trembling all over.

Simon and Rosalyn Gundersen spent his day off on a shopping trip to the county seat and closest large city. The half hour's drive through farmland and forest, then over the Ridge Route was always an enjoyable break from the demands of his congregation. Leaving their cell phones on the kitchen counter, by mutual agreement, they were guarantee some much needed personal time alone together. On this Monday they'd made their monthly Costco run, picked up paint for the living room from the Home Improvement store, stopped on the way home for supper at their favorite roadside diner and now, just after dark were making the turn onto Laurel Avenue.

Simon wanted to run past the church on his way home. He wasn't sure why he felt driving past the building seemed important, but over the past several weeks he'd learned to listen to his hunches. Lee had suggested those hunches were the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the

Comforter, Counselor, and Friend, who resided within him. Ever since they had prayed, asking for more complete reliance on God, the promptings had been growing stronger, and more frequent. Simon wasn't completely convinced Lee understood what an impact these *promptings* now had on his life. But tonight...he *needed* to drive past the church.

Still a few blocks away from the church he began to see flashing lights. Lots of lights! Two blocks closer and he could tell the lights were atop police cars and fire department vehicles. At the intersection closest to the church, stopped at an emergency roadblock by volunteer firemen, Simon could clearly see the activity was centered on the next corner – on the grounds of the church! Flinging open the car door, he dashed toward the scene, only to be stopped by a uniformed police officer ordering him to “get back in the car and move away from the area.”

“Wait! This is my property! My church!” Simon screamed above the noise. “What's going on. Is it the church building? Was anyone inside? Was anyone hurt?”

After a frustrating quarter hour of being shuffled from one authority to the another, he was, at last, given permission to approach the church building and speak with the Fire Captain directing the mop up operation on a, now completely destroyed, storage shed at the back of the lot.

Ten more minutes of questions and answers and Simon was climbing back into the car to reassure Rosalyn, “No one was hurt. The church building itself was not damaged. There was nothing of real value in the shed.”

But she knew him very well, and something was not right.

“What, Si...?”

“Roz, the Captain says he's about ninety-nine percent sure that fire was set!”

All afternoon Lee Langston had been uneasy and her quick snatches of prayer, interspersed with the business of getting her evening work accomplished, simply weren't enough to achieve any sense of peace. Something, she knew, was very wrong. But what?

Shortly after dark Lee moved away from the kitchen table, where she had pushed aside her dinner plate, now gone cold for lack of interest. She dropped to her knees beside her chair, bowed her head on folded hands and began earnestly asking her God for guidance and protection.

As I sit down in the Almighty God's presence, spending the night in His shadow, I say: "God, you're my refuge. I trust in you and I'm safe!"

That's right—he rescues me from hidden traps, shields me from deadly hazards. His huge outstretched arms protect me—under them I am perfectly safe; his arms fend off all harm. I will fear nothing—not wild wolves in the night, not flying arrows in the day, Not disease that prowls through the darkness, not disaster that erupts at high noon. Even though others succumb all around, drop like flies right and left, no harm will even graze me. I'll stand untouched, watch it all from a distance, watch the wicked turn into corpses.

Yes, because God's my refuge, Almighty God my very own home, Evil can't get close to me, harm can't get through the door. He ordered his angels to guard me wherever I go. If I stumble, they'll catch me; their job is to keep me from falling. I'll walk unharmed among lions and

snakes, and kick young lions and serpents from the path. Thank You, Jesus. In You I am protected.”

Earlier in the afternoon, after trying Simon's cell phone a couple of times, only to have it go straight to voice mail, Lee had settled for leaving a terse message on the answering machines both at his home and in the church office. Now, her prayers were interrupted by the ringing of both her cell and kitchen phones simultaneously. Making a quick choice, she grabbed the kitchen phone, leaving the cell call to go straight to voice mail.

“Langston residence. Hello...”

“Lee? It's Simon. There's been a fire at the church.”

“No! Was anyone hurt? How bad is the damage?”

“Nobody got hurt, Lee. The storage shed is gone. The church wasn't damaged at all. But, Lee the Fire Department thinks it was arson.”

Arson? No wonder I've been on high alert all afternoon, she thought. What she said was,

“Simon, you know this confirms what we've been shown. Right?”

“Yes.... I know....” The hesitancy in his voice told her he'd been thinking long and hard about their last conversation and about the warnings both of them had received during their prayer time.

“Lee...can you meet Roz and me at the church tonight? Can we anoint the building like you suggested and consecrate the whole place to God before this goes any farther? Or do you think it's too late?”

“It's never too late to ask God for His support Simon. Give me half an hour to shower and change out of my work clothes then I'll drive into town. I'll meet you at the church by nine.”

“Who should I call to meet us Lee? Some members of the Board? Sally and Bill?”

“No! Simon, don't call anyone. Not yet. The three of us will be enough. The three of us, plus Jesus, is a majority. And I'm not comfortable asking anyone else to agree with us about this just yet.”

“Okay. See you in a bit then.” He didn't ask what she could virtually *hear* him thinking... “*Why not, Lee?*” before he hung up.

When the line went dead she stood, quietly holding the phone, for several minutes, staring out the window into the pitch black night. “*Okay, Simon. See you...but this thing is going to run its course in spite of all we can do to slow it down.*” Then, shaking herself alert, as if emerging from a dream, she replaced the phone in its cradle and turned to gather her Bible, keys, cell phone and jacket for the trip to town.

After a speedy walk through the shower, wearing fresh jeans and a clean shirt, she headed toward the barn, swiftly unlocked the doors, backed her pickup out and sped toward town and the meeting Simon had requested.

As she drove through the darkness scenes from other meetings called by Simon Gundersen played through her memory. Four years ago Lee had offered her help and suggestions in avoiding the crisis then looming over Banner County and the Ridgeview Community Church. Both had been rejected – with disbelief and even a modicum of scorn – by people who prided themselves

on their Christian faith and religious behavior.

Her memory of one particular prayer meeting with Simon had included some members of the Church Board and thinking of it still gave her chills. She'd listened respectfully as Simon told the group gathered in his living room about a counseling session he'd held with a young couple, planning to leave the church. "When I suggested many of their problems could be solved by spending time in God's Word, they told me they had neither the time nor the inclination to spend time in the Word. They said it was *my job* to give them the Word on Sunday mornings and that time was all they wanted or needed to dedicate to *church*." Lee remembered commenting, without thinking, "That's a spiritual problem. Paul's letter to Timothy predicted that attitude. We need to pray for them—ask God to set them free. His Word is the most important thing in all of our lives right now." She also remembered the shocked silence that had fallen over the gathering and a personal sensation in her own spirit she'd likened to diving into a pool of ice water. Only a few days afterward Simon had called to say, "Lee, your comments on Saturday were neither welcome nor helpful." She had been hurt, but not surprised, when he suggested that perhaps her extremist brand of *helpful* would be better offered in a less *conservative* church setting, even going so far as to suggest that her behavior during that meeting had been *inappropriate*.

Lee's trip down memory lane and the short trip to town coincided perfectly, occupying her thoughts so completely, it was somewhat surprising when she pulled into the church parking lot after what seemed like only a few minutes. Crossing the parking lot, toward the lighted church doors, she spoke quietly into the night, "Well Lord, let's see if your introduction to walking in the

Spirit of Christ has taught this young shepherd anything over the past few weeks.”

Inside, Lee made her way down the hall toward Simon's office. Opening the door she was greeted with gloom rather than the harsh florescent glare normally associated with meetings held there. A desk lamp cast long shadows across one corner of the room and an antique table lamp glowed on the cadenza. Simon and Roz waited in the two visitor's chairs normally lined up in front of his desk. A third comfortable wing-back chair had been pulled in from one of the other offices, forming an intimate circle for three. An open Bible rested on a small round table standing between the chairs.

As Simon rose to greet her Lee was aware of a tangible tension in the room. She could *feel it*. But it was nothing compared to the sense of icy rejection she'd remembered during her drive to town.

“Lee,” Simon began, giving her a quick hug and air kisses close to each cheek. “We're so glad you're here. I don't know where to begin to do what you've suggested...to anoint the church and consecrate it to the Lord. I know I refused your suggestion before...but now...”

“Relax Simon. What I'm suggesting is neither mystical or magical. It's scriptural. Let me show you.” And picking up the open Bible off of the table she turned to a passage in Exodus. “You see, God gave instructions for anointing and consecrating the *Tent of Meeting* in the Old Testament. And here,” she flipped to another passage a little further on, “He gave instructions for consecrating all wood, fabric and wool for His people's use.”

Simon and Roz watched as Lee pointed out the scriptures. They listened as she calmly

explained the reasons behind the actions she was suggesting, and somehow both of them began to see the merit in what she was showing them.

“You're right Lee. There's nothing far-fetched about this!” Simon beamed, as he leaned forward to take the Bible from her hands and push it toward his wife as though he himself had just stumbled upon a great treasure.

“It's exactly what God told his people to do, and He promised to honor their actions. Why haven't I ever seen this before? I know I've read it at least a dozen times.”

“What you're experiencing, Simon, is the difference between religion and relationship. God's plan has always been a relationship with his people.” Lee's voice, hushed, yet powerful, held their undivided attention. Her words resonated in their spirits and both Simon and Roz could sense the intensity of the moment.

“So...what are we waiting for? Let's get this done!” Simon laid the Bible aside, took his wife's hand and motioned for Lee to lead the way.

Taking a tiny vial of olive oil from her shirt pocket, Lee moistened her finger with its contents, then walking to the window, made the sign of The Cross on the header.

Outside, a fierce wind kicked up. Leaves swirled frantically across the walks and parking lot. The swings in the Tot Lot jangled on their chains and a thin spiral of smoke wafted skyward from the ashes of the destroyed shed.

Chapter Three

Tuesday Morning - September 11, 2012

Driving home in the wee hours of the morning, exhausted and at the same time exhilarated, Lee replayed the events of the evening, thoughtfully envisioning each action and conversation.

As Simon and Roz had followed her progress through the church they had prayed quietly, holding hands and asking occasional questions in hushed tones. With each room they completed the power of the prayers had increased until finally, upon entering the sanctuary, Simon had solemnly held out his hand to take the vial of oil from her.

“Lee, I think this part is up to me,” he volunteered, then turning he made the mark of the Cross above the entryway and, gaining purpose with every step, progressed around the room anointing the pews, the pulpit, the musical instruments, and anything else in his path. When he reached the steps leading to the alter, the young shepherd whom she had once termed a “doubting Thomas” dropped to his knees and eloquently asked Almighty God to pour out His grace and favor upon this church.

“Father, bless us. Guard and protect us from the evil that is working against us. Guide and direct us as we bring your Word to these, your children. Open their hearts and minds to accept your love and your blessings and encourage them to walk, every day, in your Holy Way.”

Satisfied with the results of their *dedication*, the three of them had lingered in Simon's office, talking over their expectations, dissecting the motives of those in the congregation they supposed

would be their strongest opponents, and forming plans for moving forward on what they believed was God's path for them.

As Lee turned her pickup off of the country road into her driveway a cold sense of dread overshadowed her thoughts and a snippet of scripture played through her mind.

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all.¹”

Tired as she was, she took the time to carefully lock the truck *and* the barn doors. “Don't need a repeat performance of recent *afflictions*, thanks. Lord, I know you have this under control, and I know it will be as you planned. In the end the outcome will bring you glory and honor. Just don't want anything I do, or don't do, to make it easier for the enemy to bring a reproach on your Gospel.”

Once in the cottage she carefully locked both doors, checked the answering machine for new messages, munched on a few soda crackers, took a couple of aspirin and turned in for the night. When she looked at her bedside clock for the last time it was a little past three. “Gotta be up by no later than seven to meet Noel for coffee,” she thought, and having set her internal alarm for 6:45, she snuggled under her covers and dropped into a sweet, peaceful sleep.

As Lee slept Margie Whitmore hovered over her laptop continuing her hours long chat session. She had never stayed up quite so late before, but the things she was learning from her internet *friends* were so very interesting and played so perfectly into the imaginary vendetta she was building against the pastor – the pastor she felt had not only betrayed her but the entire

Community Church congregation – she simply couldn't close it down and go to bed. Besides, she was half way through a second pot of coffee, making it highly unlikely she would be able to go to sleep even if she did go to bed.

“Marge? You ever gonna come to bed?” Bill's groggy voice coming from the bathroom startled her and Margery angrily closed her laptop and picked up a Bible she kept handy for such moments.

“Just finishing up my study on this portion of scripture. I'll be there before long. Go back to bed, Bill.”

While she wasn't exactly comfortable with the deception, Margie knew she could head off another discussion about the quality of her internet friendships by simply allowing Bill to believe her late-night time was spent in Bible study rather than chatting or surfing the web. His arguments were so misplaced! Sometimes she thought he actually bought into the fundamental ideals Simon had been teaching lately. Her personal point of view stressed *tolerance* toward the philosophies of others. She defended that point of view as an underlying tenant of her Christian faith. It was simply narrow-minded for Simon *and* Bill to label her friend's ideals as *New Age*. And even if they were New Age – what possible damage could they do in her life?

She sat quietly for a few minutes, holding the unopened Bible in front of her, until she heard Bill softly snoring once more, then lying the book aside Margie reopened her laptop and resumed her chat session.

After a restless night Noel Renwald opened one eye and checked the bedside alarm for perhaps the tenth time since three o'clock. His plan to meet with Lee Langston had given him little peace since they'd set the appointment a week ago. Now it was too late to back out, but he felt more uncomfortable than ever as the minutes ticked forward and he knew Lee would already be up and on her way toward Granger to meet with him.

“Just call her, Noel.” As usual, more in tune with his concerns than he sometimes was himself, Charlotte rolled over and snuggled close to his side. “You don't have to go through with this, you know. It's Simon's battle now. You've had your inning and going back, getting involved again, probably won't make any more impact now than it did four years ago.”

“I know. I know.” He hated the resignation in his voice. Hated knowing that while his wife's apprehension was nearly as strong as his own nothing would be gained by backing out now. “But honey, I gave Lee my word. And in the end...my word is my vow. I can't go back on it. You understand...right?”

“Of course I do, Noel. Go jump in the shower and I'll put the coffee on. Lee will be here in a little under an hour so we need to get going. We'll need some time to pray before she arrives.”

Abba, Father – Jesus, Savior – Holy Spirit, Comforter, Counselor and Friend...I come to you now...asking that you meet me in Spirit of Your Holy Word and minister wisdom to me for today. It is clear that no weapon formed against us can prosper; that we are protected and have nothing to fear, but fear itself.

Lord, you have shown me Your will for my meeting this morning with Noel and Charlotte. I have absolute faith in Your Spirit to guide and direct us as we move forward.

The demonic strong holds over Brenner County divide Your church – Your Body. We have a churches on every corner, but there is no unity among believers. Christ has said a house divided against itself cannot stand. Lord, Your Word says you will, “destroy the strong holds, abolish the religious black markets and underworld traffic in dark magic, cut down the idols and false gods, and bring unity to the family of God.”

Abba, it is our desire to offer a place where unity can begin to grow and thrive. I ask you to go before me today. Prepare the hearts and minds of those who will meet with us and shower us with your wisdom, favor and grace. Amen.

Tuesday Afternoon - September 11, 2012

Shortly after noon Lee walked away from the Renwald house, her spirits as bleak and gray as the threatening sky overhead. They were forecasting heavy snow and the icy wind sweeping along the sidewalk was in agreement with their forecast. The swirling wind promised to fling winter's first major storm at them any minute. Snow meant she would be driving home on semi-familiar roads, through the mountains, after dark, unless she started by no later than four.

“Should leave me plenty of time to pick up a few things at the Home Improvement Center, grab some lunch and meet Noel at three,” she reasoned.

“Still not sure why he wants me to hang around town and meet with him at the church again

this afternoon. Don't see why we couldn't just finish up now. Near as I can tell there's not really much left to say. Oh well...they will be done.”

As Lee drove toward Granger's Main Street Diner and lunch, Noel and Charlotte sat at the little glass-topped table in their breakfast nook. The coffee clutter from the morning's gathering was still scattered around the kitchen and neither of them had any motivation to start putting things away.

“I'm not sure what I expected,” Noel pushed at the sheaf of papers Lee had left lying on the table between them, “but this certainly wasn't it.”

“I know. I thought she was going to ask you to get involved in Simon's spiritual battle over in Ridgeview.” Charlotte reached across and covered his hand with both of hers. “This? Well, this is *way* beyond anything we could have ever imagined. What are we going to do, Noel?”

“The first thing we're going to do is pray. Then I'll make a few calls.”

The concern she could read on his face worried Charlotte more than she cared to admit. Of course, he would have her support, no matter what he decided to do. But in more than three decades of marriage and ministry she had never seen her husband so moved, or so driven to take a stand against evil, as he'd been today while he listened to Lee Langston's proposal.

With the bed of her pickup covered by more than an inch of snow, Lee stowed her purchases in the front seat, tucking things in tightly, knowing she couldn't allow them to bounce around while she was driving; especially while she was driving mountain roads in a storm. Her plan had

been to head back to the farm no later than four, but the meeting Noel called at the church had run far beyond the hour she'd allowed. It was close to six, getting dark, and still snowing heavily when they finally broke up.

Hugs all around. Everyone wishing her a safe trip. Some suggested she stay the night in Granger rather than trying to drive home in the snow.

“Thanks, but I'll be fine,” she reassured Charlotte. “I've got a twelve-foot angel breaking trail for me. Good tires and plenty of time. Don't worry.”

What she hadn't said – “I've made reservations at a nice little Bed and Breakfast just outside of town. I have no intention of tackling that road at night in a blizzard. I may be old, but I'm far from senile and I don't believe in tempting evil.” So, leaving the little group clustered in the circle of light outside Noel's office, she climbed into her pickup, backed it into the street, turned and waved over her shoulder, then drove away into the swirling snow.

Wednesday Morning - September 12, 2012

“Noel, did Lee stay with you and Charlotte last night?” Simon's tone was approaching frantic, his urgency contagious. “I've been trying to call her since a little after seven last night. There's no answer. Not at the house. Not on her cell. Both go straight to messaging.”

“Simon we haven't heard from her either. She left here late. Thought she was driving straight home. We didn't ask her to call when she got there. You know how independent she is. We didn't want to insult her or give her the idea we didn't think she was capable of making the trip alone.

Now I wish we had.”

Simon could hear Charlotte in the background, asking questions rapid-fire. “Where could she be Noel? Should we call the hospitals? Have they called the State Patrol?”

“Let's not get ahead of ourselves,” Simon cautioned thoughtfully. “Lee is one of the most level-headed, responsible people I know. She always carries a cell phone. If she was in trouble she'd call one or the other of us.”

“Yeah. If she could.” Noel, now fully infected with Charlotte's panic, was envisioning Lee's pickup, crashed at the bottom of a ravine or smashed into a cliff side, covered by last night's snow, with Lee inside, slumped over the wheel, wounded or worse.

“We need to find her! I'm gonna start for your place Simon. You start driving toward us. We'll meet you at the top of the ridge and if we haven't spotted her we'll call the State Patrol from the diner up there.”

“Right! We're on our way.” Simon turned to Roz and she could read the fear in his eyes. “Lee's not at Noel's. She left their place after six last night. Let's go see if we can find. her.”

Lee woke early, as was her habit, and gazed around the strange room. It took a moment for her to recall checking into the comfortable little B and B outside of Granger the night before. A slow smile played across her face as she remembered what a relief it had been to turn into the parking lot, knowing she wouldn't have to drive the forty-five miles home in growing darkness, fighting blowing snow.

In a little under a quarter of an hour after leaving Noel and Charlotte Lee had pulled off the highway into the circle drive of Holly's House, *Granger's Premier Bed and Breakfast since 1996*. Jumping from the pickup she'd plowed her way up the steps through mounds of snow already deep enough to have her clutching the railing for safety. *"Smartest decision you've made in months, old girl. No point in taking risks that aren't necessary."*

What a pleasant surprise the cozy room they offered her had been. Far beyond what she had expected when she'd called to make the reservations, there was a downy queen-sized bed piled high with a warm duvet, several fat pillows and pristine white sheets ironed to the nth degree. The gas fireplace in one corner added not only a glow of welcome, but real warmth, and Lee had settled in without giving a single thought to causing anyone concern for her well-being. Too exhausted to even think of food, she had stripped off her boots, jeans and jacket, washed her face and hands in the adjoining bathroom, tumbled into that luxurious bed and slept like a log for a full ten hours.

Now, the storm having blown itself out in the night, bright sunlight poured through the south facing windows. Glittering rays were dancing off of the drifts piled over the parking lot and sparkling across the tiny desk situated nearby. Lee thought about checking her cell phone, but realized she'd have to dig out the pickup before she could make any calls, and because she hadn't eaten since lunch on Tuesday, she was famished. So her thoughts turned to breakfast instead of digging out, checking in or heading home. She imagined that was partly due to the fragrance of coffee and bacon wafting into her room from the dining room down the hall.

After indulging in a short-stack with butter and real maple syrup, a third strip of apple-wood smoked bacon and half of a grapefruit she carried a tray with cups and a small pot of coffee back to her room and settled in, with plans to reserve the room for a second night. *“No real reason not to. Nothing urgent at home and I need some quiet alone time.”* she reasoned.

Later, sated with breakfast and coffee, standing at the B and B's side door, over-looking the parking lot, Lee considered the unspoiled white landscape before her. With shimmering frost covering tree branches and electrical wires, and without a single footprint to mar its perfection, the snow hid all evidence of individual vehicles. Her pickup, along with the half-dozen other cars parked nearby, were simply huge unrecognizable white lumps. How she hated to step out the door and spoil that glorious scene. Unfortunately, her phone, charger, Bible and notebook were in the pickup and if she was going to stay another night she would need them all. Most especially the charger since this morning her cell phone battery would be completely gone. She'd been afraid of that last night but she'd simply been too tired and unconcerned to hunt for the charger among the packages crowding the front seat so she'd left it all until the morning.

The round trip to her pickup took about five minutes but seemed much longer. The cold winter air turned her breath to ice and caused the snow to crunch under foot. Digging down through the packed front seat to find what she wanted caused her fingers to actually ache from the cold. “Should be a pair of gloves in here somewhere too.” she grumbled. “Gonna need 'em to drive home tomorrow.”

Back inside, she wrapped her fingers around another cup of hot coffee, savoring its warmth.

She stood quietly absorbing the peace for awhile, staring out the window, still enjoying the beauty left by the storm, then taking her Bible she settled at the room's tiny desk, prepared to savor her *quiet time alone*.

“*Precious Lord Jesus,*” she bowed her head over clasped hands and invited the author of her faith to join her. “*meet me now in the Spirit of Your Holy Word and guide my thoughts to align with Your will.*”

In a rundown roadside diner, high on the Ridge Route highway between Granger and Ridgeview, the Gundersens and the Renwalds huddled together over steaming mugs of coffee and a plate of *home-made* cinnamon rolls. To the casual observer no signs of distress would have been evident. Their gathering might simply have been two couples enjoying a mountain outing to play in the snow. In reality these couples were way beyond distressed. Currently their conversation centered on how to locate their mutual friend.

“So...what now?” Simon Gundersen leaned forward and shoved his cell phone back into his jacket pocket. “The sheriff won't even accept a missing persons report for another twenty-four hours. None of the medical facilities Roz called have a patient who even remotely resembles Lee's description.”

“And she's still not answering her phones!” Noel's voice actually trembled with anxiety. “she not at home. So. Where is she?”

“Well it's for sure she didn't have a wreck somewhere along the highway. The State Patrol

assured me there were *no* accidents on the Ridge Route during last night's storm. Period.”

Charlotte spoke with what sounded a bit like sarcasm, but the others knew it was only because she was as frustrated as they themselves were.

“So that's it?” Simon signaled the waiter for another round of coffee then leaned back and studied Noel's face carefully. “The thing I want to know is why she was so bound and determined to drive to Granger yesterday in spite of the storm warnings. What was that all about anyway Noel?”

“Well...not what we thought it was going to be about. That's for sure.”

“Noel.” There was an unspoken warning in Charlotte's tone. She laid her hand on his sleeve and looked at him with what he'd come, over the years, to refer to as *that* look. It said, quite clearly, “*Shut up Noel.*”

“Lee called us a while back and set up a meeting for yesterday. When we started hearing the storm warnings we expected her to re-schedule, or cancel altogether. But she called us Monday evening and insisted driving over wouldn't be a problem. Said she'd see us bright and early as planned. And that's just what she did. After she got there she said she needed to get some things at the Big Box Stores in town then she'd be headed home. We figured she was a big girl and could handle herself just fine. Never thought a thing about it until you called to say she wasn't home yet....” Noel's narrative trailed off without adding any additional information to what the Gundersens already knew.

“But what did she *want*?” Simon persisted. “Why was meeting with you two so important she

would put herself at risk driving in the first big storm of the season?”

Noel shrugged helplessly and looked at his wife for help. If she didn't want him to reveal the details of their meeting with Lee, she could be the one to fend off the questions.

“Lee had some print-outs she wanted us to look over. She asked us to give her our opinion on her research.” Charlotte answered. Smiling sweetly she adeptly changed the subject. “What do you all think about waiting until late this evening and then checking in again with all the sources we've contacted so far?”

If there was an under current in the conversation Simon missed it. “That sounds like it's about our only option at this point. You've got my office number and my cell, right?” He pulled out his own cell and checked to make sure he had contact information for the others. “We really ought to get on the road toward home, Roz. Church tonight. Youth group at five-thirty. That means I've got some notes to go over.”

Even if Simon had been clueless, Roz hadn't missed the point at which their conversation became strained, or the fact that neither Noel or his wife had actually given them any answers. As they backed away from the diner and headed down the mountain she asked, “You do realize we still don't know what that meeting was all about. Right?”

“Yeah. I got that.”

She knew him well enough to know Simon wasn't going to have the conversation she wanted to start. His focus was pointed toward home and his preparations for the evening services. More questions would be useless, and so she settled back in the seat and watched the white landscape

whiz past her window, thinking about a very disturbing and reoccurring dream she's been having since one afternoon in July of 2008.

Chapter Four

Saturday Night - November 10, 2012

Rosalyn Gundersen sat bolt upright in bed startled out of a sound sleep. Clutching the blankets to her chest as a shield, she felt a cold sweat beading lightly on her face and arms. Slowly she realized her scream, the scream that woke her, had indeed been soundless. Simon slept undisturbed beside her, snoring softly, as usual. Except for his rhythmic breathing the house was silent. The bedroom, softly lit by the alarm's LED readout, was not occupied by dark, leathery winged, creatures staring at her through glaring yellow eyes. The only smell in the room came from an air-freshener plugged in near the bathroom door.

As her own breathing slowed toward normal, the acrid sulfurous fumes of her dream faded to the softness of the lavender fragrance she preferred to use to scent their room. A cool breeze drifting through the slightly open window, evaporated the beads of moisture on her face and arms, and chilled her to the core.

Shivering violently she slid out of bed, pulled on a woolly robe and slippers, then ever so quietly opened the bedroom door, hoping to make an escape without waking her sleeping husband.

“Where ya goin' hon?” Simon's blurry half-asleep voice stopped her in her tracks and she instantly made the decision not to worry him.

“Can't sleep,” she lied. “Going to read for awhile. Not to worry.”

“Umm...k,” he muttered, and rolling over, covered his head and immediately dropped back into a sound sleep.

In the kitchen, Roz put the tea kettle on the stove. Maybe a cup of tea was what she needed to calm her nerves. She dropped into a chair in the breakfast nook, lowered her head into her hands and began gently massaging her temples. Twenty minutes later the shrill sound of the whistling kettle jerked her back to reality—away from images of demons and danger—away from an overwhelming sense of fear.

Crossing to the stove she turned off the burner, quieting the kettle, then returned to sit at the table and simply stare blankly into space.

Half an hour later she hadn't moved, hadn't calmed down. At all.

“Thought you were gonna read.” Simon shuffled into the kitchen, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“What's goin' on Roz?”

“That dream again,” she whispered.

“The one where you see demons surrounding us?” Alert at once, all thoughts of going back to sleep forgotten, he crossed the room and placed a supporting hand on her shoulder.

She nodded. Leaning back against him for comfort, she admitted “Yes. And this time it was worse than ever. Not only could I see them. I could smell them. *Feel* them touching me.” She shuddered and turning to embrace him spoke in a voice that sent a thrill of fear up his spine, “It was so real Simon. It took me a little bit to be certain I was dreaming and not actually *seeing* demons in our room.”

“Roz, tell me the truth,” hands on her shoulders he pushed her back a little and looked deeply into her eyes. “How often are you having this dream now?”

“Almost every time I fall deeply asleep, Simon. It's gotten to the place where I'm afraid to let myself relax completely for fear I'll dream. And it just keeps getting worse. Sometimes I see little flashes of darkness skittering across a room or slithering along beside the car when I'm driving. I'm beginning to think I'm losing it. Honestly, just losing it.”

“This has gone far enough. I'm calling Lee!”

“No! Simon, it's the middle of the night! I'm not a child! You can't wake Lee up in the middle of the night just because I'm having nightmares.”

“Yes...I can.” He crossed to the counter and dialed as he spoke. “She said we could call her any time we needed her. Right now, we need her.”

Lee Langston was dreaming too. Of angels. And a ringing phone...

“Answer the phone, Lee. You're not dreaming.” The beautiful being, surrounded with a halo of brilliant white light, spoke urgently, pressing her through the dream room toward the kitchen. “It *is* ringing. Answer it. Hurry!”

Without knowing exactly how it happened, Lee found herself standing in her kitchen, holding the phone in her hand and listening to a distraught Simon Gundersen explain his reasons for this middle of the night call.

As he spoke, all remnants of sleep vanished. Her mind was sharp as she snapped out pointed

questions aimed at taking control of the panic she could tell was swirling around both Simon and Roz.

“Have you anointed the house and the cars, Simon?” She listened as he explained how busy they had been, how there was no time for themselves these days. She listened as he made excuses for the dreams Roz was having—excuses his Community Church congregation would find perfectly logical and acceptable.

“Babies!” she thought. *“Rebellious babies!”*

“Simon, I’ll be there in half an hour. Get dressed. Make some coffee....No! Make some chamomile tea and get Roz to drink it! Don’t ask her any more questions. And don’t try to explain away what she’s feeling.” Her voice went from commander to comforter, “Simon, I know you’re both upset and afraid. We’ll get this straightened out when I get there. Please, give Roz as much support and comfort as you can. Just don’t try to explain away what she’s feeling right now. Okay?”

Within fifteen minutes Lee was dressed and backing her pickup out of the barn, prepared for battle. Within half an hour she stood knocking on the Gundersen’s front door. When Simon answered her knock she brushed past him with hardly so much as a hello. She walked directly to the kitchen, where Roz sat, still in robe and slippers, slumped in her chair, nursing a now stone-cold cup of tea.

“Oh. Lee. I’m so sorry he called you. I’m okay. Really.”

One look at her face told Lee she was far from *okay*, but she went on apologizing anyway.

“I've just had a bad dream. Nothing worthy of dragging you out in the middle of the night. Honestly.”

“And how many times have you had this *bad dream*, Roz?” Lee asked.

“I don't know... A few.” Roz looked at Simon, as though for support or verification. When his response was simply a raised eyebrow, she blurted out, “A lot! More lately. A lot more.... Ever since we started talking with you and Noel and Charlotte about opening a new church here.”

Monday Morning - November 12, 2012

“We can't meet at the church, Simon.” Lee's cell phone allowed her the freedom to speak with him from the Walmart parking lot in Granger, where she'd stopped for supplies before going to Noel's office for yet another meeting.

“At the church the walls have ears. You know that. When I get back to town I'll stop by your house so we can hash this out.”

Her day, so far, had been glorious. Bright and blue. Neither too cold nor too warm. Just glorious.

Lee had driven over the Ridge Route into the beauty of the rising sun with a myriad of lists and plans playing through her head. Her mood was one of excitement and purpose. Nothing was going to deter her from her goal of accomplishing all of it before evening.

“*And now,*” she thought, as she listened to Simon “*it's all about to be scuttled.*”

This frantic phone call from her young friend didn't exactly come as a surprise. She knew his

family, his church and the very foundations of his faith were being challenged. Not only were there nightmares, wild imaginings and even wilder superstitions swirling around him, his congregation was in turmoil, the Church Board was reneging on their promise to support him unconditionally and, perhaps worst of all, in the past several days he had begun to experience real fear for Rosalyn's health. Her fear of the dreams was keeping her awake. Extended periods of staying awake provided a one way street to sleep deprivation, and down that street mood swings and depression awaited. Roz had just not been herself lately.

“Lee, we can't meet at the house either! Roz is freaking out! She hasn't slept well in weeks. Her moods are off the chart – both ways. And this last series of calls from Margie has her on the verge of breaking.”

“Margie Whitmore's still calling Roz?” Lee's tone sharpened and she inhaled deeply to regain her composure before asking, “Is it more of the same old nonsense, Simon?”

“No...it's worse than ever. Much worse. Now she's threatening to go to Social Services with complaints about what we're teaching the boys. This morning she told Roz that unless we pull out of the committee working on the new church and '*get back to conservative, rational thinking*' before the next meeting she will contact them. And the School Board, too. She's accusing us of child abuse, Lee! Abuse! Can you believe it?”

“Oh yes, Simon. I can and *do* believe she is capable of that and probably more. Remember what we read in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus? We are not fighting against flesh and blood here. We are challenging powers. And principalities.”

“But Lee.” She could hear the fear and doubt resonating through the phone now. “I’m not even part of this. Not really.”

“Simon...”

“You and Noel are the ones organizing the whole thing. It was your idea and...”

“Simon! You aren't really going to back down now, are you?” Another calming breath to clear the frustration from her tone and Lee went on. “This is just the first of many skirmishes. We aren't even into the war yet. We told you, both of you, that the steps we would be taking to unite believers in Brenner County was going to stir up a tempest. It has only just begun. Now isn't the time to turn tail and retreat.”

“I know....but....”

“Simon, I'm going to ask you again – have you taken the steps we asked you to take when we started this project?” Concentrating on modulating the tone of her voice toward patience and loving inquiry instead of coming across sounding like his mother, Lee continued. “Have you anointed your house and vehicles? Consecrated them to God? Are you and Roz taking time to pray together? Are you reading the verses we've been emailing to you? Are you trusting in God's power to protect you, Simon? Or are you still trying to get through this in your own strength?”

“I don't know.” The defeat clearly came across in his answer. “We've been so busy, and then with both boys in sports, and Roz not sleeping well....”

“Simon, this is not about what's going on around you. This is about what's going on within you. You do know that? Right?”

His deep sigh served as an answer. A negative answer she really didn't want to hear. "All right, Simon. We'll get together and talk about it this evening when I get back. Where do you want to meet me?"

Noel's office felt crowded, even though there were only four people in the room. Lee thought it was probably due to the sheer presence of the older man seated next to her in front of the desk. Dressed in worn jeans and a soft suede jacket over a stylish black silk turtleneck, his casual attire belied the intensity emanating from piercing deep blue eyes. Lee had especially noted his slender build, his mane of silver hair, and a robust tan, all impressively showcased by the jeans and dark sweater.

"What an attractive man!"

The feeling was, apparently, mutual. When they were introduced he had risen, taken her hand in an old-fashioned gesture of welcome and solidarity, then flashed that stunning smile in her direction as though she were the only person in the room. The chill that went up her spine in that moment spoke of something much stronger than mere physical attraction.

After a few minutes of get-acquainted conversation Noel opened his Bible and spoke in his *Okay, let's get this going* voice.

"David, will you please offer a few words of prayer before we start?"

Lee glanced toward Noel and quizzically raised an eyebrow. "Turning over the reigns so soon?" Her expression asked.

“Happy to, Noel.” And, with another million-dollar smile, David Dale extended his hands to the others in the room, bowed his head and took absolute control of the meeting and the project. “Holy Lord God, we invite your presence, your counsel and your direction. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight. Amen.”

Lee leaned back in her chair, folded her hands and mentally pumped her fist in the air. *“This may just be the right one, Lord. Please show us if this man is your choice for the job.”*

“We're looking for an apostle...a man whom God has called and trained”, she'd told Noel and Simon at the beginning of their search for a leader to head up their dream project. “Both of you are seminary graduates, with years of religious training. And, don't mistake my meaning here, there's nothing wrong with your education or your experience. It's simply a matter of what I consider scriptural common-sense. The Apostle Paul counted all of his education, which was formidable, and his experience, as *dung* when it came to preaching and teaching the new covenant Gospel of Grace.”

Both men had nodded their consent and agreement. The search had begun and tonight, as David prayed she was cautiously optimistic he was the man God had sent for the job.

Chapter Five - 2013

Saturday Morning - February 2, 2013

Lee sat, warming her hands with the cup of fresh coffee she'd just brought from the kitchen. Her gaze focused on the barn and outbuildings beyond the library window. Nothing was moving out there; no one walking around, no animal grazing across the fence in the neighboring pasture, nothing physical visible at all. Still, she had a distinct sense of being watched. Listened to. Spied upon.

Her library, normally a sanctuary and source of comfort felt claustrophobic this morning and that made no sense whatsoever. Lee's library consisted mainly of art books, gardening books, a few herbals, and a variety of cookbooks. She also kept a collection made up of a couple dozen novels that she loved to read again and again. The characters were like old friends. The dialog familiar. The plots well known, with no question of who-done-it. These works of wisdom and fiction were juxtaposed with an equal number of Bibles in various translations and several commentaries, all equally well worn, some to the point of being dog-eared. There was a small table in front of the window and two comfortable, if somewhat threadbare wing chairs in the room facing the tiny fireplace tucked into a corner. The furniture was anchored on the pine floor boards by the oval of a braided rag rug in muted colors that matched the drapes and throw-pillows. It was a cozy space, small enough to fit within Lee's frugal sense of simplicity, yet large enough to function as a place for entertaining a friend or two should the need present itself.

Normally Lee loved spending time in her library reading, writing, studying, listening to Classical music, soaking up the peace and tranquility of the room. On this particular Saturday morning peace and tranquility were absent. A familiar, ominous, over-shadowing something...not fear, not dread, not anxiety, exactly, but something...had settled in. Even the warmth of the coffee cup did little to ease the cold seeping through Lee's fingers into her spirit.

In the weeks between her last meeting with Noel and Simon things had progressed slowly, but surely, toward their goal for a new church in the county. There were several conference calls with David Dale, their choice for leader of the infant start-up, but the Holidays brought even the calls to a halt. Everyone had family plans, out-of-town guests, and a variety of other reasons to put off meeting or talking until after the New Year.

Now, as January slipped away into February, the original excitement over their plan had waned. More excuses were apparently easier to find and give a higher priority as the weeks went by. Lee had scribbled in the margin of her journal, "If you really want something, you will find a way. If you don't, you will find an excuse."

Noel and Charlotte Renwald, while still considering themselves a part of *the plan*, had distanced themselves from *the plan* in a less than subtle attempt to avoid conflict with the folks from Ridgeview. Noel recalled only too well the verbal scuffles his point-of-view produced with Margie Whitmore and her devoted followers before he had finally thrown up spiritual hands, brushed the dust from his feet and moved over the Ridge Route to Granger. During one conversation with Lee, Charlotte admitted to encouraging her husband to "give it some time to

cool down.” Her reasoning, ”everyone has such intense ideals and the fall-out is going to be brutal.”

Lee knew from past experience Charlotte's opinion weighed heavily with Noel. That would probably account for his comment to her about a “little cooling down period.” Plus, experience had taught her that spiritual fall-out tended to become brutal whenever an attempt to unite believers under a single ideology came to the surface. She and David had talked about that very thing way back in January. His reference to the roaring lion mentioned in Peter's second letter struck a cord in her spirit back then. Not a comfortable cord to be certain, but a cord none the less.

Again—on this misty, chilly Saturday morning—her spiritual cords were vibrating like a twelve-string banjo at a blue-grass festival. There was something permeating the very air around her, something almost tangible, something very dark and very disquieting. Lee's solution to such a state of affairs was always prayer. So, placing her hand on the cover of her Bible she bowed her head and quietly lifted everyone involved before her Lord.

If the atmosphere at Lee's place seemed charged, it could be said that Simon Gundersen and his wife were surrounded by a spiritual storm of biblical proportions. Rosalyn, still wrapped in a fleecy robe and bunny slippers, stood in the kitchen doorway, hands on hips, a snarl on her normally serene face with angry words pouring from her lips and tears from her eyes. Simon sat slumped on a tall stool beside the breakfast bar. He was dressed for the day and his briefcase

stood beside him on the floor. It crossed his mind that he had nearly made it out the door before the storm broke.

To be honest, he knew the clouds had been gathering for awhile. The signs were all there but, to avoid what he prayed would simply blow over without having this discussion, he had ignored most of them. At the moment he understood this was not about to blow over. He also knew that platitudes and homilies were not going to make everything better.

“I don't see why you can't simply face the fact that we are *so* in over our heads here, Simon.”

Roz, his rock, his normally logical, staunch supporter had reached the end of herself. Her patience was gone. Her common-sense had followed swiftly on its heels. This woman standing in front of him, having a melt-down of major proportions didn't even look like his wife. Lately her pride in the way she looked, the way she dressed and the way she spoke seemingly belonged to another mans wife...Bill Whitmore's Margie maybe.

“Roz, honey...”

“Don't you honey me! Roz snapped. “I know you agree with Lee when it comes to uniting all the like-minded believers in the whole county. It all sounds so wonderful and uplifting and right when she talks about it. And David! He makes it sound like it will be the simplest thing in the world to get everybody together and start a new church. But it isn't necessarily right and it certainly isn't simple. And Simon, you *know* it.”

“Now Roz...”

“No! You can't talk me out of saying the truth here Simon. We've been accused of everything

from heresy to demon worship since this thing started. And Simon, I'm sick of it! And I'm afraid! No! Actually, I'm terrified. Nothing you or Lee, or David Dale can say is going to convince me that we aren't in actual danger spiritually, emotionally and probably even physically, too.”

With that Simon's normally calm, beautiful wife turned around and left the house, in her bathrobe, headed he knew not where. He sat still for just an instant too long before dashing after her. In that split second she had started her car and laid rubber down the drive as she backed into the street. Perhaps the most frightening thing of all—Simon knew she was so distraught she didn't even see the enormous trash hauler about to pull across the driveway behind her.

“Thank God that truck was moving so slow.” He breathed.

With that tiny prayer echoing in this head he ran back to the breakfast bar and his cell phone. His upper-most thought: “I've got to call Lee.”

Just as he reached for the phone it vibrated violently on the smooth counter and jingled the little tune that identified the caller as Lee herself.

“Simon? Are you and Roz Okay? I was just sitting here praying and the Lord showed me a very dark cloud over you two. I'm beginning....”

“Roz just left!” Simon cut her off in mid-sentence. “We've been...uhm...a little over wrought for the past week or so and this morning it all came to a head. She came completely unwound and....”

“Simon! Simon stop! Stop right now and think about what's really happening here.” Lee's voice was strong and she spoke with authority. This was not the soothing understanding Simon

was looking for.

“Simon, we need to get together and take control of this before it gets out of hand.”

“It's because we've been 'getting together' all of this is going on, Lee.” Simon could hear the frustration in his own voice and it crossed his mind that taking his spat with Roz out on Lee was exactly the sort of distraction the enemy was looking for.

As if reading his thoughts Lee said softly, “he's a liar and the father of lies, Simon. With this enemy it has always been and will always be, divide and conquer.”

In another part of the county David Dale stared at a plate of sausage and eggs growing cold on the counter before him. His appetite was gone and his spiritual antenna was fully extended.

“Can I get my check here, Sandy?” he asked the pert blonde behind the counter.

“Oh sure. Was somethin' wrong with your breakfast Mr. Dale,” Sandy asked, inwardly hoping whatever it was wouldn't reduce the generous tip he usually left her.

“No...breakfast's fine as usual. Just need to get going. Something's beginning....”

David never finished that thought, knowing how it would sound to attempt an explanation of what he was sensing in his spirit. He simply laid down a twenty to cover the food and Sandy's tip, grabbed his worn denim jacket from the coat rack by the door and walked out into the cold February morning.

In the pickup he opened his Bible to the well worn pages of Psalms and quietly read aloud.

“The Lord is my Shepherd...he prepares a table before me in the presence of my

enemies...goodness and mercy follow me.”

As he sat meditating on the promise of the Psalm his phone vibrated against his leg and looking at the read out he saw Lee's name scroll across the screen. He answered knowing that God was on top of whatever he was sensing.

“Lee? What's up?”

“All hell's broken loose around here David.”

Even though his first contact with her had been only a few months ago, David felt he knew this woman well enough to know with a certainty her comment was neither intended as profanity or exaggeration. Lee Langston was a devout student of God's Word and in his estimation probably the most intuitive person he'd ever met. If Lee told him all hell was breaking loose in Ridgeview then in all likelihood that was literally what she meant.

“What can I do, Lee?”

“Pray!”

“Always! Without ceasing, Lee. You know that.”

“David, what we've started has caused an uproar. You know that already. But it's gone beyond just ruffling the feathers of a few local women who pride themselves on holding the form of religion. This morning Simon and Roz are under attack from within. Noel and Charlotte have been waning away from their first excitement for months. He's talking about a “cooling down” period, but I know it's more likely a “backing off” period. You know the drill, David. Shoot every dart in the arsenal at them before there's any deeply rooted conviction. Kill the sprout before it

can grow into a tree.

“David, you are the chosen leader of this little band of soldiers and right now, more than anything else they need leadership, a head over them, an authoritative man of God to stand in the breach. Neither of these youngsters has the experience or the confidence to stand up to what the enemy is throwing their way. And this is only the beginning.”

Lee and David talked for perhaps half an hour, prayed together before ending the call, and agreed to meet at her house later that evening.

Saturday Afternoon - February 2, 2013

As his pickup traveled up the valley toward Ridgeview David was praying quietly but intensely over the meeting he had called. Neither Noel or Simon had been particularly enthusiastic about getting together. Both had indicated their wives would not be able to get away on such short notice. David had assured them it would make no difference.

“We simply need to address a few hurdles before they become insurmountable.” he'd told each of them.

“Why are we meeting out a Lee's place?” Simon had wanted to know.

“It's far enough out of town to give us some privacy. I'd just as soon the whole town not know we're going forward with the plan at this point. Some of the gossip and speculation has died out and I'd rather it stay that way for now,” David answered.

What he didn't say was, “Lee's place is wholly dedicated to God. She has anointed every

square inch of it with Holy Oil and asked a blessing on all who enter there. The enemy may be able to stand outside the fence and shout, but none of his crew can enter the rooms and disrupt the proceedings. It will give us exactly the atmosphere we're going to need.

By six o'clock four very solemn believers faced each other across the table in Lee Langston's tiny kitchen. An outside observer might have mistaken this group for something other than what they were. Two appeared angry. One seemed frustrated. One emanated peace and serenity.

It was from this position of peace and confidence Lee opened the meeting.

“Thank you all for being here this evening. I know it was spur of the moment, but we agreed when we began this project to stay open and honest with each other at all times. Can either of you,” with a nod toward Noel and Simon, “tell me you've been open about what's going on in your lives?”

“Well...hey Lee! Let's cut right to the chase.” Simon's anger boiled to the surface and could be heard in his words. “I don't actually believe airing my family problems in front of the congregation was what I signed on to do.”

As sweet smile crossed the older woman's face and she reached across the small table to pat his hand in a motherly gesture.

“No, of course you didn't, Simon. But when you signed on you didn't expect to have any family problems. Did you?”

Taken somewhat by surprise Simon shrugged and slumped down in his chair, not unlike a

small boy who had been corrected when he knew full well he was in the wrong. “No...I guess not,” he muttered.

“Didn't think so. Now Noel, what about you? There's a reason Charlotte didn't want to come down with you today, isn't there?”

Noel flushed pink. And squirmed.

“Well she.... She's.... Okay! You're right Lee. Lately we've been pretty much on opposite sides of the fence when it comes to how much time and energy we're willing to put into this deal.”

“That's what I thought.” Lee nodded toward David as if deferring to him now that the truth was on the table.

“So...” David's frustration could be heard in the single syllable. “So the enemy is up to his old tricks is he?”

Both younger men blinked at him as though he had proposed a totally foreign idea.

“Did you think, for even a moment,” David went on, “that we would be able to walk into his territory and set up a stronghold for the Lord with little or no opposition?”

“Well we knew the Whitmores and some others from the Community Church were going to...” Noel started to say.

“Oh no. Those religious zealots are the very least of your opposition.” David told them.

“Gentlemen, you signed on for a spiritual battle. And in this case the most vulnerable place to attack is in your own camp. I thought you understood that.”

“I think I knew it...or thought I did.” Noel said, sitting up a little straighter and toning down

the attitude a little.

“Me too.” Simon agreed.

“And so it came as a big surprise to you both when your wives were showing signs of loosing interest? The complaints and disagreements came about totally unexpected? Are you certain?”

Lee asked, then went on, not expecting an answer. “Have neither of you read about Adam's encounter with God's ancient enemy?”

It was close to eleven-thirty when, sitting alone together in Lee's library, David said, “Well, that was an interesting get together.”

“Let's pray it was more than interesting,” Lee agreed. “Those two came very close to falling into the pit that ruins so many truly sincere men of God. It saddens me to know that my gender, though unwilling, is so often tricked into being a tool for the enemy.”

“How did you learn that lesson Ms. Langston?” David ventured to ask with a grin.

“Ha! Lee. Please. And that's another story for another day. Not an especially pretty tale either,” Lee laughed. “But it's too late to get into it tonight. Are you driving all the way back home, or will you stay in Ridgeview tonight?”

“Probably just keep going. I want to be home early in the morning so I can attend the Town Board meeting. There's a few things on the agenda I wholly disagree with and want to take the opportunity to say so. In my way of thinking, if we, as believers don't speak out against the things going on in the world, we'll just have to watch our influence disappear. I can't tolerate the idea of

that happening.”

“Uh huh...my way of thinking exactly. Can I offer you some coffee for the road? I'll fill up a thermos and you can return it the next time we meet.”

“Great idea, Lee. I expect I'll be grateful for the caffeine before I get home.”

Tuesday Noon - February 5, 2013

Margie Whitmore, Sally Youngman and a woman Sally had never met before, Meg Carter, were huddled together in a corner of the coffee-shop across the street from the hardware store. Margie was keeping a weary eye on the front door of the place just in case Bill should decide to leave the tending of their business to his warehouse boy and stroll across for a cup of coffee and the day's gossip. Normally having her husband find her enjoying a break with Sally and a friend wouldn't be a problem. Today, since the friend was Meg Carter, she knew this cozy little coffee klatch would spark another colossal row and she simply wasn't in the mood to fight with Bill about the company she chose to keep any more.

Margie had been chatting with Meg on her computer for a few months, without Bill knowing a thing about it. Deep down she knew he would criticize her for befriending someone who openly practiced witchcraft, never mind that it was not dark magic, but as Meg had assured her simply a spiritual system that fostered free thought and the free will of the practitioner.

“It builds spirituality and develops our understanding of the earth and nature. It allows us to support the divinity in all living things.” Meg had told her.

To Margie, building one's spirituality seemed like a good thing, just so long as it didn't involve “the nonsense that Langston woman practices.”

She had informed Bill just the other night, “anything is better than the demon inspired carryings on they are proposing to introduce into that new church they're trying to get started.”

The fight started when Bill dared to suggest “the carryings on” were scriptural enough and he didn't necessarily believe speaking in tongues or prophesying were demon inspired at all.

“That's all we need!” Margie leaned closer to Meg, who sat nodding in agreement. “That crazy old woman started interfering years ago while Renwald was still at our church. “Why one Sunday evening she brought some outsider to meeting and he stood right up and spoke out in what was supposed to be tongues. Well, Renwald stepped right up and told him, “We don't do that here. Exactly as he should have done. But later the Langston woman stuck her nose in, and he began to change in his thinking. That's when we knew we needed a new preacher.”

“She started the same thing with Pastor Gundersen last year, “ Sally ventured. “I don't know much about the whole *Pentecostal thing*, except what you've taught me Margie, but the Pastor and his wife seem to think she may be right. I over-heard him telling someone just the other day that the first century church and the church of today should be exactly the same. He said the only reason they aren't is because of religion. Whatever that means.”

“Well, clearly that is not going to happen anytime soon, because the Bible says all of that “will pass away,” and so it has. Anyone who brings it into a solid God-fearing congregation has no business in any church. It's just wrong.” Margie jerked her cup closer, sloshing a little coffee onto

the table. "It's all wrong. That's all," she finished as she mopped up the spill.

Meg Carter, sat quietly through this exchange with a pensive smile working around her mouth. "*Exactly so,*" she was thinking. "*They can't agree about anything, and neither of them is interested in finding the truth.*"

"This is the very reason I've chosen a more enlightened path to spirituality," Meg told them. "There is so much controversy and contradiction in Christianity, I searched until something made sense to me personally. The way I've chosen...I've shared a lot of it with you Margie...allows me free will and clears my thinking from all of that. My preference has always been to think for myself. No one should be able to tell another what to do, or what to think."

If Lee had been within ear-shot of that conversation she would have known without question who the author was. He comes only to steal, kill and destroy. In Lee's mind this would have been a very destructive little gathering indeed.

Just as the old clock in the storeroom struck noon, announcing his lunch hour had arrived, Bill Whitmore looked up to see who had just walked into the store. He then briefly entertained the notion of telling the boy in the stockroom he was going to lunch and slipping out the back door before Pastor Gundersen noticed him.

"Morning' Bill." Simon's ready smile and cheerful wave changed Bill's plan. He was a better man than running from his own store to avoid a customer. Turning back toward the door he returned the greeting, trying not to betray the dread he felt as the other man approached him.

“Simon.” Bill forced a smile and stepped forward to shake hands with the Pastor. “What can I help you find today?” he asked, sincerely hoping to keep things on a business as usual basis. The last thing Bill wanted to do was get involved in a dialog regarding church, church planning or church going. To be fair, lately he had been avoiding anything to do with those topics with everyone. Especially his wife.

“Looking for a wrench, Bill. Everything I've got is either too big or too small. Trying to fix a chair over at the office and getting nowhere. Maybe metric? Here, I brought both of mine to see if you can find something between 'em.”

Bill took both wrenches, heaved a sigh of relief, and hurried to the tool department with Simon right behind him.

“Here's one I think'll do the job. On sale today too.”

“Great! I've gotta get that chair fixed before it dumps somebody on their backside. Been putting it off for awhile. Today's the day.”

Simon followed him back to the cash-register counter, pulled out his wallet preparing to pay for the wrench and did exactly what Bill had been afraid he'd do when he came in the store.

“Bill, have you got a few minutes to visit? I've been putting off talking with you for awhile now, too.”

Cornered, Bill looked around for some excuse, any excuse, and seeing none shrugged his shoulders and decided today was as good a day as any to put this behind him.

“Sure Simon. What's on your mind?” he answered. “*as if I don't know.*” he thought.

“Well...here's the thing...as I'm sure you know, a few of us are working on plans for a new church plant and I'd really like your input on a few things.”

“Not sure you want to hear what I think of your plans, Simon.”

“I'm pretty sure your thoughts aren't going to come as a surprise, Bill. Margie has been very clear about where she stands on the subject. I'm really wondering if you stand with her or if you're just keeping quiet and agreeing with her to keep the peace.”

Scratching his head, Bill thoughtfully considered his answer for a few seconds, then said, “Probably a little of both, to be perfectly honest.”

“Thought so.” Simon nodded. “I've been thinking about it for sometime now. I keep going back to our conversation about the night Lee brought her friend to the church and he gave a message in tongues.”

Bill's eyes popped fully open and his jaw dropped. That was the last thing he's expected Simon to ask about. It was the last thing he wanted to talk about with this minister he knew to be firmly in favor of everything his wife and her friends were so vehemently against. Talking about plans for a new church was one thing. He could see no reason for another church in the community since the six or seven already in existence were less than half filled on any given Sunday anyway. But to openly talk about the doctrinal differences that seemed to spark division and controversy whenever they were brought out into the light made him decidedly uncomfortable.

“Ah...yeah...I recall the incident. So what about it?” His tone was far from normal and he cleared his throat and tried to clear his thoughts.

“I seem to recall your telling me when you and Margie first heard what was said you understood the man to be speaking in English. Is that right Bill?”

Now Bill Whitmore was an honest man, and he was, after all, talking with a *Pastor*. For a moment he studied the keys on the old cash-register in front of him as if they might hold the answer to what he wanted to say, then making up his mind to finally face the truth he answered, “That's right. It wasn't until after all the commotion settled that I actually understood what had gone on.”

“Can you tell me a little about the *commotion*, Bill?”

“Well sir,” he was into it now and for a certainty it had bothered him for years, so he determined to finally talk about it, “Pastor Noel spoke right up 'we don't do that here' he said. The Langston woman and her friend looked right shocked. She stood up and he sat down hard. Margie was jabbin' me in the ribs with her elbow, askin' 'do what?' and I was lookin' around at the other people there that night. Old lady Marshall leaned over the pew and answered Marge, 'speaking in tongues, dear.'”

Simon smiled and asked the obvious question. “So you think perhaps Margie actually heard the man speaking English, too?”

“Think she must have. Langston and her friend apologized, excused themselves and left right away. By that time most of the others were in an up-roar and Renwald was doin' his best to calm 'em all down. It took some time and by the time we got home Margie was so wound up we never really did talk about it. So I don't know for certain, Simon. I honestly don't know for certain.”

“Can I ask you another question, Bill?” Simon's tone was quiet and respectful but Bill braced himself against what he felt sure was coming next.

“...okay...”

“Why do you think Margie is so upset by the manifested gifts of the Holy Spirit?”

“Well Simon, I've always figured that was her business. I've never really pushed her on it. Now I've got a question for you.”

“...okay...”

“How's come Noel Renwald changed his attitude from 'we don't do that here' to 'let's all get together and start another holy-roller church movement in this county?’”

Before Simon could answer the front door banged open and Margie, glaring daggers at both of them, took over the conversation.

Chapter Six

Wednesday Morning - August 14, 2013

“Lee, I can't just sell out and move to Ridgeview on the off chance that you and David will be able to unite enough people to actually rent a building and pay salaries. David may have faith enough to trust in God to supply all of his needs. I'm not sure I do.”

“Noel, be honest with me. Would you be willing to make the change if it wasn't for Charlotte's aversion to this community and her fear of coming back here?”

Noel Renwald shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Lee had hit the nail squarely on the head and he hated to admit it.

“I'm not so sure all the fear falls to Char. I'm more than a little apprehensive about it myself, Lee.”

They were seated on the shady side of Lee's cottage, enjoying a soft drink and until this exact moment they had been enjoying a soft conversation. Now, there seemed to be tension building between them. Lee recognized placing the blame on Charlotte had been a tactical error on her part. David had warned her not to make any divisive remarks to either Simon or Noel when it came to the part their wives had played in slowing the forward progress of their plans over the past several weeks.

“Oh well yes,” she leaned toward Noel with a big smile and shouldered her share of the blame. “I'm afraid, too. Maybe we all are, a little.”

The air went out of the tension as quickly as it had begun. Noel reached across the little patio table and patted her hand.

“Don't worry, dear.” he soothed. “We'll get there. That is to say we'll get there if it is God's will that we get there. And *when* we'll get there will be completely up to him, too.”

Relieved, Lee sat back and smiled at him again.

“You're absolutely right, Noel. Of course you are.”

“What time are you expecting the others,” Noel asked.

“Should be here any time now. David is driving down with plans to stay for the next few days and Simon had a couple things to finish up in town before he comes out. I imagine they'll both be here by eleven-thirty.

“Okay.... Before they get here I want to ask about you a couple of things.”

Lee had known this was coming. Or at least she had felt certain it would come eventually. She knew Noel and Simon had been talking for the past six weeks on a fairly regular basis and she had already talked with Simon about his conversation with Bill Whitmore.

“Lee are you aware of the attitude the fine folks of Ridgeview have about our plans? Have you heard the rumors and the slanderous things they're saying? The names they're throwing around?”

“Yes Noel. I've heard most of it. Probably a lot more of it than you or Simon have heard, even,” she said and she silently breathed a quick prayer before going on. “*Lord, give me the right words here.*”

“Noel, it is my firm belief Jesus' words recorded in the Matthew, chapter 18, should have

been translated, '*...if two of you could ever agree about anything I would be there in the midst of you and my Father would do what you agree upon.*'

“If I have learned anything from my years walking with the Lord it is this—getting Christians to agree in unity is nearly an impossibility. In my opinion the Body of Christ could function, with signs and wonders following, exactly as the first century church functioned if...*if*... brothers could or would agree together in unity.”

“Hello you two!” David's greeting melted the moment and both of them stood to meet him.

Wednesday Afternoon - August 14, 2013

August was normally hot along the foot hills. This afternoon was no exception. Roz Gundersen's shirt was sticking to her back and there was a trickle of perspiration between her shoulders. The heat made her irritable. Irritable was not her normal mode of operation. But lately nothing seemed normal to Roz.

She had been plagued with headaches, weird dreams, strange urges and hyper-sensitive emotions for more than a year. She was sick and tired of feeling as though she was stuck in somebody else's skin. She was also feeling abandoned and ignored. Simon had gone out to Lee's again. Yet another meeting.

She was seriously involved in the process of working herself into a full-blown pity party when the phone in the hall rang and distracted her.

As an indicator of her mood she snatched the phone from it's cradle, looked at the caller ID

read out and snapped, “What?”

“Well pardon me for living,” Charlotte's voice sounded a little shocked, as well it might.

“I just called to see if you'd gone out to Lee's with Simon. Obviously not. What's wrong?”

“Sorry... I've been out in the yard picking up trash from last night's wind storm and it's hotter than blue blazes. I'm drenched in sweat and....”

“Not interested in talking about Lee or anything she's involved in involving our husbands. I get that.”

Roz blinked back a few tears, cleared her throat and stammered, “you... you do?”

“Oh yes, my dear. I do.” Charlotte was sure she had found a sympathetic ear so she went on.

“Noel's down there again this afternoon. Actually he's been down there all day. Left early this morning...before I was even out of bed.”

“David's out there too. He's coming to town for a few days according to Simon. That means the weekend is shot. They'll be in *meetings* every day.” She hated hearing the whine in her own voice, but this whole thing was getting to be too much and Roz really didn't care who knew it any longer.

“I think you and I need to have a *meeting* of our own. Can you meet me at the top of the hill. It's cooler here in the high country and nobody up here will care if we're seen together.”

Charlotte's invitation couldn't have come at a more opportune time.

Roz jumped at the chance to share her frustration with someone who could really see the problem from the inside out.

“I can be there by three. Three-thirty at the latest,” Roz put the receiver back in its cradle and ran for the shower.

“I’ll have to stop for gas and I should call Simon...”

But as Roz showered she continued to nurture her resentment and another thought came in...

“Why should I call Simon and let him know I’m going to meet with Charlotte? He’s too busy to care anyway.”

As she brushed her hair and put on fresh make-up her Pastor’s wife voice of reason chimed in...

“Because taking off for the mountains without telling him takes me out of his protection. Deliberately not telling him when I know he’d worry if he came home to find me gone with no explanation is a lie by omission, if not by commission ... and”

Again, another thought. A rebellious thought. This time more insistent...

“I hate being left out of everything. I hate all the controversy and gossip. I hate...” she was on a roll now and the words were pouring out audibly. *“I hate Lee and David. And Noel. And the whole idea of building a new church. It’s stupid....just stupid. That’s all. I’m going to talk to Charlotte and Simon can like it or...”*

By the time Roz pulled her old Chevy up to the gas pump she was in such a state of anger she was hardly able to manage the nozzle or her ATM card.

If Lee had been in that Chevy she would have felt evil swirling through the air...and probably smelled the sulfur. Lee would have seen what Roz could not—that the enemy was taking full

advantage of an old, old trick, knowing it would succeed, as it had succeeded for millennium.

Wednesday Night - August 14, 2013

The shades were drawn, the house locked for the night. Lee, with a cup of tea and a sheaf of papers documenting the afternoon's work, was headed to the library to review the lists and notes. A sound from the yard caught her attention. She stood still and listened for a bit then sat down her tea and papers and moved to the door. When the tapping came again she realized it was nearer than she'd first calculated. Not from the yard, but from the front door, and more urgent this time. She stepped out of the kitchen and into the darkened hallway, pausing to flick on a small table lamp and glance at her watch.

"Eleven-eleven, late for visitors."

Tap, tap. Tap, tap. TAP.

"I'm coming. I'm coming!" She paused again, hand on the dead-bolt. "Who's there?"

"Lee, it's David. David Dale. Can you let me in, please?"

Within seconds the door was unbolted and thrown open, the porch light switched on. Lee stood staring at the pale face and trembling hands of a man she would never have expected to appear so shaken.

"David! What is it?"

Reaching out to study him, she guided him into the hallway and closed the door behind them. For some reason taking time to throw the deadbolt back into place seemed important. In the dim

light she again thought how remarkably pale and shaken he seemed. This was a man, normally tanned and rugged, who she had at once decided would remain self-possessed in most any crisis. At the moment self-possessed would have been the last attribute Lee could associate with him.

“Come in to the kitchen and sit down, David”

She sounded motherly and old-fashioned to herself. Not her normal persona and she gave herself a mental shake before saying another word. *“He doesn't need a mommy, Lee. Find out what's happened and what you can do to help, but remember he is the head here. You are a servant. Nothing more.”*

Taking a chair at the kitchen table, where only hours before they had been listing names of potential congregants and the talents each one might possibly bring to the group, David dropped his face into both palms and inhaled a huge gulp of air.

“It's.... It's Roz and Charlotte. Lee.... Lee, there's been an accident!”

“What! What sort of accident? Where? Are they okay? Where's.....”

“They're both all right,” looking up and shaking his head like a dog emerging from the water, David pulled himself together and told her the whole story.

Sometime in mid-afternoon Roz Gundersen had driven out of Ridgeview alone, apparently headed for the Ridge Route. She was seen at the Texaco station at the edge of town about four o'clock. The station attendant told Simon she seemed nervous and distracted, that she'd filled up, asked for help checking the air pressure in a front tire and had been vague about where she was headed when he asked.

At quarter to five she inquired for Charlotte Renwald at the roadside dinner near the top of the Ridge Route and was told Charlotte had been in around three, had waited for perhaps an hour, then left. She had seemed upset and refused all offers of help. The waitress said she had tried making several calls, none successfully, then got back in her Chevy and continued on over the pass toward Granger.

A bit past six-thirty the Highway Patrol was called to a one car accident in the foothills outside Granger. When they arrived on the scene they found a car—totaled but with no one in or near it. They identified the car as the Chevrolet registered to Simon and Rosalyn Gundersen. At that point the Patrolman contacted Simon. He was on his way home from Lee's and had no notion that Roz was not at home waiting dinner on him.

Simon's first instinct, considering where the car was found, was to contact Noel and his wife. Roz was with them, but that was about all the information he could get out of Noel. There was nothing left to do but drive to Granger himself and find out what was really going on.

About ten Noel had called David, given him the story so far as he knew it, and asked for prayer and any suggestions he might have as what they were supposed to do now.

David had climbed out of the motel bed where he was going over his notes and lists from the afternoon, asked the Lord to direct his steps and headed for his car. Instead of heading over the Ridge Route to take on the Renwalds and the Gundersens himself, he had driven straight to Lee's, determined to pound on her door until he could wake her no matter how long it took.

As David talked Lee put on a pot of coffee, set out a plate of cookies, wiped the counter-top

and kept busy in general. Her hands shook slightly as she poured mugs of the steaming brew for both of them. Then she plopped down in a chair across from him and began firing questions at him again.

“Roz is at the Renwald's in Granger?”

“That's what Noel said.”

“Simon is up there too?”

“Yup.”

“Do they plan on staying in Granger tonight?”

“Not sure. Noel didn't say one way or the other. My guess, they are both too upset to try the drive home in the middle of the night. I think Roz left the boys in the care of a neighbor.”

“Good. That was going to be my next question.” Lee sat turning the cooling mug around and around, making a symmetrical pattern of circles on the table. “Did Noel offer any suggestion as to what brought this on?”

David shook his head, shrugged his shoulders and told her, “Not a clue. Apparently Roz and Charlotte planned to meet at the diner sometime around three or three-thirty. Charlotte got there a little before three, waited an hour or so, then went home when Roz failed to show up. Said she tried calling, but her calls went straight to voice mail. He wasn't sure exactly what they were planning to talk about thought.”

“Oh well...that's easy enough to figure out.” Lee's face was a study in concern and frustration.

“They were planning on agreeing together on all the ways they *disagreed* with what their

husbands are doing right now.”

“I was afraid of that.” David shook his head again and continued. “A house divided...”

“Exactly!”

“So now what?”

“David, you know as well as I do once a chasm opens and a division starts to spread the only way to stop it is...”

“Pray,” he cut off what she was going to say. “We've been praying, Lee.” Holding up a hand, palm facing her, “Okay... I know you're right,” as she opened her mouth to push her point further. “But how does one pray to change a persons thought processes when they're so far gone they lose all perspective on a subject?”

“We pray to bind the divisive spirit that's planting the thoughts. Wait, I'll show you.” She left the table and hurried to the library. In a moment she was back, laying an *Amplified Bible* on the table in front of him she jabbed a finger at a couple of brightly high-lighted verses.

...I will build My church, and the gates of Hades (the powers of the infernal region) shall not overpower it [or be strong to its detriment or hold out against it]. I will give you the keys (authority) of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind [forbid, declare to be improper and unlawful] on earth will have [already] been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose [permit, declare lawful] on earth will have [already] been loosed in heaven.” Matthew 16:18-20

“...hummm. right...? I've studied this passage for years, Lee. Somehow it never said quite what

I'm getting from it tonight. Why is that?"

“Because you've probably never needed to have it come alive in exactly this light before tonight, David. I'm glad you see it though. If what we've been led to undertake is God's will, if this division is from the enemy and, if what's happening with those young wives is aimed at becoming a strong detriment to the plan...why, then David, we can safely pray to bind the enemy from troubling them an further.” She paused, took a sip of the now cold coffee, and finished, “because what's going on in those homes right now is, most certainly, not lawful in heaven.”

Chapter Seven

Thursday Morning - October 10, 2013

Autumn had spread her mantle of color over the hills and valleys between Ridgeview and Granger. The evenings had grown chilly, the mornings frosty, but daytime skies were bright blue, and most days the temperatures were warm enough for gardening in one's shirt sleeves. Autumn in the mountains was Lee's favorite season.

On this particular Thursday morning she was hoeing up the vegetable patch north of her cottage, enjoying the solitude and humming happily to herself. The past couple of months had been productive and unusually peaceful. Things had settled down spiritually after several one-on-one sessions with first Rosalyn Gundersen and then with Charlotte Renwald.

She was appointed counselor after she had strongly suggested to the men the problems they were having at home were best left to her, an older woman. "I've been where they are right now," she told them. "I understand the temptation to rebel against things I can't control. And, I understand the spiritual implications in the situation. If you guys try to handle this with *a firm manly hand* all you'll accomplish is making it about a thousand times worse."

Lee had be right. Both Noel and Simon had to admit that after a couple of meetings with Lee both wives had come back to the position they'd been in when they originally agreed to help and support *the plan*. Both men had tried to express their gratitude more than once. Every time, Lee had waved it aside by quoting part of a verse from Titus 2

Bid the older women to ... train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive to their husbands, that the word of God may not be discredited.

“One of my biggest fears is that, in following God's bidding, in building this new place to worship Him and spread His Grace, we might do something to discredit The Word.” she told them.

“In case you haven't noticed, gentlemen...much of what's being done in religious circles today sends folks running away from church, instead of drawing them in and offering them the love and healing God freely offers.

“My constant prayer is that we examine our motives and movements with each and every step we take. The Holy Spirit will draw hearts to God, but it only takes one Pharisaical act on our parts to send them packing. And with a negative tale to tell others to boot.”

These thoughts and memories ran through her mind as she hoed and hummed. The October sun beat down on her bare head and she stopped to wipe the sweat from her forehead with her sleeve. A fat robin, probably the last of the season, pulled at a worm in the soil she had loosened so she stood very still for a bit, watching his industry. Birds and their natural dependence upon the Lord for every need were always of special interest to Lee. As the robin won his tug-of-war and carried off his prize she heard the crunch of tires on the driveway.

“Now who can that be. Not expecting anybody this morning. Guess I better go through the house in case they go to the front door.” So, tucking a few stray hairs back in place and wiping

her hands on the seat of her jeans, she laid aside the hoe and turned toward the house.

“Ho! Mrs. Langston?”

The voice was slightly familiar but she could not place it. Whoever it was had not gone to the front of the house. Instead they were working their way down the side of the cottage toward the garden, calling out as they came.

“Here.” Lee called back. And taking a few steps toward the side of the house she came face to face with the last person on earth she might have expected to see.

“Bill Whitmore? What are you doing way out here?” Lee called out. “*And what could you possibly want with me?*” she was thinking.

Always the gracious hostess, no matter how strange the circumstances, Lee greeted her guest with a hand-shake, an invitation to sit in the shade of the patio, and something cool to drink. He nervously returned the hand-shake and firmly refused her offers of comfort.

“I..ah...I came to ask a favor. I uhm.... I know I have no right to ask you for anything, ma'am.”

Lee could see the strain in his face, the hesitancy in his manner. All of that only made her more curious about his reason for leaving his store in the middle of a week-day and driving all the way out to her place when she'd spoken to him briefly at the store not twenty-four hours before.

“That's fine, Bill.” Lee smiled at him, again gesturing toward a seat in the shade. “Let's sit down here and you can tell me what's on your mind.”

“Well ma'am,” still standing, and fidgeting like an eleven-year-old, he came to the point, “it's Margery. She's sick. Awful sick, Ms. Langston. And I'm thinking it has something to do with the

company she's keepin' and that blamed computer she's always glued to.”

Lee did a few quick mental calisthenics, rehearsed several Bible verses and with a very sober expression asked the last person she'd ever expected to have such a conversation with, “What makes you think her illness and her company are connected, Bill?”

“It's something I recall you sayin' a few years back...” He hesitated, fidgeted some more, took a deep breath and plunged in. “It was during that time just before Noel Renwald was asked to leave the church. You remember, right?”

Oh she remembered all right. What she couldn't recall was having said *anything* that might bring this man, not exactly an enemy, but certainly not a friend either, to her with worries about what his wife had been dabbling in, or who she had been dabbling with.

“I recall that time, Bill. It's wasn't something one might easily forget. For any of us I would guess.” She tried to soften the words with a little crooked smile of reassurance. Remembering, too, her distaste for anything that would bring a reproach on God's Word, she went on. “What I don't recall is what I might have said to give you the idea...”

“You said God doesn't send illness,” he blurted out. “You said sickness and disease is a part of a fallen world and the enemy is the author of all of it.”

“Yes, I expect I said that, Bill. It's what I believe with all my heart. I say it often, as a matter of fact.” Her smile was more genuine now and she leaned in to ask, “Exactly what makes you think Margery is somehow involved in something that might cause her illness?”

“It's that Meg Carter and her crowd. Margie's been goin' over there once or twice a week for a

few months now. She spends hours chatting with 'em on the computer. And she's saying stuff that makes me think she's honestly buying into the trash they're tellin' her.”

“What are they telling her, Bill?

“Well to begin with they're saying everyone of us makes his own way to heaven in his own way. That Jesus isn't necessarily anything but a historical figure and he certainly isn't a necessary part of gettin' to heaven. Then they told her she could visualize and materialize anything she wants just by callin' on the power of the *earth goddess*. It makes me sick. All of it just makes me sick.”

He stopped there, simply laid his forehead against the patio support pillar and wept like a child.

Lee couldn't stand it. Here was a man, a member of the Body of Christ, in pain and in need. At that moment it simply did not matter to Lee that their personal ideas about God's law and God's Grace were miles apart. Right then she just didn't care about his point-of-view regarding the gifts of the Holy Spirit or any of the other religious dogma that divided them. He was hurting and his wife, whom he loved in spite of himself, was in real danger. Lee stood up, stepped close enough to lay her hand on his shoulder and simply prayed over him.

In a few minutes Bill had gathered himself enough to be embarrassed. Starting to make apologetic noises and move toward his car, he was quickly talking himself out of continuing their conversation.

Lee was spirituality astute enough to be cautious about attempting to *minister* to any man.

Especially *this* man. She knew she needed another man there with her. She needed a man with some spiritual authority. And she needed him quickly.

“Bill?” She moved away from him, toward the side door and reached inside for her phone.

“David Dale is working on the place he rented over on the back side of the creek. He could be here in under ten minutes. Please let me call him. I'll ask him to come pray with us and he can advise you on how to help your wife.”

“Oh no! I don't want to bother him, Mrs. Langston. Shouldn't have bothered you. I'll just go back...”

“Bill, please listen to me,” She realized this whole thing could go south in a flash, so she lowered her voice to what she hoped was a comforting semi-whisper and pleaded, “You know Margie needs prayer. Needs help. You wouldn't have come out here this morning otherwise. Let us help you Bill. Please let us help you.”

It took a bit more wheedling on Lee's part and a bit more hemming and hawing on his, but eventually they agreed. She would call David to come and pray. They would help bring Margie Whitmore back into God's fold if it was at all possible.

In the end, as she punched in David's number, Lee said, “With God *all things* are possible, Bill. Don't you forget that.”

Thursday Night - October 10, 2013

A crackling fire danced in Lee's tiny library fireplace. Occasionally a log shifted, showering

sparks toward the hearth screen, drawing her attention away from the journal entry she was writing. A cup of tea sat ignored at her elbow. It had been a few hours since she'd told David "good evening," and sent him on his way. As his SUV turned from her driveway to the road, she sank into her chair at the kitchen table, her strength gone. She'd held up throughout the afternoon but now she had simply laid her head down on her arms and wept from exhaustion. Finally, recognizing a desperate need for food. She'd gone to the garden early with nothing but coffee for breakfast, so she roused herself and fixed what she supposed could be thought of as breakfast, for dinner. She'd started hoeing her garden while planning to work until she was tired, fix bacon an eggs for brunch, then drive into town for groceries later in the day since the cupboard was as bare as Ol' Mother Hubbard's.

Bill Whitmore's visit had changed her plans.

She and David spent hours that afternoon, talking and praying with him. And, while it had been a two-steps-forward, three-steps-back process for a long time, eventually, late in the day, there was a breakthrough. Finally around six o'clock he told them he felt confident in his new understanding and would be comfortable going to Margery with what he'd learned from them.

After Bill left for town, Lee and David had continued to pray protection over him and the Word they had shared with him.

The entire thing had been a spiritual battle, and over the years Lee had learned being a prayer warrior could drain away one's strength, particularly if one made the mistake of trying to accomplish any part of the battle on their own.

After a meal and some tea...she'd had more than enough caffeine for one day...she could feel her strength beginning to return. At that point she'd taken another cup of tea to the library, lit the little pile of kindling and paper she always left waiting in the fireplace, thrown a couple of logs on the blaze, and settled down to record the day's rather amazing events.

10.12.13 - Don't know when I've been so surprised by anything--looking up and coming face to face with Bill was a shock. Without a doubt. Then to find out Margie was messing around with the focal coven! How on earth can anyone as religious and churchly-minded as she is be so completely deceived?

Lee wrote intently for some time, losing herself, as she often did, in recording her thoughts and prayers. Getting up to put another log in the fire, she glanced toward the barn. Headlights coming down the lane from the road struck her as odd. Checking the mantle clock she realized it was not only late, but nearly morning.

“Now what?”

Taking a few steps away from the desk lamp which she knew silhouetted her perfectly in the window she reached for the little pearl-handled .22 that lived in her top desk drawer and pushed it into the waistband of her jeans at the small of her back. Stepping into the kitchen she picked her jacket off the peg and continued toward the back door, checking to make certain the pistol was covered by the jacket but still easily accessible.

“Nobody should be drivin' around out there this time of night,” she took another step or two toward the door as the car rolled to a stop in the gravel between the house and the barn. “Had

enough surprises for one day. Lord, whatever it is, your favor, please.”

As she eased the back door open the car turned slowly back toward the road, making a circle in the wide drive then, with spinning tires and spraying gravel, sped back up the lane the way it had come.

“What on earth....?”

“No! Oh no!”

A flash of flame was shooting up in front of her barn. Whoever was in the car must have tossed a touch or something out into the dry grasses at the edge of the driveway. Lee knew it would only take a few seconds for the fire to spread and the barn to be engulfed in flames.

She ran for the hose.

Saturday Morning - October 12, 2013

“All I can do is thank God you are tuned in to His voice and act on His call without stopping for a bunch of questions, David.”

In the little diner at the top of the Ridge Route Lee sat across the booth from David Dale. He smiled then reached across the table and gently patted her hand.

“Me too. ...glad He woke me up the other night, I mean.”

“Can't bear to think what I would have done if you hadn't showed up when you did. The whole place could have burned to the ground. With me in it.” She shuddered a little then perked up. “When the Lord says *“no weapon formed against me will prosper”* he means it. I am just so

thankful. For Him! And for you.”

“Me too...” a pinkish flush was creeping up under David's collar. “Thankful to Him for...for everything, Lee.”

Fortunately, before the conversation could become any more awkward Noel and Charlotte entered the diner, closely followed by Simon and Rosalyn. All having agreed to meet for a debriefing and prayer, the diner seemed like a good place. Half-way between and neutral ground. Lee didn't want them a her place. It was still a mess after the fire and the walls at the cafe in Ridgeview had eyes and ears everywhere.

Getting out of the car, Charlotte had seen the hand-patting through the plate-glass window next to the booth. Roz noticed David's heightened color as they approached the booth. The two exchanged raised eyebrows behind their husband's backs and then both spoke at once.

“Hi guys!”

“How are you?”

“Alive...” Lee breathed. “With no thanks to my midnight visitor Thursday.”

“Ever figure out who it was, Lee?” Noel wanted to know.

She just shook her head. She didn't know and the police could do nothing without a plate number or a better description of the vehicle. After forty-eight hours it still remained a mystery.

“Hear you had another visitor that day, too,” Simon took a seat next to Lee and put an arm around her shoulders. He gave her a quick hug, then asked, “Think the two were connected?”

“More than likely,” her smile suddenly turned to a very serious frown. “But probably not in the

way you're thinking. Bill Whitmore was honestly and truly seeking help and answers when he came out to my place that morning.”

“So you don't think it was just an act?” Noel was not convinced the two incidents were as separate as Lee hoped.

“No. It wasn't an act,” David told them. “The man was at the end of himself. He came to Lee looking to find out more about something she told him years ago. Way back. Before you left town Noel. And before the enemy moved in to set up housekeeping in his wife's computer.”

“How weird is that?” Roz wanted to know. “The very woman who has raised the most hell.... Excuse me! But that's what it's been...she's raised more fuss, over her church doctrine clashing with our plans to start up a new work than anyone else. Yet here is this very same woman getting herself tangled up in a new-age religion, and....”

“Witchcraft is not exactly *new* new-age Roz,” Simon corrected her. “It's mentioned several times in the Old Testament. Remember?”

“Okay...let's call a spade a spade here then. She gets tangled up in witchcraft or *Wicca*, or whatever, then has the audacity to condemn us for our belief in the gifts of the Holy Spirit! Who does she think she's kidding?”

When the boy waiting tables brought around the coffee pot the conversation stopped abruptly. He topped of their mugs and asked if anyone wanted something more. By mutual agreement, however unspoken, they turned away from the subject of Margie Whitmore. Not wanting an outsider to over-hear them talking about witches and religion and a well-known local woman all

in the same sentence. It took several minutes for their order to be filled and the pie all three men requested to be delivered. They spent that time catching up on Lee's narrow escape from the attempt to set her place afire. When the server was once more slouching over his iPad at the end of the lunch counter Noel put the thing all of them wanted to know but none of them wanted to ask right out on the table.

“So...David? How did you manage to arrive at Lee's just at the right time that night?”

Taking a deep breath David answered as honestly as if he were talking to Lee alone. “God woke me up and told me to get over to Lee's place pronto. I could literally hear her struggling with a hose, hear her crying and smell the smoke. That was at a quarter to twelve. She tells me the car pulled into her driveway at five minutes till twelve. God knew she was going to need help even before she knew it. I was on my way to her place before the fire was ever started.”

“Wow!” Charlotte reached out to take Lee's hand in her own, a strange expression of awe on her face. “God really does look out for you lady!?”

“God looks out for *all* of his own,” Lee nodded, “*if* they'll let him.”

The six of them remained in the booth, talking, praying, comparing notes for a long time. Then, as the sun dipped behind the western foothills, David stood, laid his hand on Lee's shoulder and told them, “We need to get back down the hill. The yard people and carpenter should be through with clean-up by now. Shall we go Lee?”

That was when the others noticed, for the first time, the only other vehicle parked in front of the diner besides their own, was David's SUV. Lee's old red pickup was nowhere in site.

“They were together!” Roz announced as they backed out of the parking lot and headed toward home.

“Yep. They sure were.” Simon agreed.

Sunday Evening - October 13, 2013

10.13.13 What an awesome evening. Twenty-three people! God is so good to us! Thank you, Lord. And the teaching! There's no doubt you sent the right leader to us. David speaks from his heart AND yours. I am so grateful for...

The ringing phone in the hall jarred Lee out of her journaling zone. “Now what?” She wondered heading out the door to answer it, pausing to check the yard and barn as she passed the window. She didn't consider herself the nervous type, but she admitted to being jumpy since someone had tried to burn her out last Thursday night.

“Hello. Langston's.”

“Mrs. Langston?”

“...yes?”

“My name is Meg Carter. I don't think we've met. I was at the meeting tonight. I'd hoped to catch you before you left. I hope my call didn't wake you.”

The hair on the back of Lee's neck bristled. For an instant she was tempted to simply hang up.

“No...I don't remember seeing you tonight Ms. Carter,” she said. “*Let her tell you what she wants, Lee.*” “What can I do for you?”

“Meet with me. Tomorrow. Come to my shop in Overland, it's on Main Street. You can't miss it. I'll fix you lunch and we can get acquainted.”

Lee knew the place. Overland was a small community in the foothills west of Ridgeview. She'd driven by "*Meg's Memories*" a few times. It was a quaint little antique shop and garden center housed in a hundred-year-old cabin at the end of the town's main street. The shabby chic-ness of the place tended to set her teeth on edge. She recalled wondering, when she first set eyes on the place, how any man could ever find a place to sit down comfortably and rest amid all that rosy pink and white. Something other than the pink and white had given Lee the chills, even from the safety of her pickup. Now she knew what it had been.

"Tomorrow isn't a good day for me Ms. Carter, I've plans to meet friends in Granger."

"What day would be better?"

"Why don't you tell me why you want to meet with me," Lee's tone was rapidly becoming stern. "I'm usually not one to take time off for lunch with strangers. What exactly do you want?"

"Well not what you're thinking, for sure."

"And what am I thinking?"

"That because of my connection with Margery Whitmore, and my personal belief system I have some nefarious reason for cultivating your friendship. I don't, Mrs. Langston. What I want is to know more about the things I heard David talking about this evening."

"Then perhaps you should get together with David," Lee suggested.

"I tried. I caught him in the parking lot as he was leaving tonight and asked him to have lunch or coffee with me tomorrow. He politely refused and suggested I contact you."

"I see." Lee was rapidly calculating all the reasons it would be spiritually inappropriate for

David, a single man, to meet Meg Carter, a non-believer, single and not unattractive, for any reason without another woman present.

“Well...as I said, tomorrow's full. Do you have time on Tuesday? And would you consider coming to my home? I'm just west of Ridgeview off Road 12.”

“I...ah.... I suppose I could do that.”

There was something here that rang false with Lee. She did not believe in coincidence. Not at all. The sequence of events; Bill's visit, the fire, tonight's church service and now *this* just made her wonder. It was all just a bit too coincidental to set well with her. Nevertheless she finalized a plan to entertain Meg Carter for coffee at her cottage on Tuesday morning.

When she hung up there was a sense of dread and perhaps even a touch of fear. She was not afraid of the woman, *nor* the witch. “*Greater is he that is in me.*” She was afraid of her own prejudices and those of the others as well.

“None of them were exactly welcoming to Bill Whitmore this evening. I do think he is totally sincere about wanting to help Margie and get closer to the Lord himself. He's not going to be able to do that if we don't welcome him as a brother and a friend. If what Meg is looking for is something even vaguely similar the fact that she's known for her Wiccan beliefs is going to make it even more difficult to gain their trust and acceptance.”

A memory crossed her mind as she returned to her journal. She flipped through the pages toward the beginning of the volume she'd been writing in, then picked another from the shelf, turning pages until she found what she wanted. “*The Lord showed me this a long time ago. I've*

got a feeling He's going to expect us to act on it sooner rather than later."

11.07.2000 --I would prepare them for a new way of life. They will want to put away old ways and put on new, but will be afraid that what has controlled their life will continue to control their life forever.

Have faith in yourself -- in the power of My Holy Spirit within you to lead them into new paths.

"Never mind the anguish that lies behind. Forget, Forgive, Love and Laugh, as you move forward. I AM!

She read the passage over. Then she read it again. Her belief that the Holy Spirit knew every word of every passage He ever inspired, both in her writings and in the writing of others over the centuries, enabled Lee to accept with confidence this prophetic instruction from the Lord. Comforted in knowing God had already made provision for her meeting with Meg Carter. Lee closed up the cottage and went to bed, at peace with the plan.

Chapter Eight

Tuesday Morning - November 26, 2013

When Lee looked out her kitchen window a couple of days before Thanksgiving a skiff of snow dusted the landscape and blanketed the roof of the barn in white. The weather forecast the night before had called for a sunny day with no chance of precipitation. The gray-white sky and stiff breeze moving the bare branches of the maple by the driveway told a different story.

“So much for channel 7's predictions,” Lee laughed. *“Lately that weatherman's had a couple of hits and a lot more misses. Those clouds don't show any sign of lifting. My guess is there'll be more snow by afternoon. My guess is about as likely as his guess I'm betting.”*

“Oh well, still gonna have to run in for supplies,” she sighed and turned to put on coffee.

“Wonder what everyone else is planning for the weekend.”

The Holidays had been a solitary season for Lee ever since her husband's accident in the late 90's. After fifteen years of marriage, she was suddenly left on her own, and being on her own brought some dramatic changes to her life. Holidays had been one of the hardest. With no children, no siblings, her parents both gone and no really close in-laws or friends Lee had simply fallen into a pattern of keeping to herself. Before his death Mark Langston and his wife had moved around quite a bit, never staying in one place more than a few months at a time. Mark's career as a specialized heavy equipment operator had taken them from the gold-fields of Alaska to the oil-fields of Oklahoma; from California to Maine, and back again. There had always been

other couples around the job sites—people like themselves who followed the work wherever it took them. Occasionally there had been friends—people they associated with for a few months but would probably never meet again. After the accident, on her own, other couples became simply *other people*. For the past twenty years Lee's closest friends and dearest companions had been the Holy Spirit and the Word of God.

Joining other people's Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations always left her feeling like a fifth-wheel—a feeling she avoided whenever possible. Invitations were usually plentiful, but she preferred her own company to that of virtual strangers. This year wasn't going to be all that different for her. Both the Renwalds and the Gundersens had urged her to be with them on Thursday. David Dale had offered to buy her dinner in town. A few people, those regularly attending church now, made noises about her joining them for a meal.

Graciously, as always, Lee had declined every offer.

With coffee and toast on the table in front of her, she reached for her grocery list and pencil. The list was already fairly lengthy although far from traditional. No turkey. No cranberries or pumpkin for pies. Nothing to bring back memories of the festive meals she had loved to fix before Mark's accident. Instead there were lamb chops, stuff for a green salad, feed for the chickens, a new screwdriver....

“Humm...what else? Oh! Have to pick up a box of tacks to fix that....”

Tires crunching the gravel driveway interrupted her thoughts and she glanced up.

“Oh Lord! It's David. And I haven't even combed my hair yet!”

Before she could remedy her appearance he was standing on the back steps, both hands full of grocery bags—too full to knock. Lee could see him struggling with his load through the glass panel. She reached the door just as he was about to try using his elbow as a knocker.

“What *are* you doing, man?” She laughingly opened the door, took one of the bags that was dangerously close to falling and ushered him to the counter where he sat the rest of his load down with a groan.

“Bringing you our Thanksgiving dinner. Emphasis on our.” He took the bag she was still holding and put it down next to the others. “Got any more of that coffee?”

“*Our* dinner? Did I miss something?” she asked, laughing again.

“No. I did. Am...”

He accepted the mug she offered him and continued. “I’m missing the Thanksgiving meals of yesteryear.” A big boyish grin spread across his face at her look of astonishment. “Being a bachelor has it’s perks, but home cooked meals isn’t one of them. I just thought if I provided the groceries, you might be persuaded to provide the home cooking.”

“Oh did you now?”

There was a certain something in the way this conversation was developing that Lee hadn’t felt forever—something she was certain had died in a construction accident in the Yukon back in 1993. Embarrassed, she looked away.

Out the window she noticed it had started to snow again. Her guess had been correct. A frown shadowed her face as a fleeting memory of other snow storms and other Thanksgivings crossed

her mind. She looked at the very attractive man currently drinking coffee at her breakfast table.

Then asked, "And what gave you that idea?"

"The fact that we're friends. The fact that we're both very much alone. The fact that we've become partners in a very strange situation...."

Lee recognized, too late, she'd made his gesture of friendship out to be more than it was meant to be, and in so doing had made him, and herself, uncomfortable. Not at all what she intended to do.

"Okay, friend. Let's call it a deal. What did you bring for me to cook?"

She saw him relax as he began to list the contents of his grocery bags.

Thursday Afternoon - November 28, 2013

Thanksgiving day dawned bright and clear. A few patches of snow lingered in the shade, giving evidence of the heavy winter storm that blew through late on Tuesday night, dumping a foot and a half of the white stuff in the valley and over twenty-four inches up on the Ridge Route. So much snow was unusual before January or February. It came as a complete surprise, and so everyone had been forced to change travel plans.

The Renwalds, who had tickets to fly to Houston and visit her sister's family, stayed in Granger. Charlotte wasn't happy about it, but shopped for groceries and cooked their dinner graciously. Noel thanked her for keeping the spirit of the day bright and peaceful in spite of her disappointment. They had agreed it was too risky to try the drive over the pass to Ridgeview

when Roz Gundersen's invitation to join them came Wednesday morning. The fact that the storm didn't blow itself out until late that afternoon and the pass was closed for most of the day gave strength to their decision.

Simon, Roz and the boys were planning a trip to visit a distant cousin of his who lived in a small town on the plains about a hundred miles east of them. Out that way the wind and blowing snow had closed roads and stranded travelers in truck-stops and motels for two days. They stayed home, ate chili, popped corn, watched football and old movies; grateful for a roaring fireplace and a well stocked pantry.

Lee and David's plans were not impacted by the storm. She fixed dinner, using the groceries he'd brought, plus a few extras from her own shopping list. All together there was enough food to satisfy a whole troop of people. About two-thirty David pushed away from the table, and patting his slim middle, announced, "If I eat another bite I'll explode. I'm sure of it. Lee that was wonderful."

"Thanks. I haven't cooked a dinner like that forever. Wasn't sure I could still do it."

"Oh you can still do it. No doubt about that." His compliment meant more than he could know.

"I used to love entertaining. Prided myself on doing it without a lot of fuss and still putting out a pretty impressive spread. It's been years..."

She started gathering up dishes, stacking plates, making moves toward clearing the table.

"Here, let me do that. You cooked. I'll clean up," David told her, taking the plates from her hands. "Sit down and finish your coffee. I'll stack these in the sink, then I want to just visit with

you for awhile.”

Her surprise showed in the look she gave him, but she released the plates and picked up her coffee cup. “Okay...”

He did put the dirty dishes in the sink, asked about storing several items that would need refrigeration, poured himself another cup of coffee, pulled a stool away from the breakfast bar, straddled it and pinned her with eyes so intense it startled her for a moment.

“Lee...” He started. Stopped and then started again. “Lee...I want to know a lot of things about you. But I want to start by having you tell me why here? Why are you in Ridgeview. Why did you come back to this town? And why did you go back to the Community Church after they invited you to leave on grounds of “inappropriate behavior?”

“Who told you that?” She wasn't exactly surprised that he knew, but she was a little disgusted knowing the story could come back into play after so many years. She thought it had died a natural death long ago.

“Small town...small people. Word gets around. Especially when you're the new guy and folks haven't had a chance to rehash the gossip for awhile. I asked some questions about the way that congregation dwindled away....your name came up.”

“Yeah. I expect it did. Because I told 'em, when they let Noel and Charlotte Renwald go, they were making a huge mistake. I felt their action would ultimately kill the church.” She rubbed a hand through her hair, took a deep breath and went on. “It came close, too. If Simon hadn't been willing to take on the job, even though he wasn't their first choice for pastor, and if he hadn't been

open to the Lord's guidance, the Board would have hired a pastor purely to satisfy their itching ears. At that point, I believe God would have simply let them have their own way. I thought the consequences of the Board's indifference toward God's Word would be a vacant building and a scattered flock.”

She got up from the table and reached for more coffee. David could tell there was more to her story, but rather than press for the details, he sat quietly and waited for her to go on.

“Simon honestly has a heart for God, David. I guess it would be safe to say *he found favor in God's eyes*. That may sound old-fashioned, but it is as fresh and relevant today as it was in Genesis.”

“I know it is, Lee. And I agree,” he moved from the bar stool to the chair across from her, “Simon is a shepherd at heart. His heart's desire is to serve the Lord and feed his sheep.” Giving her that same intense look David asked, “He called you to come back here, didn't he?”

“He did.” She nodded, remembering the phone call as though it were yesterday. “He and Noel got together eventually. Simon wanted to know the details of Noel's termination. He and Roz were going to the church when he was let go, but the Board keep everything under wraps until they announced it to the congregation on Sunday evening of the same day they told Noel he was done.”

David shook his head in disgust. “Classy. But typical, I'm afraid. So? They got together to talk over...what””

“How to stop the bleeding, I think. There was a lot of controversy over doctrine—with

Margery Whitmore and her friends right in the middle of it. I think they hoped I could bring an older woman's influence to the table. Both of them knew where I stood on the gifts of the Spirit. Margery and I have diametrically opposing views when it comes to gifts, and fruits and works you know.” The grin that followed her question was—playful—he thought.

“I got that,” he grinned back at her. “Your opposing views couldn't be more obvious. Even more so lately. Right?”

“Lately we aren't even in the same realm, David.”

“On another topic,” he had moved toward the sink filled with dinner dishes, but motioned her to sit still. “What inspired you to encourage Simon and Noel to team up and start a new church?”

“Oh, that's a no brain-er! Unity! David,” reaching for the tea-towel to do her part in the clean up. “Or rather the lack of it.

Companionably they finished the dishes, put away the left-overs, talking about the varied and numerous dogmas, doctrines and isms dividing the body of Christ. Then they retired to the library with pie and more coffee.

It was growing dark by the time David, loaded down with a grocery bag of left-overs, thanked Lee for a wonderful day and headed for his own cabin.

Driving home he mulled over what he had learned of Lee's agreement with Simon and Noel, her conversation with Bill Whitmore, and what she had talked about with Meg Carter. He knew all of them had been attending the Sunday teaching sessions he led whenever they could.

Sessions was how he thought of them. They were still too new and too thinly populated to be

called church services. The ten or so people who gathered in the dining room at the volunteer fire-house would have to at least double before he could, in good conscious, consider calling them church services. The only regulars were Lee, Bill, Meg and two couples who drove down from Overland with Meg every week. Simon continued to hold his pastorate at the Community Church. He had given his word to stay until a new minister could be hired, so stay he would. He joined them on Sunday nights and for Wednesday Bible study, a fact that wasn't sitting well with the deacons at the Community Church. Noel, too, was with them whenever he could make it. The ninety mile round trip and the weather dictated his attendance, but not his enthusiastic support. So far he hadn't be able to persuade Charlotte to make the move back to Ridgeview. So, counting the Renwalds and Gundersens their numbers could swell to twenty on a good day. Add in the occasional curious visitors from one of the several other local churches and you might count twenty-five or six, provided you counted everything that moved.

“If it moves count it,” Noel had suggested. “If it moves twice—count it twice.”

During the ten-minute drive home in the twilight, the census kept playing through his thoughts, closely followed by one word Lee had spoken several times during the afternoon... Unity.

As he pulled up to the rustic old cabin he had rented after agreeing to take leadership of this little bland of believers he spoke to the darkness closing in around him.

”Unity! Like she said, with no unity there is *no* point.”

Tuesday Evening - December 24, 2013

Christmas eve found Lee comfortably alone, relaxing in front of the library fire, wrapped in a favorite sweater that was older than the boy who had carried her groceries to the pickup earlier. A cup of coffee and a few cookies left over from Sunday evening's exchange occupied the table next to her chair. A new novel—a *Christmas gift 'from me to me*—by her favorite mystery writer lay open across her knees. She had been alternately reading and dozing for an hour or more. Satisfied to have finished all of the chores, sent off all of the gifts and cards she felt appropriate, stocked the kitchen with supplies to last her through the New Year, her plan was to take full advantage of this hard-earned solitude by eating when she was hungry, sleeping when she was tired and doing nothing in general until January.

“Just thankful for some quite time, some time to myself,” she told the crackling fire. “It's been way too long coming.”

With those words still hanging in the air, the sound of someone pounding on the front door interrupted her solitary evening. Looking out the window to see if she could recognize a vehicle Lee was not surprised to find a soft, gentle snow falling silently on the driveway, shimmering in the yard light. Nothing else was visible. The forecast had predicted snow throughout the week. A white Christmas was expected. But nothing like the storms last month, meaning everyone she knew would finally be able to carry out their plans for a Holiday with family or friends. “*So now what?*”

“I'm coming. I'm coming.”

A few steps through the darkened hallway brought her to the door, where she flipped on the porch light, asking, "Who is it?"

"Meg Carter, Mrs. Langston. Please let me in. Please!"

Tuesday Night - December 24, 2013

The little mantel clock struck the half-hour. In less than thirty minutes it would be Christmas Day. Several hours had passed since Meg apologetically asked directions to the "little girls room" leaving Lee with an opportunity to text David Dale with the terse message: "Pray. Please!"

She wasn't sure where he was spending the Holiday, only that he would be out of town, but back in time for church on Sunday morning. Not expecting a response to her text, she shut off the phone and slipped it between the arm and cushion of her chair. Meg, returning to the library, had no idea she'd sent out a call for help. As the younger woman sat down opposite her, face swollen, make-up streaked, and eyes red-rimmed, it was obvious to Lee she had been crying. Cautiously optimistic their conversation was headed in a positive direction Lee started to ask another in the series of questions they had been discussing. But then Meg swiped at her eyes with a wadded tissue and announced "I should have known better than to come out here. I should have known you weren't going to accept my story any more than anybody else ever has."

"Why would you say that, Meg? I thought we were making progress toward an understanding."

Meg shrugged her shoulders, dabbed at the mascara streaking her face and rose as if to leave

the room.

“Meg.” Lee stood and laid her hand on the girl's shoulder. “Meg don't leave now. Don't leave angry. Not before you understand that I love you...that God loves you and wants you healed from everything in your past.”

“How can you say that? Say you love me? After what I've told you? After what I've done? How can you say that God love's me. How can he?” The last a wail of misery. “How can anyone?”

Now, as the last minutes of Christmas Eve ticked away, Meg was calm, tears gone, a serene smile on her lips.

Lee Langston closed her Bible, laid it on the little library table, leaned forward and placed both hands on Meg's knees. “So do you want to pray and ask Jesus to set you free from your past, Meg.”

“Yes...please. Yes. But I don't know what to say,” she whispered as tears began to well up in her eyes. “Will you pray with me, please, Lee?”

The older woman smiled and nodded. One of the greatest thrills of her life was sharing the simple prayer for new life in Christ with the wounded and broken souls God sent her way. “Of course. I'll say the words, you say them after me. Okay?”

“Okay...”

“Dear Lord Jesus...”

“Dear...Lord...Jesus...”

As Lee spoke Meg followed along, uttering the words softly, but sincerely.

“I ask you to come into my life and to fill my spirit, my soul and my body with your love. I ask you to forgive everything that I've done before tonight. I ask you to clean away the things that might keep you from loving me. I forgive those who have harmed and hurt me and place those memories in your hands. From this moment on I take you, Jesus, and God Your Father, to be everything I need. Amen.”

Meg looked up from her prayer and smiled. For the first time Lee could see peace in her eyes. “So this is what it feels like to be re-born?” Meg asked. “It's wonderful, Lee. Truly wonderful. I don't know that I've ever felt so...? So whole.”

With that, the little mantle clock struck twelve.

“Merry Christmas, Meg.” Lee stood and gave her a warm hug, welcoming her to the family. “*And Happy Birthday, Jesus,*” she thought.

Christmas Day - December 2013

As the pale winter sun peered over the barn roof, Lee was sweeping snow from the porch steps and praying softly under her breath.

“Lee? Lee...” Meg's voice rang through the kitchen. She sounded so very different today Lee could hardly believe the change. Smiling to herself, she turned, opened the door and answered.

“Out here.”

“Oh wow! Look at all that snow! You were right, Lee. Never would've have made it home last

night. Thank you so much for the bed. I slept like a rock! I'm...ah...is that coffee I smell?"

"Fresh a few minutes ago! Help yourself. Cups are right there by the pot. Cream's in the 'fridge, sugar's in the canister, if you need 'em."

"Black's good. Thanks."

As Meg poured her coffee, Lee brushed the last of the snow away, parked the broom outside the door, hung her jacket over a chair back and watched the girl.

"Much younger than her computer pal, Margery Whitmore, perhaps late twenties," Lee thought. *"Not beautiful. Pretty. A pretty young woman."* More so this morning without the shadow of fear and tears in her eyes. *"Maybe just my imagination,"* as she refilled her own cup. *"Born anew. Filled with the love of Christ. Needs to be baptized. Soon. Got to call David and set that up."* She said, "Still snowing some. More to come if I'm any judge of those clouds above the ridge."

Meg peered out the window toward the main road where she'd left her car parked. "Oh damn." Lee's raised eyebrow stopped her. "Sorry! Old habit. But just look out there. The snow plow has been by and there's a two-foot wall between my car and the road. I'll never be able to get up enough speed to break through it."

"And you shouldn't try." Lee's mind was racing through things she wanted to tell this brand new babe in Christ, things she was going to need, and very soon. Things like the difference between damning a situation and blessing it. Things like the power of words spoken in haste. Things like the difference between the paranormal and the supernatural. *"Coming from where*

she's been for the past few years, the sooner she understands, the better."

"Meg, what plans do you have for today?"

"Nothing really. No family close by. And we...they.... Celebrating Christmas isn't part of what we...they...." trying to frame the words in a way Lee would understand, she stumbled on. "The people I've been around lately don't believe in your...our...God. Or Jesus." There. Finally it was out.

"Spend the day with me then." "*So much for solitude and that new novel.*" But, because Lee Langston did not believe in coincidence, not even remotely, she knew being snowed in with this girl was exactly what God had in mind when He'd sent her, crying for help, to Lee's door in the middle a stormy Christmas Eve.

"We certainly aren't going to try digging your car out until it stops snowing. It's safe enough where it is for today. If the storm blows itself out and the sun comes out tomorrow that barrier will melt in hours. My pantry's well stocked and the bed's comfortable, as you already know." Her smile was inviting and her mind was racing through the pages of her Bible and journal.

"Oh, Lee! I hate to be any more of a...."

"Stop it! Don't even consider it. God put you here for a reason Meg. And I honestly believe last night—your being a new creation now—was only a portion of the reason." As she spoke she was rummaging through the kitchen for pancake ingredients, setting out syrup, bacon and eggs.

"Let's start with a meal. When did you eat last?"

"Ah.... I don't know. Monday night, I guess. Pizza with...."

“Pizza with the girls?” Lee could see no point in pussy-footing around the fact that a few hours ago Meg had been enmeshed in the occult, socializing with her *coven* of friends, and very likely laughing at all those who accepted the God she herself had turned to as this Christmas Day began. Last night she had admitted to Lee the reason she'd started attending their new church in the first place was to gather “intel” for her sisters, who often cast spells against the spread of such *nonsense*.

Chapter Nine - 2014

Wednesday Night - January 1, 2014

“Can we talk after Bible study?” David had asked her.

Now, at close to midnight on the first day of the new year, Lee and David Dale sat in his SUV with the heater running talking over the week just past.

“Well...that would certainly explain some of the stuff I've been trying to figure out for months,” David announced. “I've felt something was off...just couldn't quite put my finger on it. Knowing that it was the enemy, working through his local fans gives me real comfort. I was beginning to think we had missed God's instructions with this start-up. Over Christmas I went to my spiritual dad, the Pastor who ordained me, for counsel. He told me not to worry about it. Said God would clear it up. Guess He has.”

“Usually does. If we'll just stay open and listen,” Lee agreed. “When Meg finally listened to what the Holy Spirit was guiding her to do she couldn't get to me fast enough. Scared to death that night. Fighting against everything she thought she believed in the occult, against the spirit of religion that Margie and her cronies had been pouring over her, against the wounds from her legalistic up-bringing...everything. It took guts for her to turn her back on all of that.”

David nodded as Lee talked, then asked, “Is she sure now? Sure of what she believes, I mean?”

“Got to honestly say, it was touch and go there for awhile. A couple of times I thought she was

gonna run back out into the darkness. It's always about free will, isn't it?" Lee frowned at the memory. "I knew if she chose to run rather than give in to God I couldn't stop her. And He wouldn't. That's when I texted you for prayer."

"That text came at exactly the right time. I had just been telling my best friend, and the strongest believer I've ever met, about the problems we have been facing. When your text came, I was going to ignore it...for awhile. Get back to it later. 'Answer it David,' he told me. 'It's God calling.'"

Lee looked at him then and in the reflected light coming through the windshield, he could see tears trickling down her face. "It surely was," she agreed. "If you hadn't seen it right then...if you two hadn't stopped everything and prayed at exactly that moment..."

"But we did. We did because it's who that pastor is and what he does. It's who I want to be. I learned a valuable lesson that night, Lee." He reached over and brushed away her tears. "God will always, always, guide and direct us if we'll listen. Meg Carter left the enemy's camp that night, just like God knew she would. And all we had to do was stay open to the Spirit and respond to His guidance. She's asked to be baptized Sunday you know."

"That's what she told me," smiling at the memory of their conversation, Lee went on. "She also told me Margery Whitmore told her if she allowed herself to be deceived by those '*crazy holy-rollers*' they would no longer be friends."

David chuckled, "Oh, isn't that's too bad?"

"Meg didn't seem to think so. Apparently she told Margie that was probably the second best

news she'd heard in a week. Evidently Margie was startled by the, 'second best?' Asked what she meant. Meg told her the first was that Jesus loved her, wanted to guard and protect her, and has covered all of her sins—past, present, AND future—on the cross. Told her 'there is no more condemnation for her since she's *in* Jesus.’”

“Bet that went over big!”

“Oh yeah. She said the conversation was done just like that,” snapping her fingers in the air. “She said Margie must have started dialing coven members within seconds, because her phone rang continually for a day or two. She, of course, tried to share her new found faith with every one of them. No takers!”

“Another surprise.” David scoffed. “I wonder which of them will become the 'intel' gatherer now?”

“Well, it isn't the two couples who have been riding down from Overland with Meg. She assured me they sincerely *believe* and support our efforts. Said they are probably going to be her new best friends for the next little while. At least until she can find a few others who are disillusioned with legalistic, religious teaching and want to start coming over here to learn about God's grace with her.”

“That's good to know.” He glanced at his watch. “Hey! It's nearly Thursday. We better break this up and head home. Someone may see us and assume we're....”

“That's part and parcel of the trouble in this town,” Lee snapped. “People assume! Half the time they have no idea whatsoever about the facts. They simply assume. Then they proceed to

talk about it.”

They parted with a hand-shake rather than a hug, Lee to her pickup, David back into the building to gather his Bible and notebook and make certain the place was securely locked up.

As he entered the side door from the parking lot, he paused. Wondering if what he smelled was smoke. Shook his head, thinking, “*can't be,*” and started down the hall toward their meeting room. Halfway there, the hall lights went out and he was left stranded in total darkness. Standing perfectly still, waiting for his eyes to adjust, he knew without a doubt he smelled smoke. And as his eyes grew accustomed to the blackness he could see a red-orange glow outlining the door to the dining hall. He started to leap toward the door when something or someone smacked him across the back of the neck, knocking him to his knees. Dazed, he tried to push himself up and was hit again. Harder this time. Hard enough to turn *his* lights out.

When he came to Lee was hunched over him, brushing his collar away from what felt like a baseball sized lump at the base of his brain. “Don't try to get up. Don't try to turn over yet either.” she commanded.

“There's a fire...”

“There *was* a fire. In a waste-basket. A lot of smoke and some water damage. That because I dumped the bottle from the cooler in there. Everything is alright...except your Bible and your notes.”

Cautiously he rolled to his rear-end and sat up. His head pounded and he was still seeing stars, but was coherent enough to be thankful the burned Bible wasn't his study Bible. He referred to it

as his 'brain' and had carried it for decades. He thought of it as irreplaceable, although he knew no *thing* was—not really. “Do you think somebody....somebody deliberately set a fire in....?”

“I'm sure of it.” Lee growled “Not sure what they hoped to gain by it... Obviously don't know who they're messin' with. God will not put up with it. Whoever it is...will suffer the consequences. That much I'll promise you.”

Friday Morning - January 3, 2014

Lee's tiny kitchen was full to over-flowing—every chair, every stool, occupied. Noel Renwald stood leaning against the refrigerator. Simon Gundersen had dragged a chair for Lee from the living room, down the hall to the doorway, and sat perched on its arm next to her. David Dale, as leader of the group, stood with his back to the counter facing them, a clipboard in his hands and a scowl on his face.

“We've known from the beginning we were in for a fight. I don't think anyone here is surprised at all by the opposition, either spiritual or physical, that's coming against us.” Bill Whitmore's face was red with indignation, his fist clenched around the mug in front of him. “I, for one, have had a battle at home, too,” he told them.

The two new-comers from Overland nodded their agreement. One of them, a tall, lean, individual, unwrapped his long legs from the stool he'd been balancing on and stepped to the center of the small vacant space.

“If my understanding of the situation is correct...this fire was the third since you all set out to

start our church. Right?”

Those who had been there since the onset nodded. Simon spoke for all of them when he said, “That's right Sam. First a storage shed on the Community Church grounds. Next a grass fire right out there in front of Lee's barn. And Wednesday night, after everyone left, a trash can in the dining hall.”

Noel took up the narrative, “The first two might have started by chance. Wednesday night's fire was set. Deliberately set. No doubt about it.”

“And while no real harm was done, any one of them could have been disastrous.” Lee leaned forward and counted them off. “There was gas stored in the shed and a propane tank behind it. It could have caused an explosion large enough to catch the church building. The grass was dry and high along my driveway. It ran right up to the barn where my pickup was parked. The space between the house and the barn was filled with thick dry grass and weeds. So if someone hadn't been right there the whole place might have gone up. But the other night...the other night David was knocked out cold. Lying in the hallway. If I hadn't seen the flames through the window and come back....who knows what....”

The lanky new-comer spoke again. “And you folks think these fires were all set in an effort to discourage you. To stop you from going forward with your plan...?”

David straightened, laid his clipboard aside and took control of things. “That's right, Sam. We don't believe in coincidence. We do believe in the enemy's ability to influence evil behavior in those who, knowingly or unknowingly, dwell under his authority.”

“And you don't think it was those...*witches*?” Sam asked.

“We don't. No. There are several reasons....”

“But Meg was one of them. She admitted....”

Seeing where the conversation was headed, David looked at Lee, indicating by a tilt of his head she should speak up here.

“Sam,” Lee spoke softly, commanding his attention. “Meg spent two full days with me last week. We were snowed in here together over Christmas. Now, Sam, I've been walking with God for more years than Meg is old, and I can assure you, her conversion and her commitment to the Lord is genuine in every sense. She may have been involved with the occult, that's what the practice of witchcraft is—no matter whether it's considered dark or light magic—you know, but God is fully able to cleanse away that evil in exactly the same way He transfers an alcoholic or drug-addict out of their life in darkness. Nothing is impossible for God.”

Sam appeared to be considering her words. “But she...”

“She was with you and your wife. On her way back to Overland Wednesday night at 11:15. Have you forgotten that, Sam?” If Lee was losing her patience it was not detectable in her voice. She was just stating the facts. “I may be wrong, but I don't see how Meg could have possibly been back down here to set fire to a waste basket by 11:45. Do you?”

“No.... No. Of course not. But what about her...what do you call 'em...her..friends?”

David stepped forward and laid a hand on Sam's arm, gently urging him toward the stool.

“We're fairly sure, even though that's the easy answer, Meg's friends aren't responsible for what's

been going on here.”

The other new-comer from Overland twisted slightly so he could look directly at Lee. “Then who?” he wanted to know.

David spoke, a touch over-loud, drawing the focus back to himself. “We've got a couple of leads. The police were involved in the first fire, at the church. They suspected arson back then and have been investigating all along.”

“But that was a few years ago,” new-comer number two insisted. “I remember reading about it in the Overland paper. Story died out pretty quick. No arrests, as I recall. Cops said 'kids maybe.’”

“It wasn't kids.” Simon was adamant. “It was a deliberate attempt to terrorize the few who were left supporting the church, and drive them out of town. It didn't work then. It won't work now.”

Lanky Sam spoke up again. “But I heard the people who were left in the Community Church were against the gifts of the Spirit and the message of grace. I heard they demanded everything stay just like it had always been and anyone who....”

“There were a few open to *the Way* Paul preached,” Simon told them. “A few who focused on the Word and the Lord instead of on the religious traditions that have divided the Body of Christ for millennium.”

“There are always a few,” Lee said. “God always reserves a remnant.”

Friday Afternoon - January 10, 2014

“A week, just seven days, can fly or crawl by. Time often seems irrelevant in the natural realm,” Lee thought. “It's hard to believe it was only last Friday, isn't it?” she asked the fat Stellar Jay sitting on the feeder. He had been watching her sweep a path in the snow so she could easily supply him with the sunflower seeds he'd come to expect. Her voice was familial and no longer caused him to fly to the higher branches. He tilted his head to one side, as if to say, 'really?'

“Oh I know,” she continued. “You haven't a clue what I'm talking about. Don't worry about it. God knows. He knows what to do about it too.” She dumped several hands full of seeds on the feeder tray, scattered some peanuts on top as an added treat for the Jay then filled the hanging feeders to keep the smaller birds happy too. As she turned the little red wagon filled with seed and nut bags back toward the barn her cell vibrated in her jacket pocket.

“Charlotte. Hi,” she answered. “How's the move coming? Noel told me last week this weekend should finish it up.”

“Well....”

Her hesitancy hung in the cold air. Lee waited.

“we're moving. That's about all I can say for it. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“I'm in the middle of chores. Can you give me about ten minutes and I'll call you right back?”

“Uhm... Sure. Okay, fine,” and 'click' Charlotte was gone.

Lee parked the little wagon in the barn alley, not bothering to store the bags where the

chickens couldn't reach them.. She sloshed some water in the pan she kept filled for the mama cat who'd showed up during November's storm and promptly presented Lee with a litter of five kittens. It took about three minutes and she was headed for the house. Another minute to strip off her gloves, jacket and boots tossing them aside without caring where they fell. Across the kitchen she padded in stocking feet, down the hall, straight to the library and her Bible. "Not about to take on this conversation without a weapon," she muttered.

Dropping into a chair, she bowed her head for a second and allowed the worn pages of the Psalms to fall open in her lap. Reading aloud, she paraphrased the words:

"Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need!
He lets me rest in the meadow grass and leads me beside the quiet streams. He gives me new strength. He helps me do what honors him the most.
Even when walking through the dark valley of death I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me, guarding, guiding all the way."

Then, pressing the *recent calls* list on her phone, she waited for Charlotte to answer. It rang. Once...twice...three times. And went to voice mail.

"That's not good," she shook her head and dialed Noel's number.

"Noel? Lee. Is Charlotte with you?" She could hear the somewhat confused tone of his voice when he answered.

"...no! In fact I thought she was headed out to see you. She left here about half an hour ago. Said that's where she'd be if I needed her for some reason. Why?" Now he sounded worried.

"Hopefully no reason, She called a few minutes ago. I was outside. Asked her if I could finish my chores and call right back. When I called she didn't pick-up. Probably just driving, with no

place to pull over.” Thinking fast she told him, “I’ll try her again and if she still doesn’t answer I’ll give her fifteen minutes to get here. If she’s not here by three I’ll call you back. Okay?”

“Alright. I...ah...? Lee?”

“What is it Noel?”

“Before she gets there.... Before...” his voice trailed off into silence and Lee wondered if she heard a sob.

“Noel? What?”

A gulp. A snuffle. And then, “Lee, I’m afraid... I’m afraid she’s left me, Lee.”

“*I was afraid of that,*” she thought, but she said, “...because?”

“Because I pushed her into moving back to Ridgeview. Because she’s been feeling neglected and left-out. Because Margie Whitmore’s been calling a couple of time a day. And she’s...threatened.... Threatens...there’s no other word for it...what will happen if we move back here.” He was silent for so long Lee began to wonder if she’d been cut off, then he continued, “And, Lee, because I accused her of starting the fire at the station the other night.”

“You what? Oh, Noel! How could you?”

“That’s what she said. Just before she left.” another choked sob, “Oh Lee, I don’t want to believe Charlotte’s the one behind these fires. I don’t! But I can’t prove where she was when they started. And Lee, she’s been acting...strange. Really, really strange. Ever since we got run out of town back in '06. My sweet wife has turned into an angry and depressed woman. There have been times when she became almost incoherent in her obsession with getting even. It’s been

frightening, Lee. And I've been ashamed to tell anyone.”

“I've known for awhile something was terribly wrong, Noel.” She was hesitant to tell him she had seen, by the Spirit, how Charlotte's wounded mind, will and emotions were dividing the two of them, and causing his wife to pull further and further away from the things of God. “I just wish you'd let some of us know. We could have prayed, if nothing else.”

“Lee, I was afraid to say anything to *anyone*. You know how prayer requests get twisted up, turn into gossip, do more harm than good. I sure didn't want that for her. Not on top of everything else. Can you imagine what Margie would have done with....?”

“We're not just anyone, Noel. You should know that by now. David and Simon are absolutely trustworthy and God showed me something.... I knew something was wrong months ago.”

“*This isn't a conversation to have over the phone, Lee,*” a still, small voice whispered in her ear. “This isn't a conversation to have over the phone Noel. I was coming to town later today anyway. Can we meet somewhere?”

“What if Char shows up out there? Said that's where she was going. Shouldn't you be there” Just in case,” he asked.

“Yes.. Of course. I'll stay here,” she answered.

“*What about calling David?*” the Spirit asked.

“What about calling David?” she asked Noel.

“Oh...I...ah...” his reluctance was palpable. “What will he...?”

“He'll think the same thing I do, Noel.” At that moment Lee wanted more than anything to

reassure her friend, and the Spirit didn't stop her, so she went on.

“There's no way your hundred and ten pound wife clobbered David the other night. He's got a good solid fifty pounds and a foot in height on her. She couldn't have—wouldn't have—knocked him out, much less left him lying in that hall to be burned to death. Call him. He'll tell you the same thing I'm going to tell you right now. Charlotte's had a bad time for the past few years. True enough. She needs our help and our prayers to restore her first love for the Lord. But has she become an arsonist and a potential murderer? NO! Emphatically no.”

“You really think that?”

“I do. And so will David. Call him, Noel. Ask him to come over and tell him all of it.”

Friday Night - January 10, 2014

Carrying a tray of sandwiches, tea and cookies down the hall to her living room, Lee paused in front of the powder-room door and asked, “You okay in there?”

At least fifteen minutes had passed since Charlotte Renwald left the kitchen table, where she had been pouring out her heart and soul since a little after three in the afternoon. The library clock striking seven reminded Lee that neither of them had eaten since morning. It prompted her to offer tea (not coffee, caffeine was the last thing they needed) and a snack. Charlotte, although far from calm, agreed something light would be wonderful, then asked where she could wash her hands before they ate.

“*Doesn't take a quarter of an hour to wash your hands,*” Lee thought. “*I know she's still not*

ready to hear reason. Or to go home. Maybe something to eat...”

Nearer the door she could hear crying. *“That's not surprising. Lots of tears bottled up in there.”* Then words. Angry words came through the door. *“Her phone's on the table. So who's she talking to?”* Leaning an ear closer to the door, Lee could just make out what Charlotte was saying.

“and I refuse to listen to you any more. Or to follow your orders! You don't own me... You don't!” Sobbing. “I know you think you can force me to...” Louder sobs. “But you can't! You can't. You don't own me any more.”

“Charlotte?” Quickly putting the tea tray down, Lee rushed to the door and twisted the knob. “Charlotte! Let me in.”

“NO.”

“Let me help you!”

“You can't!” Hysterical sobbing now. “No one can.”

“Nonsense! God can. And He will! Now open that door.”

Finally, the door had been opened. Finally, a demoralized Charlotte had spilled out the last dregs of the poison left-over from years of closely held jealousy and bitterness. It took another three hours. The tea was stone cold, the sandwiches dry and beyond saving. Lee was trembling from exhaustion. But finally, Charlotte was able to listen to the Word. Finally, she was able to accept the promised blessings Lee had pointed out in the Bible from the message to the church in Rome,

“For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can’t, and life can’t. The angels won’t, and all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God’s love away. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, or where we are—high above the sky, or in the deepest ocean—nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ when he died for us. “

There were still tears. Of course. But now they were tears of joy. And hope.

“Noel's on his way, sweet girl.” Lee had called him the moment they had reached a breakthrough. “He'll be here in less than half an hour. Then you can share everything with him.”

“But not about the voices! How can I tell him about those demonic voices, their demands and suggestions? He already thinks I'm a criminal. If I tell him about those, he'll *know* I'm crazy and...”

“Hush now.” Standing behind Charlotte's chair, softly massaging her shoulders, Lee wanted to reassure her, and at the same time encourage her to be completely honest with her husband. Perhaps for the first time in years.

By two o'clock Saturday morning Lee's cottage was quiet, the Renwalds gone, hand in hand, to their new home in Ridgeview, leaving Noel's car in her driveway to be picked up later.

“Well, Lord, wasn't that something?” Lee asked as she turned back the bedding and fluffed her pillow. “If it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon not handle another crisis this month.”

Chapter 10

Wednesday Morning - April 9, 2014

A soft spring breeze swayed the daffodils growing in a half-barrel on the deck off Bill Whitmore's kitchen. The early morning sun warmed his back and offered him an hour of peace and quiet to enjoy his coffee and newspaper. Bill loved these early mornings. He hungered for peace and quiet, as other men hunger for steak and potatoes. For months, because she spent half the night chatting on her computer, his wife's habit had been to sleep late, leaving him on his own to do as he pleased before he left to open the store.

The slamming of the bathroom door shattered the quiet. When Margie yelled at him from the second floor landing, Bill was fairly sure his peace would not last long either.

“Bill, where are you?”

“Be right there,” he called.

“Well hurry up. Your cell phone rang just now. Why'd you leave it in the bedroom anyway? You knew I wanted to....”

“Sorry, hon. Forgot it was still in my jacket pocket.” He took the stairs two at a time and dashed past her into the bedroom, hoping to avoid a confrontation. “I'll just grab it, so you can get back to sleep.”

“I'm awake! You *know* I won't be able to get back to sleep now.” She was pulling a ratty housecoat on over yoga pants and an even rattier sweat shirt he knew she'd worn all day

yesterday and maybe even the day before. "I've been wanting to talk to you anyway. It feels like you've been avoiding me all week."

"no... I..."

"Have you been avoiding me, Bill?"

"Why would I avoid....?"

"You know why, Bill Whitmore. And I suppose you're planning on going over there again tonight, too."

"Well, it had to come sooner or later. May as well get it over with," he thought. "Marge, you know I'll be going to Bible study at the fire-station tonight. I've gone every Wednesday night this year, and you know..."

"Oh I know! I know you'd rather spend time with that bunch of...of...lunatic outcasts than stay at home with me." Her voice took on a wounded tone and she fisted her hands on her hips, preparing for combat.

"Margie, I don't want to have this fight with you again," he started, trying desperately to maintain his cool. "We don't agree on this. Maybe we never will...but David is..."

"David is deceived! David is a con-man. And that bunch he's duped into following him are..."

His wife was well on her way down the same old road they'd traveled for years, and this time, Bill had promised David, Simon and Noel, he wouldn't go with her. "No Margery. David Dale is not deceived. He is not a con-man, he is a teacher of the truth found in God's Word. He has not *duped* anyone. He is a servant of God. And, he is doing everything he can to unite the body of

Christ in this county so folks can stop holding on to religion and quit denying the power of Christ.”

There. He'd finally said it.

“Well I can see he's got you stupefied, too.” She took a couple of steps back from him and put both hands out, palms flat as if she wanted to shove against his chest. “Carrie tells me that Meg and Georgina have been taken in by them. If they can fool those two...well, it's no wonder you could be so easily led astray. You always were...”

“Always was *what*, Marge?” He advanced the two steps Margie had retreated, pressing his chest deliberate against her outstretched palms, forcing her to plop down on the edge of the bed. “Too stupid to know the truth when it reared up and smacked me in the face?”

Real fear flashed across her face. Who was this man who dared to stand up to her? Margery Whitmore had worn the pants in their relationship since their first date. The man standing over her at the moment was a stranger. Struggling to regain control, she glared at her husband and growled, “Yes Bill. Stupid. That's what you are. That's what you've always been. And even more so since you've been hanging out with those people. How stupid do you have to be to forget all the rules, Bill?”

“The rules? Oh! You mean the laws. Right?” He knew his wife, knew her background and her obsession with the religious legalism drilled into her almost from birth.

“Okay, Margie, lets talk about the rules,” and taking a deep breath, praying he could remember enough of what he'd been learning to make an impact, he plunged in. “You've always done the

church going for this family and I'm just a stupid hick from the country. So, going to church is all about keeping the rules, right?

“...right. My father taught us that we belonged in church every Sunday. Not off listening to some wanna be preacher who never went to seminary and...”

“Did your Daddy also teach you about respect? Or rebellion? Or lying? Or witchcraft? What do you think he'd say about listening to some witch who never went to church. These women you so stubbornly defend are the ones being deceived.” Before she had time to form an answer he went on, “I may be stupid Marge, but I'm smart enough to know that when God's Word says '*...rebellion is as the sin of divination,*' That's witchcraft Margie, '*and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.*' it's one of those rules you should consider not breaking.. Wouldn't you say?”

“Where' did you get that idea? I've never read that in *my* Bible. It sounds to me like some of the claptrap that Langston woman tried to push down our...”

Bill stepped to his bedside table, flipped through the pages of his Bible until it fell open to a highlighted passage in the Old Testament and shoved it under her nose.. “Maybe you missed this part, love.”

She glanced at the page. Barely. And went for a new angle, “Wicca is not witchcraft, Bill. It's an ancient, earth...”

“That's what they're telling you isn't it? Worship Mother Earth. How about Father God, Margie. I seem to recall one of the rules you are so fond of says '*have no other Gods before*

Me.'"

Stymied by his intensity, Margie remembered her husband's special weakness, shifted gears again, and went after it. "Of course, I knew you were going to criticize my friends, Bill. You've always wanted me all to yourself. You're just jealous. Any time I spend with someone...."

"It won't work Marge," Bill stepped back a foot or two, holding out a hand to help her to her feet.

"This time we're gonna stay focused on the real issue until we either agree or part ways. It's up to you."

"What do you mean part ways?"

Bill saw the realization in her eyes.

Deep down Margery Whitmore always knew her gentle, easy-going husband had a breaking point. Over the years she had pushed fairly close to it more than once. Up until today she had never pushed past it. Sitting there, on the bed they had shared for over twenty years, for better or for worse, she looked at his hard eyes, set jaw, unyielding frown, and realized she was way beyond that point.

"Bill? You don't mean that. I know you don't," she pleaded, a tremor of fear shook in her voice where only manipulation and domination had been seconds ago. Like all bullies, Margery Whitmore was a coward at heart. As she looked at Bill, a scenario of living alone, with all of it's challenges, played through her brain. She had always pushed him, bending his non-confrontational nature to her stronger will, and she knew it. But living without him

was...unthinkable.

“I do mean it Marge!” Bill stated flatly. Then turning away from her, he stepped into the hall. “I’m going back out on the deck and finish my coffee. If you’re interested in working this out, so we can live together in peace and unity, clean yourself up and come on out. If that’s not what you want....” He turned and looked at her, still frowning, “...if that’s not what you want, I’ll go on to work and move my stuff into the back room as the store later. I can stay there until we work out something permanent.” With that he walked away, down the stairs, and out the kitchen door, leaving Margie staring after him in disbelief.

On the deck, Bill pulled out the cell phone he’d retrieved from his jacket pocket, the one that had started this day off with a bang. He quickly sent a text message to David Dale, Simon Gundersen, Noel Renwald and Lee Langston. Terse and to the point it read. “Confronted the enemy in my home. Pray. Please!”

Wednesday Afternoon - April 9, 2014

To her credit, Margie had chosen the higher road. After a quick inventory of her appearance and her attitude she’d washed her face, combed her hair, put on clean slacks and a decent sweater, then joined Bill on the deck. For hours they had wrangled with the differences and difficulties in their marriage, their philosophies, and their expectations for the future. In the end Bill got his point across. No more lies. No more one-sided domination. No more manipulation. No more Mother Earth. Only Father God. “*as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*” he

told her

Toward the end of the lunch hour, seated in a back booth of the Ridgeview Cafe, Simon and David watched Bill and Margie coming across the street from their hardware to join them. Bill's grin could only be termed triumphant. Margie, for the first time in either man's memory, appeared to be at peace. And, amazingly, they were holding hands.

"Looks like a break-through to me," Simon nodded toward the approaching couple.

"Could be," David agreed. "God never fails. Never gives up, either. Margie was His as a child, from what I've heard. God wasn't about to lose her to the devil now."

"No matter how hard she tried to run away from Him," Simon added.

As the couple entered, David stood up, walked straight to Bill, stuck out his hand, grabbed Bill's hand and began pumping. Grinning like a child, he said, "So glad to see you Bill. And you too, Margie. Come. Sit down with us. Let's hear all about your new..."

Simon, after a brief hesitation, stood to join them. "Yes, Bill. Margie. Join us." Somehow he felt obligated to slow David's enthusiastic greeting down a little. He recalled, only too well, Margie's loudly voiced opinions of David, and everything he stood for. Thinking, "*take it easy David,*" he guided Bill to their booth, hoping Margie would be agreeable and follow, but frankly doubting the sincerity of her about-face.

As Bill ushered Margie into the booth ahead of him, he told them, "I just got off the phone with Lee. She's over at the feed store. Should be here in about ten minutes or so."

Simon glanced at Margie, anxious to see what her reaction to this announcement might be.

Margie stunned both men with an announcement of her own. “I called Meg! She was in town this afternoon too. I can't wait to tell her she's right. She's been telling me for months I needed to get back to the truth. Just couldn't bring myself to believe what you,” here she bobbed her head toward David, “were telling them was the *truth*.”

David smiled and nodded. “*you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.*” he thought. He said, “That's okay Margie. You understand now, and Bill will help you to catch up with anything you still have questions about. We're just so thankful you've...”

“Here's Lee now,” Simon, still not completely convinced, was only too happy to steer the conversation away from the miraculous change in his old adversary. The change that David and Bill seemed willing to accept at face value. “*This will be the litmus test,*” he thought, “*can't think of anybody Margery Whitmore hates worse than Lee.*”

David hopped out of the booth, snagged a chair from a close by table, placed it at the end of their booth, indicating Lee should sit down there. If he was at all apprehensive about this meeting between two women who had been enemies for years he gave no sign of it. Reaching for the small bag she was carrying, he told her, “Here, let me hang that on the coat rack for you.”

“No. This is for Margie. A little gift to celebrate her safe return,” Lee told him. As she handed the brown paper bag to the obviously flabbergasted Margie, Lee patted Bill's cheek in a motherly way and said, “Told you the Lord would work it all out.” Turning to Margie, she continued. “I'm so thankful you've come to the end of this season, Margie. We all are. Welcome home.”

Amazed, three men watched as the two women clasped hands, both on the verge of tears.

“Mrs. Langston...I”

“Lee, dear. Just Lee please,” squeezing the younger woman's hands and smiling, she went on.

“All is forgiven. Don't worry about...”

“But I...”

“I have too,” Lee, a little closer to tears now, plumped down in the chair. “You did nothing worse than I myself have done more than once. And the Lord has forgiven me. How could I not forgive you?”

After a few minutes of very emotional assurances of mutual forgiveness all around, Margie opened the little bag, pulled out a fluff of snow white tissue paper and then a Bible, embossed with her name, and bound in rich red leather. The gift brought on another round of tears, more mutual declarations of solidarity and radiant smiles.

“Hail, the prodigal daughter returns,” David thought. *“Glory to God Almighty.”*

Wednesday Night - April 9, 2014

The spring night was cool, but not cold, with millions of stars and a sliver of the moon looking down on the fire-station parking lot. David and Lee leaned against the hood of her pickup talking over the events of this extraordinary day.

“Enough people in there tonight to call it a legitimate “church service,” David mused.

“I counted forty-two,” Lee agreed. “And I didn't have to count anyone twice either.”

David laughed. “I didn't count 'em period. Afraid it would be presumptuous I suppose. A

crowd that size has been so long coming I just....”

“You just doubted it would ever happen,” Lee finished for him. “I know, 'cause I was right there with you part of the time.”

Taking the subject away from attendance, partly to avoid issuing a challenge to the spiritual forces of darkness he knew wanted nothing more than to kill their dream before it could grow roots, David commented on Margie's presence in the group. “Much more reserved than I expected her to be. No opinions expressed, No apparent disapproval during worship. Just part of the body and enjoying it from what I could see.”

“Taking it all in. Comparing it with where she came from, what she's always thought of as church, I expect. The fact that she wasn't all over Bill to leave or badgering him with questions seems like a good sign to me,” Lee agreed.

“Guess we'll know more come Sunday morning, Wonder how their conversation is going about now,”

“Wouldn't you love to be a mouse in the corner to hear it?” Lee laughed. “I wonder if they've ever had a conversation that wasn't ninety percent *I, me, mine* on her part. Bill won't know what to say...”

David's smile said he knew something Lee didn't. “Oh, I don't know. My guess is he will be able to handle it without a problem. Over the past few months he's learned to listen to the Spirit and follow God's lead. It may be Margery who won't know what to say now.”

“They'll be...”

“They will be fine, Lee. Bill is prepared to step in to his role as head of the house, guiding and directing his wife toward becoming the woman God intended her to be all along. God uses strong women to their best advantage if they are willing. As you know only too well.”

Lee stepped back and looked at him with amazement. She opened her mouth. Closed it. Thought for a second. Then said, “It's the willing bit that's the tricky part, you know.”

“So say we all, dear,” he whispered. “Learning to hear God's still small voice and follow without question is probably the most difficult lesson in all of Christendom.”

She stepped closer to him, laid a hand on his shoulder, took a deep breath and changed the topic again. “Speaking of listening and obeying David. I.... I've been hearing from Him for a week or so myself.”

“Wonderful! What's He been telling you Lee?”

“You may not think it's so wonderful when I tell you, David. I've been questioning it some myself.”

“What's going on Lee?”

David felt he had come to know her fairly well over the past several months. At the moment, the tone of her voice and the frown on her face were unfamiliar. He suddenly had the distinct feeling what she was about to tell him was not something he wanted to hear. Not at all.

“I believe the Lord is calling me to move to the Western slope David. There's a small congregation over in the Cimarron Valley led by dear friends of mine. They are struggling. Just like Simon and Roz were struggling when Simon reached out to me a couple of years back. “

Lee was right. David did not think this was wonderful news. In fact he thought it was possibly the worst news he'd heard in months. He started to tell her so, then thought better of it. If God was calling his friend to a new congregation, if God needed her exceptional dedication and her intuitive gift somewhere else... *"who am I to tell her not to listen?"*

As the night wore on, the breeze grew colder. To escape the chill, and the weariness of the stressful day behind them, Lee and David climbed into her pickup, where they talked into the early hours of Thursday morning.

When they finally came to an agreement, after turning over every other contingency, they parted with a hug and a few tears.

It was settled. Friday morning Lee would drive over the mountains to follow the Lord's leading and David would break the news to his congregation on Sunday.

"I hate good-byes," she told him. "Give everyone my dearest love and let them know this is simply a season of separation, not a ultimate parting of the ways."

Chapter 11

Friday Morning - July 4, 2014

The small community of Cimarron sweltered in the summer heat. Dust and heat waves shimmered in the bright sunlight. Every square foot of shade was jammed with excited towns people. Every store-front and porch was draped in red, white and blue bunting. Fire-works popped and crackled around town with joyous abandon. The annual parade—two fire trucks, twelve tractor-pulled floats, and several horse-drawn wagons loaded with cheering teens—was forming at the end of Main Street.

Lee Langston sat on a rough log bench in front of Mack's General Store, enjoying the shade, sipping soda through a straw, while happily anticipating the celebration.

In the months after closing up her cottage in Ridgeview, leaving the care of her chickens and cats to a neighbor boy, and enlisting David to “drive by once in awhile and check on the place” she had gone about the business of settling in this new place. After loading everything she felt would be essential to her comfort into the back of the old pickup and driving over the Continental Divide, her first stop was at a real estate office. Choosing between two available rental cabins was simple. She picked the one furthest from town, not because of the location, but because of the fireplace, claw-foot tub situated in what she considered a decent bathroom and a garage where she could secure her truck. The kitchen was not all bad either.

It took just twenty-four hours to un-box her things and arrange them in the furnished cabin.

Another hour spent checking out the General Store for groceries and a few kitchen utensils not provided in the furnished cabin and she'd established the feeling of home.

Another woman might have been uncomfortable with the temporary nature and sparseness of her current space. Lee, who had lived a nomadic life-style during her marriage to Mark Langston, was perfectly contented. Her Bible and a few favorite books filled a little shelf above the front window. Her laptop, a cup filled with pens and pencils and her journal served to turn a small desk into her office. Quilts, sheets, blankets and her own pillows, spread over with a soft woven throw, turned the tiny bedroom into a sanctuary. All she needed to complete the transformation were her clothes in the closet, her towels in the bathroom and her boots beside the back door.

With homemaking out of the way, Lee had driven around town, a very short trip really, located the drug-store, a pizza place that looked promising, the school and three churches. Everything she saw said small town America. The people she met were friendly and welcoming, typical of a western community. Lee saw nothing to hint at the seething spiritual unrest Adam Johns had so urgently spoken of when he asked her to help them find their way through the storm he felt certain was headed their direction.

Adam and Kathrine Johns were two of the first people God had placed in Lee's life immediately following Mark's accident more than twenty years ago. Adam, a burly, bearded giant of a man was shepherding a small church in a small town along the Yukon River where Mark and Lee were working. When Mark was air-lifted to Fairbanks, leaving Lee to make her way to the

hospital on her own, Adam and Kathrine loaded her into their rugged four-by-four truck, and prayed with her throughout the trip. By the time they arrived it was already too late. The injuries Mark suffered with his Excavator tumbled down a hundred-foot embankment were beyond repair. The surgeons were sorry, but there was nothing more they could do. The attending nurse handed Lee a brown paper bag with her husband's boots, cap and personal effects in it and turned away. Kay Johns simply took Lee in her arms and rocked her through the worst of the nightmare.

Months later, still in Alaska, still clinging to the Adam and Kathrine for support, Lee came face to face with the Lord. Grief had left her cold, hard, depressed, and angry—very, very angry.

*“God how **could** you do this to **me**?”* angry.

One night, alone in the tiny rental house she had shared with the love of her life, she came to the end of herself. There were no tears left. In her anger at God she had pushed away most everyone who reached out to help her, and she was still no closer to making up her mind what to do with the rest of her life. Every time the Johns came around all they wanted to do was pray with her, and her tolerance for that was wearing pretty thin too.

Winter, which comes early in the far north was approaching fast. She wasn't working. The settlement for Mark's accident, while substantial, wasn't going to last forever, and her support system was headed south before the snow flew. So what was she going to do? “God, how could you **do** this to me?”

“Get your Bible, Lee.” An audible voice...soft...sweet and coming from an empty room jolted her into action.

Mark's battered old Bible lay on the kitchen counter. She hadn't opened it in months. Now, grudgingly she picked it up. "Okay. So now what?" The pages seemed to fall open by themselves and in the margin of Romans 8 she read:

"Experiences of deep sorrow can spread a shadow over the face of our lives. The darkness of great grief and pain can leave us feeling spiritually paralyzed and virtually unable to pray. Our minds and hearts are consumed, and we don't even know what we ought to pray. What a comfort to know that the Holy Spirit can interpret perfectly even the groanings of our souls. When sorrow binds up your heart and words stick in your throat, even your sighs and groanings become, with the Spirit's help, eloquent prayers offered to your heavenly Father.

"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them."¹

Somehow those words broke the log-jam in Lee Langston's heart. They ripped through her anger, opening her ears to hear and her eyes to see God's grace in the situation.

From that night more than twenty years ago, until today, when God called, Lee listened. When asked "why?" she would simply say, "He has it all under control."

"Lee?"

Blinking back tears, Lee looked up to see Katherine Johns standing in front of her, a look of concern on her face. "Is everything okay, hon?"

“Yes. Sure. Everything's fine.” she answered. “Just thinking back to when we left the Yukon.”

“Oh...yeah,” sympathetic, Katherine reached out and touched her friend's cheek. “Rough memory.”

“Long time ago. A lot of water under the bridge since then,” Lee swiped at her face with her sleeve and smiled up reassuringly. “Don't travel down memory lane often anymore. God has healed my soul and I know Mark is waiting for me up there. No point in making myself miserable in the here and now.”

Kay patted Lee's shoulder, trying to think of something uplifting to add to their conversation, but before she could come up with anything Lee stood up, gave her a hug and asked, “Where's Adam. Isn't he coming in to watch the parade?”

“Oh! That's what I came to tell you.” Kay's mouth twisted in disgust. “He's over at the church trying to clean graffiti off the front doors. Someone, or something, paid us a visit last night. Left us a message. Spray painted a pentagram and some profanity on one door and the words '*go to hell hypocrite*' on the other.

Lee grimaced then hugged Kay again. “Ick! That's just nasty! When you told me you were in a spiritual battle for the soul of this town I knew we could expect some unholy opposition. But vandalism and satanic symbolism is over-kill, don't you think?”

“Well...anything to get their point across to the community I suppose. Adam says there's a power washer in Grand Junction who can come out here later today and wash it off without actually damaging the building. It won't be cheap, with the Holiday and all, but at least people

won't have to walk past it to come to church Sunday morning.”

Adam Johns was climbing a rickety wooden step-ladder leaned against the front of his church. He had a mouth full of tacks, a hammer in one hand and a painter's drop-cloth in the other. Behind him, on the sidewalk, he could hear the giggles of a trio of small boys who had stopped to point and stare at the mess he was attempting to cover up. He *needed* to get it covered, before half the town drove by and stopped to point, laugh. And gossip.

The glaring red graffiti was burning a hole in Adam's resolve to stay calm and let God handle the mess. Anger, of a measure to match his six-nine, two-seventy stature, was boiling up inside of him. Normally gentle as a teddy bear, this morning he sincerely wanted his hands on whoever had done this unspeakable act of vandalism. “*Wouldn't solve a thing. Just serve to prove 'em right,*” he thought.

Twisting far to the right, reaching to tack a corner of the drop-cloth to the door frame, Adam was suddenly startled by the sound of squealing brakes. He jumped, dropped the hammer and the cloth, and nearly stepped off his precarious perch. The slamming of a car door and steps running up the walk toward him caused him to face the street, then start down the ladder. On the sidewalk, staring up at the paint, stood the last person Adam expected to see.

Fred Wilkins, minister at the local Baptist church, stepped toward Adam, hand out-stretched, a look of sympathy on his face and words of encouragement on his lips. “Adam! I was just on my way downtown for the parade. This is horrible!”

Adam nodded, "It is! Yes."

"When...? Who?"

"Sometime last night. And when you stopped out there, I was just thinking what I'd like to do if I only knew who..."

"I can imagine. I'd really like to help you out there," Reverend Wilkins growled. "This is something I'd expect to see in a city somewhere. Not here."

"Evil doesn't limit itself to big cities anymore Fred."

"I know, Adam. I do know. Somehow it just seems more insidious like this. Spelled out right here in our own little town."

Adam stooped to pick up the hammer he'd dropped, gathered up a few of the tacks and started back up the ladder. "Yeah..."

"Here..." grabbing a corner of the drop-cloth, Fred reached as high as he could, holding it up toward the other side of the door, "let me help you with that. Don't want the entire town gawking at this on their way to the parade."

Sunday Evening - July 6, 2014

The kitchen in Lee Langston's little rented cabin smelled invitingly of fresh baked scones and coffee. A couple of jar candles flickered on the counter and one on the window sill. A soft warm pool of light from an old Coleman lantern threw shadows around the seven people packed into the room.

Adam and Kay Johns, Fred Wilkins, his wife Mary, Jeff Morton—the Pastor at First Assembly, Ken Russell—the Catholic Priest and Lee had gathered there, intentionally staying away from any church setting. Their purpose—to unify their resources against what they now considered a common enemy.

It took a few minutes for everyone to greet everyone else. They spent some time chatting about the attack on Grace Community Church. *The attack*, that's what they all considered the vandalism now. Finally, everyone found a seat in the kitchen and Adam asked Pastor Morton to pray before they went any farther.

That's when the lights went out.

“Just sit still everybody,” Lee jumped up, slowly feeling her way to the living-room, then the bedroom. She returned with several jar candles. Lighting those produced enough light for her to find and fill the Coleman stashed on the back porch, pump it up, strike a match to the mantels and set it on a high shelf. Now the room was bathed in a warm glow. “Not going to let a little thing like *lights-out* keep us from doing what we came here to do,” she laughed. The others agreed and joined in her laughter, but soon settled back into a reverent mood. Again, with bowed heads, they lifted their requests to God in prayer.

After prayers, scones and coffee, and nearly two hours of earnest conversation, Father Russell asked, “Adam, where ever did you find this woman?” He nodded toward Lee. “She's as well versed in the practical application of God's Word as any preacher I've met. Thankfully without the ego many acquire from all their years of learning,” he added.

Lee blushed, waving a hand in the air to brush away the compliment.

“God gave her to us over two decades ago,” Adam answered. “We've been through a lot together. We've learned that when there's a spiritual battle to wage God's Word always wins out. Lee knows how to live by the promises in the Word. That's why, when we started to see signs that the enemy was moving in on our town, Lee was the first person I called for help.”

“Well I can certainly see why,” Mrs. Wilkins said, reaching across the table to pat Lee's arm lovingly. “We've been a tight-knit body for so long, I think we forgot what the enemy is capable of doing. His goal is always to...”

“Divide and conquer,” Lee finished. “Jesus said it best, 'no house, *or city*, divided against itself will stand.'”

Reaching for her Bible, she ruffled through the pages, finding a note in the margin near the verse she'd just quoted from Matthew's Gospel. Leaning toward the lantern light she read:

“If you let Satan continue to win strategic battles in your heart, he will ultimately defeat you. He will take over as much of you as you allow. God and Satan cannot be in control of you life at the same time. Every time Satan wins, you lose ground with God.”

“So...” looking around at these each one of them, she asked intensely, “what can we do to take back your town and your churches for God?”

Tuesday Morning - July 8, 2014

“We talked for about an hour yesterday morning.” David Dale sat back in his desk chair and

waited for Simon Gundersen to return from the file cabinet, where he'd gone to find information on several church members. "She sounded about as worried as I've ever heard her sound. Lee doesn't usually get too upset over stuff like this. Normally she's more of a "*the battle belongs to God*" type."

"I've seen her get pretty worked up a few times," Simon told him, "but back then there were plenty of good reasons for it. Graffiti, vandalism and threats seem like fairly good reasons to start worrying again if you ask me."

"But why...?" David paused, wondering why this particular battle was being thrust upon one of *his* people, for that was the way he thought of Lee. And why now, when they had more than enough going on within their own new church.

As though reading his mind, Simon answered, "Because Lee goes way back with Adam and Kay Johns. They were with her in Alaska when her husband was killed. And then again a few years later when God directed her to help start a church in Arizona smack in the middle of a New-Age stronghold just outside of Sedona."

"So...this isn't the first church Lee's been instrumental in getting started?" David wanted to know.

"Nope."

"Why her? I mean...aren't men...?"

"I think so." Simon had a crooked little smile on his lips as he answered. "But I also think there are times when God calls a man to do a job and gets refused. He knows Lee doesn't ask

why. Or how. Or how much. She just believes God will use her to get the job done and then move her on to the next job. She doesn't ask for thanks, or validation. Can't tell you how many times I've heard her say, 'to serve God, you must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who diligently seek him. When I do what he asks, he rewards me with his favor and his trust.'

“That's great,” David sighed. “You don't have to be around her long to feel her intensity level for doing God's will. It's infectious. She gets excited and everyone around her is excited by it. She motivates people to look for God's purpose in their own lives.”

“That's Lee,” Simon agreed. “I've also heard her say, 'God puts people in your life to bless you. Satan puts people in your life to destroy you. The trick is to figure out who sent who.’”

David laughed. “Sort of a 'test every spirit' concept. Scriptural, but practical. That's Lee alright.”

The two men continued their conversation for some time, while pouring over the files Simon had spread across the desk. Neither knew precisely what they were looking for, just that they would know it when they found it. Finally, after going over the information again and starting back through it once more Simon shoved a file toward David, saying triumphantly, “Here! Look at this!”

David glanced at the name on the file, looked at his friend with raised eyebrows, and carefully read the topmost page. He rifled through the rest of the file, checking for anything else they may have missed. He stood up, stretched and announced, “Knew there was *some* connection!”

Simon reached for the phone. “Calling her.”

“Lee? Hi. David and I just found something that may help you out over there. Meg Carter has a married sister who lives in Cimarron. Meg said they were both raised by a step-father, purported to be a warlock. The mother was also steeped in new-age religion. Meg admitted she dabbled in that stuff after she moved over here, but told us her sister is deeply involved—leads a coven that meets at their home—an old farm north of town.”

He listened for several minutes, then nodded. “He's right here.” He held the phone out to David.

“Lee?” David listened, alternately nodding then shaking his head. “All right. We can do that. Sure. Simon and I will start right now. I'll let Noel and the others know this afternoon. And Lee, take care of yourself, will you.”

David hung up the phone and slumped back into his chair. Sitting very still and staring off into the distance. It was obvious his mind had traveled across the mountains to Lee's side. She had asked for prayer support. Prayer support she would have. No question. However, at that moment he was seriously considering how best to make the trip to Cimarron himself, how to give her moral and physical support too.

“I know what you're thinking,” Simon told him. “I'm thinking the same thing. I just don't see how one of us going over there is will change things—here *or* there.”

“I'm not certain myself, but if you can take over for me on Sunday I'm going to find out.” And with that David pushed away from the desk, gathered up the scattered papers from Meg Carter's file and with purpose in every step, started for the office door.

“Sure... I can...” Simon started to tell him, but he found himself talking to an already closed door.

Thursday Evening - July 10, 2014

Behind Lee's cabin a tiny brick-paved area served as her *patio*. The space was furnished with a couple of wicker chairs found at the thrift-store and a variety of terracotta pots filled with brightly colored summer flowers. An up-ended apple box, topped by a shabby green shutter, held her trusty Coleman lantern currently casting a circle of golden light over everything. A tray holding frosty glasses and a pitcher of tea sat on an antique garden cart situated between the chairs. Overall the space was cozy and intimate.

It was here Lee and David had spent most of the afternoon, after sharing a late lunch at the local pizza joint. They had a lot of catching up to do. They talked over the three months since Lee changed her address. They spent several hours bringing each other up to date on what had been happening in Ridgeview and in Cimarron.

David told her all about his success with the church growing project in Ridgeview. She was thrilled to hear now the number of regulars had increased in such a short time. He brought her up to date on the other members of their little band of believers, too. Noel and Charlotte were doing much, much, better. Roz was healing—no more nightmares or anxiety attacks. Simon would be filling in, teaching in his place, on Sundays until further notice. The Whitmores were growing closer and rapidly learning new ways they could work together to repair their marriage.

Lee told David about Adam and Kay Johns and the group of believers they led. She told him what a warm welcome everyone had given her when she arrived in Cimarron. She told him about new friends and serious concerns. Finally, she told him about the mess Adam found on his church doors the morning of the Forth.

David listened quietly, asking a question here and there, until she began talking about the Forth of July. That's when he admitted his reason for sitting in her yard on that Thursday evening was his concern for her personally.

Lee looked at him, and blinked back tears. "Why David, how perfectly..." she hesitated.

"perfectly what? Sweet? Gallant? Wonderful? What?" she thought.

"ridiculous," she finished. "You know God has my back, no matter what the enemy throws my direction?"

"Yes. But..."

"No buts, David." Finding her stride, Lee made up her mind to spell it all out for him at last. "I think it's amazing that you were concerned enough to come over here and offer your strength and your support in this battle. I just don't think you fully understand how God uses me in a situation like this one."

David, watching her closely, shook his head. But before he could formulate a reply she went on, "Many people look at me and see the exterior, the natural—an older woman with a ferocious hunger for God's Word and a opinion about *everything*. Occasionally someone sees the gift of God that allows me to distinguish between spirits. It is one of the gifts Paul wrote about to the

church in Corinth and for some unknown reason the Spirit chose to use me in that capacity.”

He lifted a hand, as though asking permission to interrupt. She ignored his gesture, and went on. “This isn't something that's readily acceptable in today's church world. We've pretty much fallen into the category of religion that holds its form, but denies its power. It scares a lot of church-going folks silly to think anyone can, as the early church apostles did, look at 'em and know if they have faith for God's healing, or His blessing; or, for that matter if the god they serve is not God at all, but a new-age impostor, seeking to devour their souls.”

“And you can?”

“Yep. Sometimes it's a blessing. Sometimes it's a curse. It makes for an especially lonely life-style. Most aren't all that agreeable to hearing the truth they've built up a fancy facade to conceal. I'm not just an opinionated old woman, David. God has gifted me with what's known as spiritual discernment. With that gift it is possible to walk into a room and know whether it is a spiritual stronghold of evil. New-agers talk about a person's aura. Mostly that's spiritually discerned, too, but you wouldn't want to meet up with the spirit that's imparting the knowledge.”

“Why am I just now finding out...? He was sitting on the edge of his seat now, and the look on his face read amazed and more than a little apprehensive.

“Because when the subject comes up the reaction is usually what you're feeling right now. Surprise. Maybe a little disbelief. The first question is normally, 'Are you sure it's from God?’”

He blinked a couple of times, swallowed hard and asked, “Are you?”

“Without question.”

“How...?”

“David, you're a student of the Word. You know it agrees with itself from cover to cover. You've studied the eye-witness accounts of Spiritual gifts in action throughout both the Old and New Testaments. You know the Old Covenant is Jesus concealed. The New Covenant is Jesus revealed. You know He told his followers what they could expect when the power of the Holy Spirit was imparted to them. I can know without question God has gifted me with a tool He can use in building up the body of Christ because the Word says so. For me...that settles it. Plus, I've seen the gift in action too often to question Him.”

“And why am I just now hearing about this gift of yours?” David wanted to know.

“It's not something I go around announcing to the world,” she told him.

“I would have thought, after your invitation to be part of building a new congregation we were...”

“We were. Are.” Lee assured him. “But it takes me awhile to reach a point where I'm confident in a relationship. *'Test every spirit'* you know?”

“Yeah. I've heard that about you.” At which point he smiled that million-dollar smile she was so attracted to and relaxed. “In fact, Simon said something similar just before I headed over here.”

Any tension between them evaporated into the night and they sat back, sipped iced tea and talked for another two hours.

Chapter 12

Tuesday Morning - September 15, 2014

Lee's pickup, loaded with everything she'd brought to Cimarron, plus a bit more, was parked beside Adam Johns' battered Jeep in the parking lot of Grace Community Church. Adam, Kay and Lee sat on the front pew, holding hands and talking over the events of the past six months. Their plan: meet at the church to pray over Lee's trip home, but somehow the prayer session had turned into a debriefing.

“So when Simon and David found out about the coven meeting out at the Jefferson's farm and David came charging over here to rescue you,” he grinned at Lee, knowing she would object to his phraseology. “you'd already figured out there was a connection to Ridgeview?”

“It's like I told you at the time, *'there's nothing new under the sun,'* to quote King Solomon. The enemy sends his servants into any situation that may give God glory and honor. Sometimes it's subtle, sometimes it's violent, like what you experienced on the Forth of July. Sometimes the opposition comes from external forces, such as the local group of pagans. Sometimes it comes for within.”

“What we had came from the outside. What went on in Ridgeview was from within the body itself. Right?” Kay Johns wanted to know.

“Right.” Lee sighed, then went on, “the enemy will infiltrate any group dedicated to serving God, if he can find a vessel open to his suggestions. I've even seen him use a pastor's wife, or in

extreme cases the pastor himself, to create divisions and conflict.”

“That's what it's really all about,” Adam put in. “Divide and conquer. And it isn't new. A careful reading of Paul's letters to the early churches shows how quickly the enemy figured out dividing believers was the best way to defeat them.”

“Exactly!” Lee agreed. “Look at what has gone on here. For that matter, look at what goes on in every hamlet, town, and city around the world. The body of Christ is divided by so many things. Divisions fall along traditional lines, denominational lines, racial lines. Mostly they simply refuse to agree on just about everything. But, in a case where there is unity, like in your ministerial alliance, Adam, the powers and principalities of darkness muster their troops and set out to divide. And conquer.”

Adam nodded. “That Sunday after the Forth, when we got together to decide what could be done to discourage further vandalism and violence what did you sense, Lee? You never said specifically.”

“Nothing evil,” Lee assured him. “I think I've told you before, I believe the realm of the spiritual surrounds us. Encompasses us, if you will. It's not visible but, for some of us, it is possible to distinguish certain elements when the Holy Spirit reveals them. The group you brought to my home that night were in one accord. We were surrounded by God's ministering angels. No one who posed a threat could have entered...” She paused, thought about it for a moment, then added, “in fact, I think there was one couple who wasn't able to come. A sick child or something?”

“Right. The Morrissions,” Adam recalled.

“Who we later found out were alternately going out to the farm to dance sky-clad with the pagans, then attending mass with their Catholic parents to keep up appearances,” Kay said, with a sardonic laugh.

“It is written, *you can't serve two masters*,” Lee added with a grin.

The debriefing continued until nearly noon. They recalled how God brought unity to not only the Cimarron Ministerial Alliance, but to their congregations, adding strength to the Christian community in the Valley. Adam told them how humbled he felt to have been part of building a grace based non-denominational church that was now growing exponentially every week. Kay revealed her personal and private fears. She told how they'd held her back from trusting and believing God's Word until she saw the power and protection provided after *the attack*.

It was a morning of praise and blessings, but at last, Lee reluctantly hugged her friends good-bye, climbed into the pickup and headed out over the mountains toward home.

Tuesday Afternoon - September 15, 2014

A stiff autumn wind blew across the tundra as the old pickup huffed its way toward the top of the pass. Lee, humming along with a favorite Chopin CD, was undisturbed by the rolling clouds gathering to the north. An hour from the popular tourist village where she planned to spend the night, and making good time, a sudden storm was the last thing on her mind.

When she heard the still small voice that was her constant companion and guide tell her, “*stop*

and check your load, Lee,” she obediently found a place to pull over, climbed out and walked to the back of the truck. The wind whipped at her hair and the tail of her denim jacket making her aware, for the first time, of the potential storm coming her way at forty-five or fifty miles an hour. Having traveled the mountains for much of her life, and being wise to the rapidity with which the weather could go from sunshine to blinding snow, she calculated the time it would take to reach a safe haven. Over an hour forward to her reserved night's lodging; under thirty minutes back to the small cluster of shops at the foot of the pass. *“Hate to turn back,”* she thought. *“Hate getting caught up here in a blizzard even more,”* she said to the flapping canvas covering her precious load, as she tightened the cords holding it to the bed of the truck.

“So...back we go, old girl,” she told her faithful old pickup with a pat. “There's bound to be a place to park until this blows itself out.”

At the foot of the pass the wind was calmer. The clouds boiling over the mountain tops still threatened driving conditions beyond Lee's tolerance, making her grateful for the Spirit's warning and the *'Cafe'* sign flashing a neon welcome in the gathering dusk. She parked the pickup in front of the windows, climbed out, went inside and chose a booth where she could watch it. For a few seconds the relief at being off the mountain, out of the wind, and sheltered within reach of pie and coffee distracted her. She settled into the booth, checked her view of the pickup, reached for the menu, then looked around her.

“This is no place for you, Lee. Go back to the truck and find somewhere else to wait out the storm.”

“What can I getcha lady?”

She looked up to find an enormous man in a filthy butcher's apron blocking her escape from the booth. Fully bearded and balding, with a greasy looking gray ponytail and a gravelly voice that spoke of too many years of smoking, his rough greeting made her wish for a clear path to the door.

“Oh just coffee.” She tried making small-talk to lessen the discomfort she felt. “Looks like quite a storm headed this way, doesn't it?”

“Guess so,” he growled at her. “Coffee's not all that fresh. I'll have to make some more. I was about to close up for the night.”

“O! Please. Don't bother doing that.” Thankful for an excuse to flee, she smiled up at him, reached for her jacket lying on the seat next to her and started to scoot out of the booth. “I'll just head back down the road to the restaurant at the Park entrance. It's only a couple of miles, isn't it?”

“They'll be closin' too.” As he spoke he appeared to be giving her loaded truck a thorough once over. “Movin'?” he asked.

“Just hauling some of my things home to Ridgeview,” she answered evasively.

“Got somebody followin' you to help with the loadin', I guess.”

“What?” Lee turned her gaze away from the big man toward her loaded pickup and gasped in amazement. “No! Wait! Stop! Don't do that! Hey, that's my truck,” she shouted, trying to elbow her way out of the booth.

For a big man, the waiter was surprisingly light on his feet. He swung away from the booth, hopped over the end of the counter, grabbed a very sturdy looking bat and was out the front door of the cafe ahead of her.

“Hey! Hey you there,” he hollered at a pair of scruffy looking young men currently working to untie the ropes holding down the cover over Lee's load. One of them looked up, sized up the situation, jabbed the other in the ribs and hooked a thumb toward a rattle-trap Ford parked behind the side of the building.

“Hey. Get on outta here.” The gusting wind swirled his ponytail around his face; the bat whirled over his shoulder as Lee's protector took a couple of running steps toward the Ford. He stopped abruptly—just in time. It barely missed hitting him as it spun out, kicking gravel back against the cafe and his shins. “Rotten little thieves!” He muttered as he turned back to where Lee stood checking the still tightly covered bed of her truck.

“Everything alright in there Ma'am ?”

“Yes. Thanks to you.”

“Didn't figure they were up to any good,” he waved away her thanks. “Got no tolerance for piddling little crooks like them.” He opened the door of the cafe and asked, “You still want that coffee? I'll get it started. Could use a cup myself after that little dust-up.”

Shaken, Lee nodded acceptance. “I'll be right in. Just want to check my tie-downs all around again.”

When she was alone she leaned against the tailgate, drew several deep cleaning breaths and

whispered, "Thank you Lord! I know you told me this wasn't a good idea...stopping here. I thought it was the cafe and the waiter. I missed it, Lord. If it wasn't for that man I don't know what would have happened. Thank you for putting someone here to protect me. You never fail me."

After going through the motions of checking her load and making sure the vehicle was securely locked she headed back into the cafe. A gust of wind propelled her inside where she was greeted by the comforting fragrance of fresh coffee, plus something that brought memories of a pie or cookies baking.

"Which way you headed?" The burly waiter asked, shoving a mug of steaming coffee across the counter toward her. "Didn't see you turn off the highway. Sure hope you wasn't planning to go over the pass tonight. Just heard on the scanner she's closed from Elkhorn Curve to the other side. Probably won't be any plows out till morning now."

"Ouch! More decidedly bad news," Lee answered. "I was planning on being tucked into a nice warm motel room on the other side before dark."

"Not gonna happen tonight."

Still a little shaken from their recent encounter Lee wrapped her hands around the mug he'd offered as if to draw from its strength and warmth. "I guess that means I'll have to find a place to spend the night around here. Got any suggestions, Mr.....?" Realizing she didn't even know the name of her protector she stuck out her hand in introduction. "I'm Lee, by the way."

"Gabe. 'I'm Gabe.'" he pumped her hand enthusiastically. "Not much available this time of

year as far as over-night accommodations go. Most of these places shut down for the season right after Labor Day. Weather's just too unpredictable to gamble on customers year round.”

“Gabe..huh? Well Gabe, you've certainly lived up to your name-sake today.”

Puzzled, he turned and looked directly into her eyes. “Excuse me?”

“Your name-sake...Gabriel,” Lee explained. The look he gave her told her there was no comprehension whatsoever. “The angel...Gabriel,” she tried again.

At that he threw back his head and roared until tears rolled down his cheeks. His reaction caused Lee to look at him with a raised eyebrow, wondering what could be so hysterically funny about being named after an arch-angel.

“Knew my Ma picked a Bible name for me,” still struggling to keep a straight face, he went on to explain. “Didn't know it was some angel's name. Ma did all the Bible readin' in our house. Always told me my Daddy...never met him...was a pistol and I was a son-of-a-gun. That's when she wasn't telling me what a little devil I was. Sure never expected somebody to be comparin' me to any angel.”

That was when the still small voice Lee trusted in for direction at every turn spoke in her spirit again. *“Tell him Lee. Tell Gabriel how much I love him. Tell him I loved him before I formed him in his mothers womb and what I did to save him. Make sure he understands before you leave here tonight. He's ready to hear it now.”*

Wednesday Morning - September 16, 2014

Lee opened her eyes to bright sunlight streaming through unfamiliar plate-glass windows. Her legs were cramping and her neck felt as if it might never be straight again. It took a full minute for the events of the night before to clearly focus in her mind. She was huddled in the same booth where Gabe had first appeared on her horizon. It seemed like days ago. In fact, it had been less than twenty-four hours.

“Mornin' Lee! Can I getcha some coffee?” He stood at the end of the table again, but now his appearance seemed softer some how. His voice certainly was. This morning, instead of a snarl, he wore a smile and a clean apron. “Had the scanner on just now. Highway Patrol says the pass is still closed. Still snowin' up there. Should be cleared by mornin' though. Looks like we're gonna have to figure out a better place for you to spend tonight. Don't see how you slept on that thing.”

“Well...I offered to sleep in the pickup. Remember? This was much better, honestly it was.” she wanted make him believe it. She wanted to believe it herself. The truth was her whole body felt as if she'd slept on a kitchen shelf instead of a padded seat. “By the time we turned in last night, make that this morning, I could have just as easily slept on the floor.”

“I know. Sorry it was so late. Once you started tellin' me about Jesus and what He's done for us...me...I guess I just couldn't stop askin' questions.”

“Don't be sorry, Gabe,” she stood and hugged him. “Don't ever be sorry for the time you spend learning about Jesus.” Now, how about that coffee?”

Sunday Night - September 21, 2014

There were perhaps a hundred people standing in scattered groups around the lawn in front of Ridgeview's *Old Town Theater*. The building was decked out to look as if it had been constructed in the last century. It was, in fact, the product of some very clever developers who sold the town council of Ridgeview on the idea of a packaged sub-division, including tennis courts, a swimming pool, shops and a theater, sometime in the last decade. All of the 'amenities' were presented to potential buyers as coming '*straight out of the old West*'. The idea was, for the most part, a monumental flop, resulting in under half-a-dozen log-cabin style mansions on disconnected acreages in the foothills west of town. After the clever developers moved on to greener pastures, the good citizens of Ridgeview voted to incorporate the *amenities* for use by local groups and organizations. All in all the project had turned out to be a great blessing for this rapidly growing fellowship.

Throughout the past summer, as their congregation grew, David, Noel and Simon spent hours searching for exactly the right facility to house *Grace Place of Ridgeview*. Late in August the theater building became available for rent at a reasonable price and was declared a perfect fit. Now, in late September, everyone agreed the church could grow in this building for at least another year before they would need to even start thinking about constructing or buying a larger place.

As David guided Lee through the building, showing her what she had only seen in photos so

far, their conversation turned to the tall, bald stranger standing with Simon and Roz near the front door. “So he just dropped everything and followed you home?” David asked.

“Yep. Said there wasn't anything to keep him where he was. He'd been knocking around the mountains, from one tourist town to the next for awhile. Said he was tired of bad company and worse living conditions, wanted to get cleaned up in more ways than one. Shaved off the beard and the pony-tail, turned in his time card at the cafe, hopped on his Harley and followed me home.” Lee laughed and asked, “Can I keep him?”

“You're asking the wrong one. Looks to me like God put him in the right place at the right time for both of you. I suggest we get him baptized sooner rather than later, find him a place to live, a job and some *good* company, then watch what the Lord has in mind for him.”

Chapter 13 - 2015

Tuesday Morning - January 6, 2015

Winter had spent the night encompassing the foothills in a mantle of white, and it wasn't finished yet. Even though the clock pointed to mid-morning the sky was still dark and menacing. Lee Langston stood at her kitchen window, coffee in hand as usual, watching as massive snowflakes softly followed a straight path to the ground. With no breeze to alter their course snow was rapidly accumulating, blanketing the morning in solitude. She knew from experience there would be a whisper of sound as the flakes touched down, but within the warmth of her cottage the silence seemed complete, broken only by the tick-tick-tock of the little clock in the library.

“Love when it snows like this,” Lee told the kitchen at large. “Gives me such a sense of calm and security.”

Lost in thought, she stood for quite a while sipping her coffee and watching the storm. When the clock, striking the hour, roused her she shook off the mood, refilled her mug, carried it to her desk, opened her journal and spent the next two hours sorting out emotions and memories—an unusual occupation for her.

In the months since returning to Ridgeview her activities had fallen into a routine: rising before the sun, feeding her chickens and the cats, feeding herself, spending a quiet time with her Bible and journal, then moving on to whatever project demanded her attention for the afternoon.

Evenings were often a reversal of the morning: a light meal for herself, feeding the left-overs to cats and chickens, giving the outbuildings a quick check before dark, then back to the library for study or reading. Sundays and Wednesdays found her at Grace Place for fellowship and worship. Other than the occasional shopping trip in town her life had become more simple and solitary than ever before.

There were occasional phone calls with the Renwalds, the Gundersens, even Margery or Bill Whitmore, but often days passed without communication from the world outside her cottage.

“Life is much like this snow storm right now,” she thought. “Everything is falling quietly into place, sticking to the plan and fulfilling its purpose. Nothing's being whipped around and causing problems. It almost makes me wonder when the wind will pick up and start shifting it all around.”

David Dale and Gabriel Sanders were digging David's big SUV out, preparing for a trip to the Theater. It wasn't exactly a two man job, but for the past several months any job David needed done found Gabe at his side, helping out.

While it was true Gabe had followed Lee home after their meeting in September, it was David who kept him. As it turned out both men were blessed by the arrangement. David's rustic rental cabin was large enough for two. Gabe's small savings stretched to help with the expenses until he'd found work at the Loading Chute Cafe, and by the time his income would allow a place of his own, they were so comfortable with each other neither could see a need to change their

arrangement.

Much of David's time was spent in study and preparation for Grace Place services, or counseling with Grace Place members. Gabe worked long hours at the cafe, and studied with a voracious appetite for the Word.

If Lee's days had fallen into a routine, David and Gabe had developed not only a friendship but a pattern of working together that fit both to the nth degree. David was sensitive enough to hear the whisper of God's voice. Gabe was completely devoid of religiosity, having never been indoctrinated into any denomination. When Gabe questioned something he'd read in the Bible and took his question to David the discussion often turned from the theological to the practical. If David's answer came from tradition, or religious dogma, Gabe tended to steer it back to the simplest solution.

“But it says.... Doesn't it mean what it says, David?”

There had been any number of carefully prepared sermon notes torn into small pieces and deposited in the trash after one of those conversations. Keeping it simple enough for Gabe, was David's new motto for teaching and preaching. Keeping himself approachable, believable, authentic...and always faithful in the little things, had become David's personal goal.

On this particular snowy morning the conversation over breakfast had been about Lee. And angels. And demons!

After shoveling out the drive from the cabin to the road and brushing a good six inches of the feathery white stuff off the car, they loaded in the materials needed for Wednesday night's service

and headed toward town. It took several minutes for the windshield to defrost and the interior to warm up, then Gabe turned to David and went back to their earlier discussion.

“So...Lee...what? Sees? Senses? Feels the supernatural?”

“Not in the same sense you're talking about. No,” David answered. “Did you read the chapters in First Corinthians I suggested last night? Where Paul talks about the gifts of the Spirit?”

“Did. Still not exactly clear on some of it though,” Gabe admitted. “Been around guys who say they can see spirits sometimes...mostly when they're high, I guess.”

“It's nothing like that, Gabe. Although I think the veil between the spirit realm and the natural may become more transparent under the influence of some mind altering drugs.”

“Guess so....” Gabe agreed.

David wondered exactly how much experience he had in that realm, but prudently refrained from asking.

“God often uses Lee to distinguish between spirits...good and evil...if you will. Under the Holy Spirit's guidance she can tell for a certainty when a person is...is faking love for God. In today's culture, similar to what the Corinthian believers were facing, churches are filled with immoral behavior that is accepted as normal. Paul said, in no uncertain terms, that although everyone is tempted, true believers possess, in Christ, the power to resist sin.”

“Yeah. That's one of the first things she taught me about being 'in Christ' that night on the other side.”

The way Gabe referred to his conversion experience as '*the other side*' amused David, but he

never once attempted to correct the younger man, assuming the life he had lived for the first forty or so years compared to his life today was exactly as he thought of it...the other side. Maybe he meant the other side of the mountains, but David would forever think of it as the other side of the Lord.

“The Holy Spirit has been promised to every believer in order to encourage us and guide us into all God's truth. When we trust Him for our decisions and behavior we are the most pleasing to our Abba, Father. That's walking the way Jesus walked,” David told him.

“That's the way I want to walk,” Gabe assured him. “That's the way I see Lee walking. And you, too. When I grow up I wanna be just like you two,” he added with a growling chuckle.

David smiled and started to brush off the compliment, then thought better of it. “Thanks, Gabe. For what it's worth, you're getting there faster than most.”

“So what about the demons? Real or imagined?”

“Oh real, no question.” David stated emphatically. “It's impossible to believe some parts of the Word—the mercy and grace of God, for example—without also believing in a supernatural force of evil. If God and His ministering angels are real, so is the enemy and the evil spirits serving him.”

“Okay. Let's say they're real. What can they do to me, now that I'm in Christ...or rather that Christ is in me?” Gabe thought he'd already found the answer in his reading, but he wanted to hear David tell him whether or not he was correct.”

“First, and foremost, demons; devils, evil-spirits, can and do horrible things when they are in

possession of people they are permitted to operate through. You've seen and heard some of it...on *'the other side'* I imagine.”

“Yeah. Didn't know at the time what I was dealin' with,” Gabe admitted. “Some smarter now, thanks to the Word.”

“But...,” David continued, “they are all made subject to Christ and believers by the Cross and the name of Jesus and his Holy Spirit.”

“Thought so.”

“Just don't forget they must be discerned, tested, resisted and rejected. They are...*agents*...of Satan. We are told we must be firm in our faith when they come at us with suggestions and symptoms.”

“That's what Peter wrote. I got that.” Turning in the seat to face David full on, Gabe asked, “So how come church folks are so slow about figurin' that out?”

“Ah...a question for the ages,” David replied as he turned the SUV into the snow drifted across the parking lot behind the Theater.

Sunday Evening - January 11, 2015

Lee rolled down the window in her pickup, reached out and patted Gabe's cheek with affection. “Good night, sweet friend,” she told him. “It was good seeing you, as always. You and David getting on alright over there?” Extending her hand toward David, a twinkle in her blue eyes, she laughed as she shook his hand in parting.

“Oh Yes Ma'am,” Gabe grinned, slinging his big arm over David's shoulder. “Getting on like a couple o' old bachelors. Doin' just fine.”

“Good to know.” Laughing, she turned the key in the ignition. “Hate to think there was any...” her voice was drowned out by engine noise and then she was gone.

Gabe gave his friend's back a pat as they watched her headlights arching through the night toward home. “When you gonna tell her, David?”

“Tell her?” David gawked at him in amazement. “Tell her what?”

“You know *what*. You talk in your sleep pardner.”

“I don't....” David stammered, a slow glow of red creeping up from under his collar.

“Oh yeah, you do,” Gabe assured him. “And the walls in that cabin are so thin every word is plain as day. Oh, and you snore, too,” he shot back over his shoulder as he turned and headed back inside.

David stood there in the cold January darkness wondering exactly what Gabe might have overheard. It was possible for Lee's name to have been called out in a dream he knew. She had occupied a lot of his dreams over the years, ever since that first meeting in Simon Gundersen's office. Sometimes she was the teacher he knew her to be, sharing her knowledge of the Word with anyone willing to listen. Other times her role in his dreams was that of a seer, foretelling an event God had planned for one or another of them. Lately, after he'd come to the realization that he'd fallen in love with the woman, his visions of her had taken on a very different tone. Had he voiced the thoughts and desires running through his sub-conscious and manifesting in his dreams?

Gabe's pointed question played back through his thinking and he asked himself, 'When *are* you gonna tell her, David?'

As Lee's pickup rattled over the gravel driveway, headed for its home in the barn, she watched as a momentary flash of light played over the living-room windows.

“Oh great! Wasn't it just the other day I was wondering how long the peace and serenity could last uninterrupted,” she asked the truck. “So why's there a light in my living-room, when I'm not in my living-room?”

A closer look revealed the light was not coming from inside the house, but rather through the house. Proof of that was the wide path of light now stretching outward from the garden side of the building. Whoever was prowling around her place in the cold and dark was carrying a powerful flashlight, and obviously was not bothered by the idea someone might see their progress across the property.

Lee reached over and locked the passenger side door, then did the same to her side. Killing the lights she dropped the truck into reverse and slowly backed toward the road. The path of the flashlight continued to widen, moving from behind the cottage toward the barn. Knowing it was not possible for the intruder to have missed seeing her pull into the drive, Lee turned the wheels hard to the right, positioning the truck to point straight at the front of the barn. She waited until the beam of light touched the barn doors, then turned her lights on bright, hoping to catch her visitor in mid skulk.

Covered head to toe in black, wearing a ski mask to match, a heavy-set body stopped stone still in the dazzling light, then took off loping awkwardly toward the road, dropping the flashlight and something that looked very much like a woman's purse along the way. As the fleeing prowler approached the main road in the darkness, a deep ditch covered in dirty snow left over from Tuesday's storm stopped the escape. Hands flying overhead, the black clad figure sailed out over the ditch and landed with a perfect two-point belly-flop on the other side. By that time Lee had her headlights aimed down the road leading away from the farm. A hundred yards or so beyond her mailbox a vehicle sat waiting. She could tell by the stream of white exhaust it was running, but it was too far away to clearly make out the license plate. She touched the accelerator and slowly rolled up even with the fat figure now struggling to extricate itself from the snow and weeds clogging the ditch. Pulling her own flashlight from the pocket in the door, she lowered the window and turned its beam toward the ski mask.

“Don't know who you are or what you're doing out here,” she snarled. “but you best get on up outta there and go back to whatever hole you crawled out of. Trust me when I tell you, you don't know what you're messing with sneaking around here.”

A weak voice spoke from the ditch. “You don't scare me old woman.”

“Oh it isn't me you need to worry about. It's the angel who guards me and what's mine,” Lee answered confidently. Then she said something she'd wanted to say for most of her life. “Open his eyes Lord. Show him what he needs to fear.”

It must have worked, because there was a terrified howl from behind the ski-mask as the

rotund would-be-robber gathered momentum, shot out of the ditch and streaked toward the waiting vehicle. Lee sat in her truck and laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks. Then she dug out her cell phone and called for backup.

Monday Morning - January 12, 2015

“So...what do you think he saw?” Gabe asked, wiping tears of laughter from his face.

“No telling,” Lee answered him.

The three of them were gathered around Lee's kitchen table, comfortably enjoying the last remnants of a country omelet, toast and homemade berry preserves,

David had arrived almost immediately after Lee's call telling him about the intruder at the farm. He'd spent the rest of the night patrolling the boundary of her place, watching in case someone, or something, came back.

Gabe had shown up a little after dawn, hungry as usual, so Lee fixed them all breakfast and told her story again for him. Now, she continued to answer his questions.

“Possibly the angel sent to guard me and what's mine. There are ministering spirits, sent to serve the heirs of salvation, you know. Maybe, for the first time, he saw the demon who's assigned to him and who influences his decisions to steal. Or kill. Or destroy. Or, maybe that demon recognized my angel and propelled his fat little vehicle outta there before it was too late. It's impossible to say for sure. Any one of those scenarios would be scripturally correct and supernaturally probable. Whatever happened, I'd give a weeks grocery money to see it faithfully

reproduced on film. One of the funniest things I've seen in years.”

“I don't see anything funny about it,” David told them grimly. “You're out here alone and...”

“David! Dear man,” Lee cut him off with a wave and a smile. “That's exactly the point. Don't you see? I wasn't alone. I wasn't in any real danger. God has promised to give his angels charge over his children, and that's precisely what he did last night.”

Still scowling, David was evidently not comforted by her confidence. “Still don't think you completely understand the dangers...”

“Of course I do, David.” The comedic tone of the incident, as she'd shared it with Gabe, was clearly lost on David. His concerned take on the whole thing caused Lee to change to a more serious note. “I've lived alone for decades and, after giving my life to Christ, there has never been a time when God has left me vulnerable.”

David, shaking his head, opened his mouth for another salvo of 'what ifs' but before the words were formed, Lee continued.

“God called me, gifted me, for his service shortly after Mark's accident. He has never asked me to do anything he hasn't equipped me to accomplish. I have absolute confidence in his Word, his promises, *and* his protection, David. Please don't spend another second worrying over me. You see I'm never really alone because God will never leave me, or forsake me. And quite frankly, I like my life just the way he has designed it.”

Gabe saw, even though Lee didn't, the struggle going on in his friend's mind. Here was a man who cared a great deal for this woman, possibly enough to risk asking her to share the rest of his

life and his home sometime in the future. And, the woman in question had just told him quite plainly she was less than interested in changing her status anytime soon.

David sat silently for a beat or two, then said, “Okay. Well...as long as you're protected, and happy, I'm happy for you.”

With those words still hanging in the air, he rose, retrieved his jacket off the peg next to the back door, jerked his thumb at his young partner and announced, “Let's be on our way, Gabe. Things to do, places to go, people to see, you know. Thanks for the breakfast, Lee. See you later this week?”

“David? Wait!” Lee moved quickly around the table, catching hold of his arm to stop him. “Don't mistake my meaning. Please. I do need your support. And Gabe's too. I'm afraid I've said the wrong thing. Again.” A shimmer of tears in her eyes stopped him cold and he turned back toward her. “I'm notorious for saying or doing inappropriate things at the wrong time. You know that.”

“You didn't...” he looked toward Gabe for help, but Gabe was busily zipping his own jacket, refusing to catch his eye.

“I did. I can tell by looking at you. Please come back and let's...”

“Lee, let it go. Nothing you said or did was inconsistent with who your are or inappropriate in any way.” He turned back toward the door, attempting to finishing the conversation by saying, “I just let it slip my mind for a minute how closely you operate with God. You'll always have our support, Lee, but you don't need our protection because you can always rest in his.”

“That's not true David. Ask Gabe. If God hadn't put him in the right place at the right time to protect me last fall where do you think I'd be right now?”

“If not Gabe, then someone else. Or he would have warned you...”

“He did. The Spirit warned me about that cafe. Stopping there. But David, nobody is perfect and nobody hears God's Spirit perfectly every time. We all make mistakes and he allows them, otherwise we'd all be marionettes on strings, dancing to his tune. That's not what he wants either. As believers, we need each other.” She stepped over to where Gabe, with hand on the door knob, was trying his best to exit the situation. “Look how God took my error in judgment and turned it into something more wonderful than any of us could have orchestrated. Gabe here is a by-product of God's grace in my imperfection.”

“Or maybe...” David wasn't finished trying to disentangle his feelings from his understanding. “Maybe you were both exactly in the perfect place at the perfect time. That's the real trick, isn't it? Knowing...” With that he threw back his head and laughed delightedly.

Both Lee and Gabe stared at him in wonder.

“Knowing that God's timing is perfect!” Then he took her shoulders in his hands, pulled her toward him and air-kissed both cheeks. “Today, apparently, is not God's perfect time. Thanks again for breakfast. We'll see you later in the week.” And with that, still chuckling, he hooked Gabe by the elbow, drug him out the door, and left Lee staring after them, bewildered over what on earth had just happened.

Chapter 14

Thursday Morning - March 12, 2015

“Jesus will prepare you for a new way of life. You want to put away old ways and put on new, but are afraid that what has controlled your life until today will continue to control your life. Have faith in yourself—in the power of God's Holy Spirit within you to lead you into new paths. Never mind what lies behind. Forget, Forgive, Love and Laugh,” David wrote on the yellow legal pad where he was preparing notes for Sunday's message. Leaning back he read the words again, thoughtfully, and then called toward the kitchen, “Hey, Gabe. Come take a look at this and tell me what you think.”

Gabriel Sanders stood at the sink, elbow deep in soap suds, finishing the dishes both of them had been ignoring for the past two days. When he heard David call, he stepped back, dried his hands on the seat of his jeans, and made his way into the room they called “the study.” In all honesty the rental cabin they shared was hardly large enough for anything so grand, but because the little room was flooded with natural light most of every day, and because both of them enjoyed reading and studying in the space, it had been so named.

“What's up?” he asked from the doorway.

“Just finishing up notes for Sunday,” David told him. “Callin' the message, “*A New Way of Life*” and the last few lines seem to be pretty good advise for all of us. Wondered what you thought.” He held out the legal pad to his friend.

Gabe straddled one of the wooden chairs they'd pulled in from the kitchen and read deliberately for several minutes. "Wow! Speaks to me. For sure." He handed the pad back, then asked, "did you plan on telling all of them what you told me last winter?"

"What's that? We talked about so many things, I...."

"Are you going to tell them it didn't matter who they were or what kind of a past they had. As long as they sought Him for healing, Jesus healed them gladly and graciously. He never asked them what they had done or not done, or if they had repented. He never asked them to take a pledge to follow Him and never told anyone that He would not heal them because they deserved to be sick.

"Are you going to tell them none of the first century converts were perfect in their thought life or behavior? You said some of them came to Him without strong faith. It just didn't matter to Jesus. All that mattered to Him was that they had been suffering and needed His love.

"Are you going to tell them, like you told me, Jesus puts no demands and no conditions on you. He simply wants to heal you and set you free! After you told me that about my new life in Christ, all of the other stuff just sort of melted away and I could move forward."

As Gabe spoke David had been rapidly crossing out parts of his notes and adding others. He held out the pad to Gabe again. "Try it now," he suggested.

Gabe read for a bit and then announced, "That'll do it. It's no wonder The Grace Place is growing so fast. With you givin' 'em words like this...."

"It's not me," David cautioned him. "You know it isn't. It's all God. Anytime I take over we're

finished. Unless the Holy Spirit speaks through me anything I tell those gathered to hear from Him is just.... just words.”

As the two men continued with preparations for Sunday's service, across the valley on the other side of Ridgeview, another group was also making plans.

“Won't Meg or Margie recognize you?”

The speaker was a stately red-haired woman of perhaps forty. She was dressed in a sheer, floor length white garment that flowed around her bare ankles as she moved among the twelve other people seated in a circle on the wooden floor. Bracelets jingled on her wrists and several gold chains bearing various amulets and crystals hung around her neck. She came to a stop in front of a scrawny youth, dressed entirely in black. A full sleeve tattoo was exposed by his ratty tank top. Both ear-lobes bore quarter-sized expanders, and his nose, upper-lip and tongue boasted piercings as well.

“Maybe...? Probably,” he answered.

“Then Vanessa will have to go. There's something to be said for a modicum of restraint when it comes to personal expression, Jason.” Her slight smile was belied by the sting in her words.

“But I...” the boy began.

Turning on him with surprising speed, the red-head tapped one talon-like fingernail on his pallid chest. “Vanessa will go. Do you question my decision Jason?”

“No...no ma'am,” Jason cowered. “Never.” He assured her.

“Good!” She continued around the circle and stopped in front of an even younger girl.

“Vanessa? Are you prepared?”

The girl, perhaps in her late teens or early twenties, also dressed in white and adorned with bangles and crystals, blushed slightly, rose to her feet and with bowed head and folded hands, curtsied before the older woman. “I am my worship. Bless me, as I beg to serve you.”

“Very well. Then Sunday is the target date. And division is the ultimate goal. Are we in unity?”

Twelve voices spoke together, “We are in unity, your worship. Let there be division in the gathering of the enemy. Division! Division! Division...” the chant continued.

The checkered black and white hen Lee was moving aside so she could collect her morning's egg gave a squawk and flapped out of the nest box. Normally placid, the entire farm yard seemed to be in chaos this morning. “*There's something...*” Lee thought.

Setting the basket of fresh eggs aside, she was started toward the house, when she *saw* in the Spirit a circle of shapeless, evil, forms chanting “division—division—division.”

The vision stopped her in her tracks and she remained motionless for several minutes. “Lord? What are you showing me? Make it clear. Give me wisdom and understanding,” she prayed.

“Had to be the morning my cell phone battery went dead,” she snarled as she made her way to the back door and then to the phone on the kitchen counter. Impatiently she dialed, then fumed as it rang. “Come on. Come on, David. Pick up!”

“Hel...

“David, it's starting again!”

“What's starting?”

“God just showed me a gathering of evil-spirits, evoking division over and over. The only reason He would show me that so clearly is because the enemy is desperately trying to divide The Grace Place congregants again.”

“But I assumed...”

“Assumed? That's the biggest weapon Satan has, David. You know it's true. He lulls us into thinking we've driven him off, or converted his servants and we can relax. We can't relax...not on this side of Heaven.”

“You're right. Of course. What do you suggest we do, other than pray?”

“Call Meg Carter. Ask her to meet you out here. We need to know what she knows. *Who* she knows.”

“Shall I call Noel and Simon, too?”

“Couldn't hurt, she affirmed. “I'll put the coffee on, and look for you within the hour. Oh, and bring Gabe, too.”

Thursday Afternoon - March 12, 2015

The atmosphere in the kitchen was grim as David said “Amen” and looked up from his prayer. Those seated around the room had listened quietly to Lee's narration of her vision. Not one of them was surprised by the things she had to say. Well...Gabe may have been somewhat taken

aback by the overt conversation concerning demons and satanism. No one else was.

At the close of the prayer, everyone shifted into more relaxed postures, waiting to hear whatever might come next.

Lee reached for the pitcher of iced tea and offered refreshments for anyone who was interested. No one was. "Okay then," she sat down, faced the group, and pinning her attention on Meg Carter, asked point blank, "What do you know about this local coven, Meg?"

"I know they *were* dabbling in paganism. Not satanism," she answered. "I know there were a couple of the younger ones, and a woman who joined just before I got saved, that seemed to be pushing the others further and further into the practice of darker magic with an emphasis on ancient charms and spells. The older woman was cautious about openly admitting she was a Satan worshiper, but it felt to me as though she really wanted to show off the power she bragged about being able to call forth, "*with a few words.*" I saw her cast a couple of charms that I'm certain had nothing to do with Wicca and everything to do with calling out demon power to do her bidding. She gave me the... the creeps," Meg finished.

"So, what we're dealing with now is more than..." Noel Renwald started to say."

"No...it's what we've been dealing with from the beginning," Lee cut him off. "What we're fighting against is powers and principalities, rulers of darkness, and emissaries of Satan. This is, quite honestly, no different than what you were dealing with seven years ago when they destroyed your congregation and forced you to leave town, Noel."

He nodded in agreement, but said nothing.

“These are the same spirits that terrorized you, Simon. Or tried to kill you, Gabe. I don't know if you know...”

“Not all of us see the supernatural quite as clearly as you do, Lee.” David's gentle voice halted her before she could take the conversation down a path he was unwilling to travel. “Satan is a defeated foe. Jesus holds the keys to death, hell and the grave. We are warned about pronouncing a reviling judgment against things we do not understand. Both Peter and Jude write of the dangers involved there.” He stood and stepping behind her chair placed both hands on her shoulders in a gesture of solidarity. “I think we are called to unite and persevere; to rely on him who is able to keep us from stumbling and to present us before the Father's glorious presence without fault and with great joy.” He continued to softly knead Lee's shoulders tenderly as he continued. “We are promised that no weapon formed against us can prosper if we keep our hearts and minds focused on Christ. So, keeping our focus on Christ in the face of any and all opposition is what we must do.”

“That's now we've come this far,” Simon Gundersen chimed in. “The Grace Place attendance has doubled and re-doubled since David became our shepherd. I say he's right. We unite and focus on what's important...Christ and the finished work of the Cross.”

Lee listened quietly to the men she had introduced to God's plan for The Grace Place. Within her spirit a calm satisfaction settled comfortably and with a strong sense of finality she spoke. “You're right. All of you. This battle is the Lord's. We have no need to worry or fear. He will accomplish what he set out to accomplish. All we need to do is focus on Him.”

In agreement, everyone folded their hands, bowed their heads, and lent their God given power to the prayer David prayed as he led them toward a common unity.

Friday Morning - March 13, 2015

As dawn slipped over the darkness of night, on the south side of town, conflict reigned in the circle of thirteen. The imposing red-haired woman, clothed today in black from head to toe, stormed at the others, "Silence! All of you." Her anger was tangible. The air crackled with it. "Stop moving and be silent so I can center," she hissed.

Never before had her power been so diminished. Never before had she failed to experience the mind-bending thrill that total domination over the circle brought to her spirit. Something was wrong. Seriously wrong. It infuriated her, and her fury was currently directed toward her own disciples. *They* had to be the reason her lord Ba'al had refused to honor them with his presence. Today of all days he should readily answer her summons.

"Why would he fail to acknowledge our efforts to exact vengeance on those who have lured away our members?" she wondered. "We must center our minds and channel our powers," she instructed those seated around her. Fingering the silver pentagram swinging against her chest on a heavy black cord, she began to softly chant an ancient incantation once more.

"It's not over yet," Lee told the pine log she stooped to place on the grate in her little library fireplace. She'd laid the fire an hour or so before daylight. The room had been cold and dark

when the Spirit woke her with a strong urge to pray for David, Simon, Noel and The Grace Place. Instantly wide awake, she had wrapped herself in a warm robe, carried her Bible from the nightstand to the library, started a fire and settled down to do as she was instructed. As the hours passed the urgency she felt subsided somewhat, but deep in her soul she knew..."It's not over yet."

As the little mantel clock struck six she stirred herself enough to think about making coffee and exchanging her pajamas for work clothes. A mostly consumed log broke apart dropping pieces into the ashes and sending a shower of sparks toward the chimney. The fireworks startled her, causing her to jump, solidifying her into action.

In the kitchen, grinding coffee beans, measuring them into her french press, filling the battered red tea-kettle and setting it to boil, Lee's thoughts traveled back through the years to July of '08.

"This fight has been going on for almost seven years," she told the singing kettle. "Seven years of visions and dreams and angelic covering. Seven years of demonic interference."

'Thank you Lord Jesus for the cross. Thank you for the crown you wore. Thank you for the stripes you bore. Thank you for your nail-pierced hands. Thank you Lord for saving me,' she hummed while she pressed the coffee and toasted half a bagel.

"So has the battle been worth it?"

Seated at the table, breakfast finished, she flipped through the pages of her journal, recalling the days and weeks behind her. "I'd say so! Look at the victories. Look at Meg, and Margery, and Gabe. Look at the growth of The Grace Place. Look at the friendships and the restored

relationships.” Pausing here and there to read a highlighted date, to remember a specific skirmish, she bowed her head on folded hands and wept for joy. “Oh thank you Jesus. You are so good in every way.”

Interrupted by the jangle of her cell phone, Lee wiped her eyes, breathed deeply to clear her voice and answered, “Good Morning David.”

Without preamble he echoed her earlier words, “It's not over, Lee.”

“I know....”

“But we've entered a new season. God has shown me the path we are to follow, and I think you'll be surprised.”

“Oh good. I would love to...”

“I'll be there in half an hour,” David told her. “We'll talk about it then. Oh, and Lee, I'm famished, got anything a growing boy could eat?”

She laughed delightedly, “I think I can come up with something. See you soon.”

Epilogue

Monday Morning - May 25, 2015

The Memorial Day Picnic organized by a group of Grace Place families was in full swing. Rampaging children ran through the crowd of adults giving the impression of a disturbed ant hill. Dozens of tables, loaded down with ice-chests, casserole dishes, grocery bags and boxes told of the feast to come. Charcoal grills sent forth the enticing smell of smoking meats. There could be no doubt a celebration was in the making.

Lee and David sat at one end of an out-of-the-way table located in the shade of a huge old cottonwood tree. Their conversation was centered around the season immediately behind them.

Looking back Lee recalled that morning in March when David had come for breakfast prepared to tell her what she already knew. He would be stepping aside as shepherd of The Grace Place—handing the reigns to Simon Gundersen at the end of June. Noel Renewal would be stepping up as President of the Board of Directors. New elders would be appointed to take their places. David would be moving on, to whatever work the Lord had for him. Grace Place was established, and *“the gates of hell could not prevail against it.”*

It was on that same March morning, even though Lee believed she knew exactly what was coming, part of what David had to say took her completely by surprise. “I’ll be sad to see you go, David...” she started to tell him.

“Come with me!”

Looking back now, three months later, she knew her stunned response was far from confident. Negative or not, it had no impact on David's determination to sweep her up in his excitement for the future—their future. After the first rush of amazement and emotion was past she had admitted, to herself and to him, there had been an inkling of God's plan in her spirit for a very long time.

As the preparations for a Memorial Day Service and picnic went on around them it was evident these two, no-longer-young, servants of the Lord were lost in their own world. No one intruded on what was so obviously a private conversation, but eyebrows were raised and heads nodded in their direction.

“So...today we tell everyone. Right?” He reached out to touch her hand—a tender gesture of intimacy, not lost on Charlotte or Roz who were unpacking more food a few feet away.

“I imagine most of them already have a pretty good idea what's going on,” Lee told him with a sweetly girlish laugh.

“Do you think they'll approve?”

“Doesn't matter if they do or if they don't,” Lee assured him. “I'll be seventy in a few weeks. That makes me fully capable of making up my own mind about my future. I have every confidence the Lord put us in this place, at this time, for exactly this reason. We've done all that he required for these people, so now we move forward. Together.”

“Amen!” Gabe, who had walked boldly into their space, leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “Well said darling.”

He reached out to touch David's face, as gently as David had touched Lee's hand, then the big man asked, simply, "Do either of you know where we're going next? Because you know wherever you two go, I'll be going too. Right?"

"Right! How could we leave our guardian angel behind?"