



W.R. NORMAN

STORM CHASER

A SUPERNATURAL THRILLER

ELYON VISIONWORKS, LLC

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First trade paperback published in the United States of America
by Elyon Visionworks, LLC.

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Book layout and typesetting: Anton Khodakovsky
Cover design: Anton Khodakovsky
www.bookcoversforall.com
Chicago skyline photo courtesy of Joe Marinaro

Application submitted for The Library of Congress catalogue number.

ISBN-13: 978-0-615-38205-0 (pbk.)
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and Bound in the United States of America.

“THE LORD IS A WARRIOR;
THE LORD IS HIS NAME.
THE PHARAOH’S CHARIOTS AND HIS
ARMY HE HAS CAST
INTO THE SEA;
AND THE CHOICEST OF HIS
OFFICERS ARE DROWNED
IN THE RED SEA.”

EXODUS 15:3,4

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FIRST BLOOD

//O H, JESUS! HELP! I'M BURNING!"

"What?"

"I'm on fire, Lenny! It hurts! God!!"

"Quit yer playin', Frank," Lenny hoarsely chuckled as he took another sip of rotgut whiskey and wrapped himself tighter in the newspapers he and Frank would use to keep warm in the trash-filled back alleys of Chicago's Magnificent Mile.

"Lenny, please," Frank coughed as he rolled out of the abandoned refrigerator box they called home and into a nearby puddle of muddy water. A smoldering emerald refer joint clung to his trembling lower lip despite his attempts to spit it out. The veins in Frank's neck bulged and pulsed violently. He began to wail and growl like a bobcat snared in a hunter's trap.

"Frank, you ok, buddy? What's the matter?" Lenny asked, his voice rising with the fear that began to overtake him.

"God!!" Frank screamed at the top of his lungs as the agony grew unbearable.

"This ain't funny, Frank," Lenny muttered as he inched closer to his friend. "What's the matter with you?"

Frank didn't answer. He curled himself up into a ball and grabbed

the sides of his head, writhing back and forth along the ground and howling like a madman.

That's when Lenny saw it.

Faint at first, but growing brighter by the second, a river of green liquid flames poured from Frank's mouth and spilled onto his quivering lips and chin.

"Water! Water!" Frank cried in a shrill, high-pitched voice that sounded more like a twelve year old girl than a gruff two hundred sixty pound Vietnam war veteran.

"Water! Water! Water!" Frank cried over and over again in his tormented mantra.

The emerald flames suddenly set his goatee on fire and caused the flesh on his chin to bubble and boil. His lips quickly dissolved into two fatty lumps of red and yellow flesh.

Lenny forced himself to swallow the vomit that crept up his throat. He desperately searched the alley for anything to help douse the flames, but finding only discarded whiskey bottles, Lenny bolted for the street.

"I'm going for help, Frank!" Lenny shouted. "Just hang on, buddy!"

At that moment a few blocks away, Lauryn Jefferson, a beautiful caramel-skinned woman in her late twenties with long woolly black hair that flowed down her back, was strolling hand in hand with her college sweetheart and soon-to-be husband, Will Harris, a rather imposing man of West Indian descent whose no-nonsense attitude, swaggered walk and permanent frown suggested that he was the type of guy who just couldn't sleep well at night if he hadn't beaten up at least one person during the day.

As they leisurely made their way down Michigan Avenue, enjoying the cool summer breeze blowing off the lake, Lauryn felt a peace she hadn't known for months.

Her final year at Northwestern's medical school had almost proved to be more stressful and demanding than she could handle.

But with graduation behind her and an internship at Mercy Hospital set to begin in the fall, Lauryn had finally arrived.

"Thank you for such a wonderful evening, Will," Lauryn said as she snuggled close to her man and pulled him in for a passionate kiss. Normally Lauryn wasn't big on public displays of affection, but the two glasses of Zinfandel she had on their dinner cruise of the lake still had her feeling a little tipsy.

It was their sixth year together and that night was their anniversary.

Caught off guard by Lauryn's amorous advance, Will managed to crack a smile and warm his icy facade. "Anything for you, sweet."

He loved Lauryn dearly. She could see right through his tough-guy act and touch his heart like no one ever could. As a private investigator for one of the city's top law firms, he regularly encountered the worst that human nature could conjure. The love and stability Lauryn provided helped Will endure a life filled with crooks, conmen and murderers.

But that was all about to change.

As Will gently ran his fingers through Lauryn's curly locks and leaned in for another kiss, Lenny exploded out of the alley and charged down the sidewalk, screaming and flailing his arms in the air.

"Help! Somebody help me!" Lenny hollered. Spotting Lauryn and Will, Lenny shuffled over to them, nearly collapsing at their feet.

"What's the matter?" Will asked as he placed himself as a protective wall between Lauryn and the deranged, teary-eyed stranger.

"Call the police!! The hospital!! Anybody!!" Lenny huffed as he gasped for air. The foul stench of cheap booze, stale sweat and urine hung in the air like a dank cloud. Lenny struggled to keep his balance.

"Frank," Lenny coughed, "My friend Frank is hurting! He's on fire! Green fire! Please help!"

"I'm a doctor," Lauryn burst forth, stepping in front of Will and taking Lenny by the hand. "Where's your friend now?"

"Down there," Lenny cried, "In the alley."

Lauryn pulled out her cellular phone and quickly dialed 911.

"I don't know," Will said with a wary edge in his voice as he suspiciously eyeballed Lenny. "Could be a setup."

"Will, please," Lauryn rebuked, "Look at him, he's shaking. Have a heart, for once."

"Probably the liquor," Will disgruntledly muttered under his breath. As far as he was concerned, this bum was high on God knows what and the few brain cells he had left were obviously playing tricks on him. But none of that would matter to Lauryn. Will knew full well that Lauryn was a sucker for a bleeding-heart hard luck story and that even as ridiculous as this vagrant's claim of green fire was, Lauryn just couldn't stop herself from getting involved. So Will just continued to scowl at Lenny and make sure he didn't try anything funny.

"Yes, hello!" Lauryn shouted into the phone. "There's a possible burn victim in the alley behind the Water Tower on Michigan. Send help right away!"

Lauryn slapped the cellular off and took Lenny by the hand.

"Come on! Take me to him!"

Lauryn and Lenny darted off into the darkened alley. Will shook his head and grudgingly followed after them.

"He's over this way!" Lenny proclaimed as he took Lauryn and Will to his dark, rat-filled corner of the world.

Suddenly, Lenny stopped dead in his tracks, as if struck by lightning. "Oh God, no," Lenny whispered as he dropped to his knees.

"Jesus Christ," Will muttered as he too caught a glimpse of what remained of Lenny's friend Frank.

Lauryn had to turn away. It was too gruesome. She suddenly felt her stomach twist a into tight queasy knot and what remained of her anniversary dinner spilled onto the shattered glass that covered the

alley's pavement. Despite all her training as an emergency room doctor, she had never seen anything quite so awful, so bloody.

Will instinctively reached for his gun. "It's as though someone turned him inside out," he remarked as he stared at Frank's charred and greasy remains.

His stomach and intestines hung from a nearby fire escape. His heart looked as though a bite had been taken out of it. Blood and melted body fat was everywhere; dripping from the walls, splattered across trash cans, forming coagulated pools on the ground. And the stench was almost unimaginable.

This must be what hell smells like, Lauryn thought as the acrid smell of sulfur and burned human flesh filled her nostrils and caused her eyes to tear.

"It's horrible," Lenny sobbed. "What could've done this?"

"You two stay put!" Will ordered. With his .45 caliber semiautomatic pistol cocked, Will quickly searched the alley for any signs of an attacker. After knocking over every trash can and searching every possible hiding spot, Will was satisfied they were alone. He slowly made his way back to the sight of the massacre.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?" Lauryn asked with a nervous tremor uncommon for her usually rock-solid demeanor.

"Once," Will replied in a solemn, almost ominous tone.

"During a ritual murder case I worked on a few years back in Louisiana. An old Creole farmer couldn't raise his crops. There had been no rain for several years. Figuring he was cursed by the spirits, the old man butchered and skinned his wife as a sacrifice then spread her body to the four corners of his land. But this... This is worse. A lot worse. This guy looks like he's been worked over by a blowtorch and run through a meat grinder. No one person could have done this. Not in the space of a few minutes," Will said as he wrapped his arms around Lauryn and hugged her tight. She was trembling.

"You shouldn't be here," Will said as he caught one of the tears

that fell from her eyes. "I want you to take the old man back to the street and wait for help to arrive. Ok?"

Lauryn nodded her head, thankful for the release. To Lauryn, the alley and the mangled body reminded her of a nightmare that haunted her as a child.

At the tender age of seven, Lauryn witnessed her neighbor and best friend Yuri, a chubby Polish boy with ruby red cheeks, get run over by a train.

It was a hot July afternoon. They were eating popsicles and playing a game of tag as they skipped along the tracks. Both had been warned over and over again not to play on the tracks, but children do what's fun.

They never heard the train coming. But for Lauryn chasing a butterfly off into the bushes, she would have met the same grisly fate as her friend Yuri.

By the time the train came to a stop, Lauryn's chubby friend was scattered along almost half a mile of track. The image of Yuri's head laying at her feet tormented her dreams for years to come. Seeing Frank's decapitated body strewn across the alley brought all the painful childhood memories flooding back into her mind like a raging maelstrom.

As Lauryn helped Lenny to his feet, Will knelt down alongside of Frank's corpse. His mangled body looked as though it was somehow deflated, like a rubber doll only half full of air.

"I got a bad feeling about all this," Will grumbled as he leaned in closer, inspecting the head which rested a few feet away.

"Be careful, Will," Lauryn cautioned. "We don't know what we're dealing with here."

"Lauryn, sweetheart, please," Will said with a brash cockiness in his voice. "I'm an experienced invest..."

But before Will could finish his proclamation, a light green mist spewed forth out of Frank's twisted mouth and into Will's nostrils.

"AHHHH!!!" Will shouted as the acidic mist rapidly engulfed his

head and traveled into his body. The ebony flesh on his face turned white and began to fall off the bone in bloody ribbons.

"Will!!!" Lauryn screamed out in horror.

"I'm getting the hell outta here!" Lenny hollered as he scrambled out of the alley.

Will fell to the ground unconscious and his eyes rolled back into his skull.

Somewhere high above the alley there was a deafening shriek. It sounded like a thousand hawks screaming out all at once.

Lauryn was in a state of utter panic. But that panic would turn to horror when she saw Will's body suddenly float into the air and hover a few feet above the ground. Will bobbed in the air like a magician's assistant during the levitation act, only there was no sly illusionist dressed in black conducting the show; at least none visible to the human eye.

"Oh my God..." Lauryn muttered, as her body shivered with the type of electric sensation one feels while dreaming about falling off the edge of a cliff. *This can't be happening. This can't be happening*, her mind screamed over and over again.

Suddenly, like some make-believe vampire attempting to spook people in a carnival haunted house, Will's blood-shot eyes popped open and he began a low-pitched wail. Boiling blood and intestine soon spilled from his mouth by the gallon.

"No... Will, baby... What's happening to you?" Lauryn sobbed, as she helplessly watched the man she loved slip into an abyss from which there appeared no return.

Slowly, almost like the Tin Man from the Wizard of Oz, Will's arms and legs began to move back and forth in a very mechanical fashion. He looked something like a child making snow angels on the ground, only Will was levitating.

As a member of the medical community, Lauryn had been exposed to just about every natural and unnatural phenomena one

could possibly fathom. Given enough time, Lauryn was confident she could find a way to explain how Will's body seemed to defy the laws of gravity. But when his eyes began to glow and two beams of emerald light shot forth into the sky, that was it. She cracked.

"Oh, God!" Lauryn exploded, half laughing, half crying. "This is a dream! This has got to be a dream!"

Now in the movies, take Superman for instance, the evil villains always shot red light from their eyes. No big deal. Any comic-reading teenage boy would tell you that much. But for Lauryn, a good Christian girl that was raised in a middle class suburb of Chicago, this was far too much for her "scientific" mind to deal with.

Her father, a Baptist minister, would later tell her that the *devil* had gotten hold of her fiancé. That somehow, Will had been possessed. But Lauryn didn't care about any of that. Every ounce of her being simply longed to take Will into her arms and hug him tight like she always did when things got rough. She wanted to hear him say that everything was gonna be all right. But things would never be all right, ever. And deep down in a place she seldom visited, Lauryn could feel part of herself dying with each passing moment.

Remembering the many sermons her father gave on demon possession, Lauryn summoned all her courage and did the only thing she could think to do.

"Satan! In the Name of Jesus! Come out!!" Lauryn proclaimed.

But Will kept on floating, waving his arms and illuminating the night sky with the turquoise green light spewing from his eyes.

"In Jesus' Name!! Damn you!!" she shouted as she placed her hands onto Will's chest and attempted in vain to push him back onto the ground.

"Dammit!!" Lauryn yelled out in pain as she quickly ripped her hands off Will's searing-hot body. Lauryn winced and groaned as she stared at her crimson palms. Blisters began to form immediately. There was no time to worry about that, though. Because the next instant, Will's entire body burst into flames - green flames,

shooting high into the clouds, arcing like an emerald rainbow and disappearing over the roofs of nearby skyscrapers.

Without warning, Will suddenly stopped making snow angels in the air. He flipped upright and floated with his arms outstretched in a position that looked remarkably similar to that of a man hanging from a cross. *Satanic blasphemy* is what Lauryn's father would later say.

Over the next few months, as the *emerald plague* spread throughout the country, every dime-store New Age crackpot with a medical degree would come up with a new way of describing the strange phenomenon that had struck Will. Some of the most popular being:

Trans-substantial Essence Liberation, Metaphysical Re-Polarization, Evolutionary Astral Identification and Human-Solar Copulation.

The State-sponsored false prophets of the New World Order would eventually refer to it as *The Rapture*. But, that wouldn't be until after Christianity was outlawed.

In the present struggle, however, the guttural, almost ghoulish, sounds that spilled out of Will's mouth, would haunt Lauryn for the remainder of her days.

"Kraaaaal!!! Ahhhhh!!! Sheeee!!! Noooo!!! Kaaaas!!!" Will thundered with an inhuman voice louder than the shout of a hundred men.

All the blood rushed from Lauryn's face. She slumped to the grimy alley floor; partly out of fear, but mainly because the power of the words sucked the strength right out of her legs. She couldn't stand up even if she wanted to.

"Help me!! Somebody!! Anybody!!" Lauryn cried out into the deserted alley as the tears fell from her beautiful brown eyes.

"Will!!" she groaned, as she clasped her hands in prayer and hugged them tight to her chest. "Will!! If you can hear me, please..."

"Kraaaaal!!! Ahhhhh!!! Sheeee!!! Noooo!!! Kaaaas!!!" Will thundered again. His voice rattled and quaked nearby trash cans.

"Please, Will...", Lauryn pleaded.

"Will is mine now!!! I am Will's!!! I am ALL!!!" Will bellowed.

Lauryn was in a state of shock. Terror and agony filled her heart. The man she loved beyond measure had become a monster. Nothing in life could have prepared her to deal with such an ordeal. All Lauryn had was her instincts. The urge to survive.

As much as she hated to leave her man, Lauryn did her damndest to get away. But she just couldn't run. No matter how hard she tried, her legs had no life. They felt as though they each weighed a ton. She couldn't walk. She couldn't even crawl. She was stuck.

It wasn't fear that kept her pinned to the ground. It was a *force*. An evil force which rested upon her like a wet, mildewed blanket.

However, when Will spoke again, the terror Lauryn felt seemed to melt away. She no longer felt afraid, she felt nasty. Dirty.

"Puuuul..." Will uttered, this time in a gurgling, almost sexual, tone.

"Puuuul... Aaaaan..." Will murmured, as he stroked his bloody teeth with the charred and swollen lump that was his tongue.

Lauryn felt a warm tingling sensation pulsating in her abdomen and pelvis.

"Puuuul... Aaaaan... Raaaah..." Will groaned on. The words dripped from his gnarled mouth like honey.

Lauryn closed her eyes. And despite her best efforts, she felt herself becoming aroused. Images of the nights of passion that she and Will had spent together raced through her mind like an adult movie.

As far as Lauryn was concerned, she and Will had always made love. She believed that what they had was special, more than just a physical connection, a soul tie. But what Lauryn felt then was different, weird. The dark and perverse thoughts running through her mind made her feel ashamed.

This is crazy, Lauryn thought as her hips unconsciously rocked back and forth.

"How can this be happening?" Lauryn moaned out loud, not realizing that Will no longer floated in front of her, but had drifted behind her.

"Draaaal..." Will moaned as he wrapped his powerful arms around Lauryn's body.

"Nooo..." Lauryn protested as Will's searing body pressed up against her and enveloped her body in a dull green light.

As the emerald light grew brighter and brighter, Lauryn screamed out. Not from pain, but pleasure.

"What're you doing to me?" Lauryn growled.

Will ignored Lauryn's plea and as he squeezed her tighter, he began to roar like a lion. Actually, it would be a mistake to say Will roared *like* a lion. He roared because he *was* a lion.

Will's human skin had spilt apart and laid nearby on the ground smoldering like a greasy, bloody, wetsuit that some interspecies shape-shifter thoughtlessly discarded in favor of a new body.

Fortunately for Lauryn, the sulfuric stench from Will's charred body was absolutely horrible. The putrid clouds of gray smoke rising from his body filled her nostrils, causing her to awaken out of Will's spell.

Lauryn nearly fainted when she opened her eyes and realized that she was being held in the claws of a mighty, five hundred pound African lion. But Will, or rather, the Beast, held Lauryn firmly in his grasp. He roared so loud that department store windows several stories above them began to shatter and fall to the alley below.

"Lord God," Lauryn prayed earnestly, "I'm sorry for all I've done. Please God... Please don't let me die. Please, Jesus. Save me."

The Beast rose up onto its hind legs and bared its nine inch fangs.

Lauryn covered her eyes and prepared to die. But since her eyes were closed she never saw what happened next.

What she felt was a gust of ice-cold air rushing over her body. What she heard was the sharp crackle of lightning, the blare of a trumpet and what sounded like two swords clashing together.

When Lauryn opened her eyes, she saw Will, completely human, lying on the ground. He was sleeping and appeared to be in perfect health.

Some rustling behind a nearby trash can caused Lauryn to spin around. She gasped as she beheld a winged man, jet black and rippling with muscles, who stood at least twelve feet tall. He carried the corpse of a lion in one hand and a massive sword of fire in the other.

The Stranger turned to Lauryn, his shoulder-length dreadlocks blowing in the wind, and said in a voice more loving and powerful than any she'd ever heard, "Be thankful your father Maxwell was praying for you. This battle was just the beginning. Prepare yourself."

And with that, the Stranger disappeared in a flash of light.

Lauryn could hardly believe her eyes. She was utterly overwhelmed. Thankfully, however, she could hear the police and ambulance sirens racing towards her.

Run, she heard a voice whisper in her mind. Run away.

Lauryn looked at Will sleeping on the ground but she no longer saw the man she loved. She saw the Beast. And that scared Lauryn more than anything else she witnessed that evening. Will, her soul mate, was now the enemy. He wasn't the loving man who stood by her through thick and thin. No, he was the Beast. When Lauryn starred at Will's face, all she saw was the monster that tried to rape and kill her scant moments before.

Run, Lauryn! Run away! He'll get you!, the demons that invaded her mind shouted. Run for your life!! Will is one of us now!!

After taking one last look at the man whose children she had hoped to bear, Lauryn ran. Ran away from the carnage and death in the alley. Ran away from the life she had known and loved. She ran right into the trap that the devil's henchmen had so carefully laid for her. And though Lauryn couldn't yet see the spiritual side of the battle in which she was ensnared, she would never be alone.

The Lord Himself would make sure of that.

"Someone stop her!" Akarra shouted to the warrior angels under his command.

Akarra was a mighty Captain of the Lord's angelic army. He had been summoned from his post in Jerusalem specifically to protect and guard Lauryn from demonic attack. Intelligence reports had indicated that a strike against Lauryn would likely occur that evening, so Akarra placed a regiment of his best fighters on guard duty to shield her from any potential harm the Dark Side might have tried to inflict.

One warrior angel could easily handle five regular army demons, so Akarra felt confident that Lauryn was sufficiently covered. He had no idea that the demonic strongman and ruler of the Chicago Principality, His Terrible Majesty Zariel, intended a full scale onslaught. He and his angelic troops were outnumbered a hundred to one. If he hadn't crossed the *Barrier* and entered Earth's realm to do battle, Lauryn would've surely lost her life. Akarra's new battle was to keep her from losing her mind.

He knew all too well the awesome impact that actual contact between spirit beings and a human could produce. Many a prophet had gone mad from less traumatic experiences than the one Lauryn had just experienced. And to make matters worse, an entire legion of *Fear* demons had slithered down from Zariel's mountainous crystal castle, which floated high above the city, and sought to force themselves into Lauryn's mind.

For those unfamiliar with Fear demons, they differed greatly from regular army demons. While soldier demons had a human-like appearance and wings for inter-dimensional and interstellar travel, Fear demons looked like slimy blood-sucking leeches. They fed on panic and horror. Their mission was to blind their target with uncontrollable terror and doubt. They worked closely with *Depression*, *Apostasy*, and *Suicide*. A Fear demon, though no larger than a thimble, was a mighty foe because he never worked alone. He

always traveled in legions. And when he attacked, he attacked by the thousands.

Lauryn was under a massive attack from Fear. She was covered from head to toe by a pulsating black mass of spirit leeches, each sucking the strength and faith right out of her.

“Run Lauryn!” the Chief of Fear whispered into Lauryn’s ear. “Run for dear life! God can’t protect you forever! The Beast will return and devour you! Run!”

“Help!!” Lauryn shouted as she ran through the alley, stumbling and falling repeatedly. The tears in her eyes were blinding. Her mind was on fire. *Will tried to kill you! You have no one! You are completely alone! Alone! Alone!! ALONE!!!*

Akarra knew that if he and his forces couldn’t remove the legion of Fear that clung to Lauryn, she wouldn’t last much longer.

“Riki!! Get those things off her and patch me a line!!” Akarra shouted to his lieutenant.

Riki was a fierce female warrior from the Kenya Province. Heeding Akarra’s command, she withdrew a long golden trumpet from inside her vest and blared a note so loud that Fear’s words to Lauryn were drowned out.

Without Fear’s taunts and torments in her mind, Lauryn stopped running and slumped up against the rear wall of the Saks Fifth Avenue store and began to weep bitterly. So long as Riki blew her trumpet, Lauryn could rest her mind and Fear couldn’t attack her. The more Lauryn ignored Fear, the weaker it became. So it was imperative for them to re-establish contact with her and generate the panic they needed for survival.

A large guardian angel named Jediah, whose appearance resembled that of a grizzly bear, suddenly appeared on the scene dragging a massive net that shimmered and crackled like lightning.

“Jediah!” Akarra hollered as he sliced two leprosy covered *Death* spirits in half with his massive sword of fire, sending them screaming

into the Abyss to await the Day of Judgment. “Didn’t think you were going to make it in!”

“What?! And miss all the fun?!” Jediah roared. “Never!”

“Riki’s got the Fear stunned, but she can’t hold on forever!” Akarra shouted as he started ripping the leeches off of Lauryn with his bare hands.

“Stand back, boss!” Jediah growled. “I’ll take it from here!”

Akarra grabbed his sword and returned to fighting the hundreds of Death spirits that continued to pour out from Zariel’s castle in the clouds. Several of his angels were badly wounded. The Death spirits were infecting his troops and causing their bodies to decay.

If the backup troops Akarra requested didn’t arrive soon, there’d be no angels left to fight or protect Lauryn.

Jediah leapt down from the sky and pounced right on top of Lauryn and her blanket of living terror. The tiny Fear demons scattered across the ground like a mass of slimy buckshot. Using his net, Jediah gathered all of the demons in one swoop and slung them over his shoulder. Riki, on the verge of collapse, stopped sounding her trumpet.

“You know, Riki,” Jediah said with a sly grin, “Fear extermination is my specialty.”

“Do tell,” Riki huffed in her thick North African accent.

“Watch this,” Jediah said as he gathered the sparkling net into his gigantic paws.

“Please!!” a thousand Fear spirits screamed out at once. “Have mercy! Please!”

Jediah shook his head and tossed the net high into the air where it exploded in a ball of white-hot fire.

The Fear spirits were no more.

“Impressive,” Riki chuckled as she pulled out a ten foot long sickle and flamed it to life. “Ready to give the boss a hand?”

“After you, my lady,” Jediah said as he followed Riki into the sky to join Akarra and the other warriors.

Jediah loved to fight. He could've been a captain like Akarra, but he preferred the dirty work. There was nothing Jediah enjoyed more than sinking his claws into the chest of demon soldiers and sending them to the Abyss where they belonged. In the few minutes that followed, Jediah single-handedly wiped out a third of the enemy forces, allowing Akarra to leave the front lines and tend to Lauryn personally.

"God..." Lauryn sobbed. She heard the police cars and ambulances screeching to a halt less than fifty yards away, but she was in such a state of shock that she couldn't summon the strength to call out to them. "Why me? Why me?" Lauryn mumbled over and over again as she laid slumped over in the shadowy back entrance of Saks.

Akarra landed right beside her and put away his fiery weapon. He knelt his twelve foot frame down and sat beside Lauryn, studying her. It puzzled Akarra as to why of all the powerful spirit warriors and prophets the Lord had stationed throughout the world, He would select this meek and spiritually immature young lady to be the *one*. She was no soldier, no leader. She was just an average, ordinary woman. Nothing remarkable about her so far as Akarra could see, except perhaps for her beauty. But in the spirit realm, looks alone just won't cut it. Maybe on Earth, but not in the spirit.

"You should've let me die," Lauryn mumbled under her breath.

This remark caught Akarra off guard. *She can't see me, can she?* Akarra wondered to himself.

"It would have been better for me to die," Lauryn continued.

"Wait a minute," Akarra said as he jumped to his feet. "This isn't Lauryn talking."

Sure enough, when Akarra leaned around to Lauryn's other side, he saw the culprit. Perched on Lauryn's shoulder was a fist-sized gray sewer rat that held a large cockroach in his mouth. The rat was a *Suicide* spirit and the roach was a *Blasphemy* spirit. It was the cockroach that did all the talking.

"God is a liar," the roach sang sweetly into Lauryn's ear. "If He truly loved you, He wouldn't have let this happen to you."

"God, how could you let this happen to me?" Lauryn sobbed. "Don't You love me?"

"You must have done something truly awful to make Him hate you so much," the cockroach said with a chuckle.

"What did I do? What did I do?" Lauryn cried as she buried her head in her hands.

Akarra had heard enough. Just the sight of Blasphemy and Suicide made him sick with rage. But to have them torment a person under his charge was just too much.

"Leave her!" Akarra thundered.

"No!" the cockroach chuckled. "We have a right to be here. Her words invited us and she has to be the one to tell us to go. Not you!"

Akarra grabbed the rat and roach in his mighty hand and prepared to crush them into oblivion.

"A Captain of the Host violating the Law? Ha! Father Lucifer will be more than happy to report your misconduct at the next Assembly On High. You know the rules," the roach said with brazen authority in his voice. "We stay until she tells us to go."

Akarra had no choice but to set them back onto Lauryn's shoulder. Rules were rules. If a human invited a spirit into their life, whether by words or deeds, that spirit had a legal right to remain with that person until such time as they decided to become free.

"Lauryn, listen to me," Akarra said as he knelt alongside of Lauryn, speaking into her other ear. "God loves you. He died for you. He's the one who saved you tonight. You're not alone. Life is not over. Just trust God. Ask Jesus for help, Lauryn. Say His Name. Just once. Say it. Say the Name of Jesus and be free."

"No fair!" the blasphemous roach hissed. Suddenly, the rat whipped his lengthy tail around Lauryn's neck and shoved it into the ear in which Akarra was whispering.

Seeing that he could no longer speak to Lauryn, Akarra moved in front of her and placed his hand on her heart.

“Remember when you accepted our Lord as Savior, Lauryn?” Akarra gently spoke. “Remember that Sunday morning twenty three years ago when you asked Him into your heart at your father’s church. Do you remember?”

Lauryn slowly raised her head and stared out into the blackness of the alley. She sniffled and began to wipe the tears from her eyes. Images of her father, handsome and strong, leading her before the congregation and kneeling with her at the altar, began to run through her mind. *What a strange time to be thinking of this.* Lauryn thought to herself.

“Remember,” Akarra softly said, as he kept his hand on Lauryn’s heart.

Lauryn recalled wearing a pink flowered dress. Her hair was in pigtails.

“Are you ready?” her father asked.

“Yes, daddy,” she replied.

“Good girl,” he said as he placed his arm around her tiny shoulders. “Repeat after me: Dear Lord Heavenly Father,” “Dear Lord Heav... Heavenly Father,” Lauryn said a little nervously.

“I thank You for sending Your Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for my sins,” the Reverend prayed.

“I thank You for sending Your Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for my sins,” Lauryn repeated.

“And I, this day, ask Jesus into my heart and accept Him as my Lord and Savior,” her father continued.

“And I, this day, ask Jesus into my heart and accept Him as my Lord and Savior,” Lauryn said with a smile that stretched from ear to ear.

“Forever and ever. Amen,” the Reverend concluded.

“Forever and ever. Amen,” Lauryn joyfully proclaimed.

“Always remember this, Princess,” her father said. “From now on, you are the Lord’s daughter. He will never leave you or fail you. In times of trouble, just speak His Name and He’ll be there.”

“Ok, daddy,” she said as she gave her father a big hug.

That Sunday morning was one of her happiest childhood memories. Why it popped into her head at a time like this puzzled and yet also comforted Lauryn.

Akarra leaned in close to Lauryn and said, “Just speak His Name, Lauryn, and all the pain will disappear. I promise.”

“Oh...” Lauryn sighed as she cast her weary eyes towards heaven. “Jesus, if You can still hear me, please help me. I need You.”

That was all Akarra needed to hear. He jumped to his feet and snatched the blasphemous roach and suicidal rat off of Lauryn’s shoulder.

“NOOOO!!!!” the roach cried. “You cheated! You cheated!”

“I never cheat!” Akarra snarled. “I live by the Law. And now you die by the Law.”

And with that, Akarra slammed the roach and rat onto the pavement and crushed them with the heel of his mighty steel boot, sending them to the Abyss in a cloud of putrid sulfuric smoke.

“I’m so proud of you,” Akarra whispered to Lauryn. “The Lord is with you always.” And with that, Lauryn suddenly found herself at peace. She wasn’t all alone. Maybe things could be all right, after all. She felt the strength returning to her legs. As she rose and headed towards the flashing lights and blaring sirens, she found herself humming one of her favorite Sunday School hymns about how things always worked out for the good of those who loved the Lord.

Akarra followed close behind, joined by Riki and Jediah. When the angelic reinforcements arrived, Zariel quickly withdrew his forces and the battle ended. As the three warriors watched over their latest charge, Jediah spoke what they were all thinking.

"They'll be coming back for her, you know."

"Yeah," Akarra said somberly as he stroked his goatee. "But next time we'll be ready. I promise you that."

The first officer to respond to Lauryn's 911 call for help was Detective Roger Tannenbaum, a balding ox of a man with foul breath and an even fouler disposition. Tannenbaum had a reputation on the force for finding answers to the questions no one wanted to ask. He also had a reputation for dabbling in the dark arts and using rather unorthodox methods for discovering clues in a case. It was no accident that he was the first officer to arrive at the scene of Frank's gruesome murder and Lauryn's near-death ordeal.

"What the hell?" Tannenbaum grumbled to himself as he surveyed the blood-covered alley and Frank's mangled corpse. "God-damned slaughterhouse," Tannenbaum muttered as he spit a large wad of his favorite wintermint Skoal chewing tobacco onto the alley pavement and casually tapped the mass of gray intestines hanging from the fire escape with the muzzle of his revolver. Frank's innards slipped from the rail and landed on the ground with a sickening thud similar to slapping a wet mop onto linoleum tile.

"Disgusting," Tannenbaum said as he packed another wad of chew between his cheek and gums.

As an ambulance and two squad cars arrived on the scene, Tannenbaum noticed something sparkling on the ground. He knelt down and retrieved the object.

"Gold chain," Tannenbaum remarked to himself. Upon further inspection he saw that the clasp on the chain was broken, but a golden "W" charm still hung from the necklace. Tannenbaum held the chain in both hands and closed his eyes. He picked up several strange *vibrations* emanating from the piece of jewelry.

"Odd," Tannenbaum said as he furrowed his brow and stared around the alley as though he sensed something - something *evil*. True, there was something inherently evil about a man ripped to

pieces and burned beyond recognition. But Tannenbaum was used to the sight of blood. What made the hair bristle on the back of his neck was something else, something he couldn't yet explain. His intuition told him to hold onto the chain. *You'll need it later*, he heard a voice in his head say. Hazy images of a lion and a tall winged man crept into his mind like a slow fog rolling inland from the sea.

Tannenbaum pocketed the necklace and turned to meet the two paramedics who rushed over to the body.

"Jesus Christ!!" the young Irish medic exclaimed with a look of utter horror and revulsion as he beheld the smoldering clump of flesh that was Frank's body. "I think I'm going to be sick," he said as he dropped his first aid pack to the ground and puked his guts out.

"Take it easy, son," Tannenbaum said gruffly as he took a sip of whiskey from the sterling silver flask he carried with him at all times. "Here," he said to the young man, "Have a drink. There's nothing you can do here."

Tannenbaum passed the flask to the young medic whose trembling hands eagerly groped for the pain killer.

"Whoa! Slow down, boy," Tannenbaum hoarsely chuckled. "Don't go making yourself sick all over again."

The paramedic slowly lowered the bottle from his lips and handed the whiskey back to Tannenbaum. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Tannenbaum said as he helped himself to another shot. "Ahhh, Jack Daniel's... The best friend the lonely and the damned will ever know."

"Were there any other bodies?" the older paramedic asked.

"Not as far as I can tell," Tannenbaum replied. "Listen, we're dealing with something very, very strange here. I want you to call in the Haz-Mat team and have hospitals prep themselves for a possible large-scale emergency radiation treatment scenario. If what I think happened has happened, then we've got a pretty nasty situation on our hands."

"What do you think happened?" The young Irish medic anxiously inquired.

"Don't worry about that, son," Tannenbaum replied. "Just do as I said, all right?"

"Yes, sir," the young man said as he and his partner darted back to the ambulance and called in the Hazardous Materials Team, used whenever there were deadly chemical or biological substances, or as Tannenbaum suspected, radiation contamination.

Officer Rodriguez, a mild mannered middle aged family man and devout Roman Catholic approached Tannenbaum.

"What's the story detective?" Rodriguez inquired, coughing slightly from the sulfuric stench that lingered in the air.

"One very dead African-American male vagrant, approximately fifty five years of age. Decapitated, eviscerated, dismembered, gutted and torched."

Tannenbaum used the tip of his shoe to roll Frank's head upright. "Notice the green flakes and crystals around the edges of the lips and chin."

"Yeah, I see," Rodriguez replied. "Let me get a closer look."

Rodriguez started to kneel down, but Tannenbaum grabbed him firmly by the arm. "I wouldn't if I were you."

"Why not?"

"We don't know what we're dealing with here. Could be contagious," Tannenbaum said, as he eased his grip on Rodriguez.

"We're dealing with a homicide here, detective," Rodriguez said as he stepped around Frank's dismembered body parts. "There's not a virus in the world that could tear a man apart like this. No. We're looking at the work of sick psychopath."

"Look at the intestines. Look at the chest cavity. Notice the point of decapitation on both the neck and shoulders," Tannenbaum stated, "All the edges are ragged and torn, like what you would see in a dog bite case. No weapon was used. Further, all of the wounds are cauterized and show traces of the same green flakes and crystals."

"Check out the yellow splotches in the chest cavity," Rodriguez said.

"My guess is sulfur," Tannenbaum replied.

"That would explain the smell," Rodriguez commented.

"Yeah," Tannenbaum said as he turned to Rodriguez and placed his hand on his shoulder. "Listen, we're dealing with something extremely unusual here. Not your run of the mill homicide or psycho serial killer. This is something *else*."

"You know something," Rodriguez said suspiciously.

"On the ride over, did you hear the report of a strange green light arcing over the rooftops in this vicinity?" Tannenbaum asked.

"Yeah, I heard it," Rodriguez replied. "Dispatch reported receiving close to fifty calls. Didn't think much of it though. July fourth is coming up soon. It was probably just some folks setting off early fireworks."

Tannenbaum shook his head.

"You think that light had something to do with this guy's death?" Rodriguez chuckled, "Been watching too many episodes of the X-Files, detective. Next thing you'll be telling me is that some space-man came down from the sky and killed this guy for body parts."

Tannenbaum said nothing. It was pointless to try to explain the paranormal to those who needed a simple and convenient answer to everything. "Request a homicide team down here and have your men seal off the entire area. I want the name of every bum, wino and crack-head who sleeps in this hell hole and I want the names of any witnesses to this murder as well as the name of the individual who phoned in the 911 call."

"Anything else?" Rodriguez said smugly.

"Yeah," Tannenbaum replied with an equally smug tone. "Get me Luke Richards from the FBI in DC and Margaret O'Keefe at the Foundation For Advanced Human Potential in San Francisco. Have all the local hospitals send any reports of radiation poisoning to my office immediately. And for God's sake, keep this whole thing quiet."

The last thing we need is the press getting their grubby little hands on this and creating a panic.”

“Why don’t I just call the President while I’m at it?” Rodriguez groaned.

“Just do your job, officer,” Tannenbaum snapped. “Now do you remember everything I said?”

“Yeah, I got it,” Rodriguez grumbled as he headed back to his squad car.

Tannenbaum removed the gold chain from his pocket and held it tightly, hoping to gain more insight. He stared into Frank’s glossy and bloodshot eyes. *What did you see?* Tannenbaum thought to himself. *Who did you see?*

As Tannenbaum silenced the thoughts in his mind, he heard an answer.

Amun.

Will had managed to flee the alley before Tannenbaum and the paramedics arrived. When he awoke he couldn’t remember anything that happened to him, but the sight of himself covered in blood, laying next to a butchered wino was enough to let Will know that he had to get the hell out of there, and more importantly, he had to find Lauryn. The thought that she might have met with the same fate as the dead street walker turned Will’s heart ice cold and boiling hot at the same time.

He loved Lauryn more than life itself and always swore that he would die before he saw even one hair on her beautiful head harmed. Will fancied himself a man of honor, but all he could feel when he thought of how he let Lauryn face death alone was shame.

So much blood. What happened to me? Where is she? Will’s tormented mind anguished over and over again as he stumbled through the dark alleyways in search of his love. *Think, dammit! Think! Remember!* But no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t recall the last fifteen minutes of his life. He remembered meeting a crazy

man on the street. He remembered following Lauryn and the crazy man down into the shadowy alley. But from that point on, nothing.

Will’s head ached with the pain of ten migraines. He felt as though his skull would literally split wide open. It was the worst pain he had ever endured. His body quaked and shivered from icy electric shock waves that shot from the top of his head to the tips of his feet. Tears unwittingly fell from his eyes. Yet the pain his body felt was nothing compared to the sheer terror he felt at the thought of having lost the only woman he ever truly loved.

As Will rounded a corner and met with a dead end, he thought he would break down and die.

“LAURYN!!!” he screamed out at the top of his lungs. “LAURYN!!!” Will yelled again, this time becoming dizzy and falling into several bags of used coffee grinds stacked behind the rear entrance of a Starbucks Cafe.

Will struggled to free himself from the mildew covered beans but the dizziness was so bad he couldn’t stand up for more than a few seconds at a time before plummeting back down onto the cold, unforgiving concrete.

Will was paralyzed from the pain and the guilt. He couldn’t move no matter how hard he tried. All he could do was lie in the heap of coffeehouse filth.

Now, Will was not a man accustomed to prayer. He had never seen much use in it. Anything Will needed, Will provided. It wasn’t God who watched his back, it was his own skill and cunning. God didn’t save the world from the bad guys, he did.

Will preferred to live by the gun rather than the Word. And up until that evening, Will’s formula had always met with success. But now, Will was scared; not for himself, but for Lauryn.

Will could fathom and even accept his own demise, albeit not without having tried to raise hell to the very gates of heaven in order to prevent it. But the crushing and humiliating realization that he had been powerless to save his beloved, his future wife was far too

much for a man like Will to bear. He would reach out to God, if for no other reason than to save the one thing he held precious in life.

After several minutes of lying perfectly still in the moldy trash heap, the dizziness began to subside and Will's mind could function once more.

"God, please," Will forced himself to beg. "Please let Lauryn be all right. I know I ain't ever called on You before, so I understand if You won't hear me. But please... Lauryn, she's a good woman. She loves You. For her... not me... let my baby be all right. I promise I'll do right by You from now on, but please, just let her be all right. Please. She's all I got in this world."

And so, Will remained in the filth, unable to do anything other than stare up at the blackness of the night sky and think about what brought him to such a sad state. As time passed, old ghosts from his past began to float in and out of his mind. All the crimes he had committed in the name of justice. All the lies. All the killing.

Will had never regretted any of the things he had done in his life. As far as he was concerned, you had better get the next man before he gets you. Kill or be killed. It was the law of the jungle. Especially the inner-city jungles of Chicago.

This is payback, Will thought to himself. *What goes around comes around.*

Will was certain his time had come. He never discussed the details of his job with Lauryn, and she never asked. Will told her that he was a private investigator for a big-time law firm there in town. Lauryn just assumed that meant that Will simply did what the P.I.'s in the movies did; stake out the bad guys, take a few photos, maybe get into a car chase every now and then, but nothing too heavy, certainly not murder.

Will was indeed a private investigator, but the type of investigator who if unable to find a scandal, was paid to make one. And if that meant paying prostitutes to sleep with wealthy executives and

capture it all on tape, so be it. Extortion was one of the tools of the trade. If the job called for some lowlife wife-beater to meet with an unexpected car crash or accidental fall from the roof of an apartment building, Will didn't mind being the man for the job. It was all business as far as he was concerned. Strictly business.

Will lived by a simple code: Nobody died unless they had it coming. Perhaps if Will had only known how close he came to the gates of death and hell mere moments before, his code might have changed somewhat. But then again, maybe not. Will was the type of guy who prided himself on walkin' it like he talked it. Death was just another part of life. And if the Grumpy Old Man Upstairs decided to pull his card, well then, so be it. No tears. No apologies.

But lying helpless in a pile of garbage did something to Will. It humbled him. It put a dent in that massive, ungodly monster of an ego that he sported ever so proudly.

The wisdom of old held that every warrior prayed for a good death. The ancient Samurai, for example, elevated it to an art form. Will had always assumed that if he did someday bite the Big One, he'd go out with guns flaming and fists-a-flyin'.

Will's whole life's philosophy was that it was better to go out in a blaze than to just fade away. A disgraceful death in a heap of trash was just not how Will had envisioned his exit from the stage of life. As he pondered his situation, a strange new sensation washed over him. The bittersweet release of self-pity began to intoxicate his once unflappable sense of invulnerability. For perhaps the first time in his life, Will began to feel sorry for himself.

It's all your fault, you know? Will thought to himself as he struggled to find a comfortable lump of filth upon which to rest his head. *You've had it comin' for a long, long time, brother. Too bad you had to go an' drag poor Lauryn down the tubes with you. You're pathetic.*

"Shut up," Will coughed, not exactly sure who he was talking to. "Just shut up."

What Will didn't know, and couldn't know, was that a gigantic demon in the form of an octopus named *Guilt*, with slime-covered tentacles stretching some twenty feet in length and suckers the size of a phonograph record, had floated down from Zariel's castle in the sky and was squeezing the very life out of him.

"What kind of man allows harm to come to his woman?" the octopus gurgled with sheer delight. "I'll tell you what kind. A punk! A sissy! Is that what you are, Will? Or are you just a coward?"

"I ain't no coward," Will mumbled to himself.

"Well, you gotta be something," Guilt chuckled as he tightened his grip. "A real man would never let anything come between himself and his woman. You should be ashamed of yourself! ASHAMED! ASHAMED! ASHAMED!"

Guilt spirits were arguably some of the strongest spirits that Satan had in his army. Their only weakness was that they often tended to run their mouths so loud and for so long that they often gave themselves away and instead of causing their victims to seek the comfort of drugs, alcohol or suicide, their heavy-handed tactics actually had been known to cause their targets to seek God and repent of their wicked ways. And once Guilt was detected, it had to flee at the first sign of genuine repentance. But because of Will's bull-headed nature, repentance was the furthest thought from his mind. Guilt knew that full well, so he felt perfectly at ease to berate Will at the top of his lungs. What Guilt didn't know was that the trio of angelic warriors, Akarra, Riki and Jediah, were escorting Lauryn to the police, merely half a block away.

As Akarra hovered close behind Lauryn, he spotted detective Tannenbaum a few yards ahead with his back turned to them. Akarra noticed something strange wrapped around Tannenbaum's head. As he focused his eyes tighter he saw that it was a golden snake.

"Sorcery," Akarra mumbled to himself.

"I don't like the looks of this, boss," Jediah snarled.

"Me either," Akarra agreed. "Lauryn," he whispered into her ear, "Listen carefully. Something's not right up ahead. Be suspicious. Turn around and go back the other way. Contact the police from a safe location."

Lauryn suddenly found herself no longer humming her favorite gospel hymn. She felt uneasy. A chill ran up her spine. *Something's not right here*, Lauryn thought to herself. *Better get to a safer location. Someplace public.* And with that, Lauryn turned around and headed towards the street.

As they were walking, Jediah though he heard something.

"You hear that?" Jediah asked Akarra.

"Hear what?"

"Listen," Jediah said in a whisper. In his manifestation as a grizzly bear, Jediah had a superior sense of hearing.

"Yeah," Akarra whispered. "I hear it."

"Sounds like Guilt to me," Jediah said.

"Yep," Akarra agreed. "Nothing but a lot of hot air. If those guys knew how to whisper they might actually be dangerous."

"Say boss, let me get a little piece of 'em," Jediah said. "For old times sake."

"Check it out and bring me a report," Akarra instructed. "But don't go starting a fight. We've had enough warfare for one evening."

"But..." Jediah moaned.

"No buts," Akarra said firmly. "Just bring me the report."

"Yes, sir," Jediah growled as he trotted off to find out what all the ruckus was about.

Meanwhile, Will was still stuck in his trash pile, feeling ever more sorry and ashamed of himself.

"Look at you!" the octopus of guilt proclaimed loudly. "You're nothing! Less than nothing!"

Will shut his eyes and didn't even try to fight back the tears. The thought of Lauryn's death haunted him beyond measure. But sud-

denly, all of the pain and guilt began to dissolve away. The river of tears began to dry. Will took a deep breath and for some strange reason felt like a new man. Even his head began to feel better. Of course, he had not even the slightest of a clue as to why.

"Boss, now don't be angry or anything," Jediah said as he dropped the dead octopus carcass at Akarra's feet. "I tried to do like you said, but the guy made a move. What could I do?"

Akarra simply sighed and shook his head. "What's done is done. Who was the target?"

"Will," Jediah replied.

"Wonderful," Akarra groaned. He didn't particularly care for Will or his influence over Lauryn. He worried whether she could endure his presence, especially after the traumatic incident in the alley. "Take me to him."

Jediah started off in Will's direction.

Akarra placed his hand on Lauryn's shoulder and nudged her slightly to the left. "Down here looks good, Lauryn," he whispered.

When Lauryn first caught sight of Will, she didn't know whether to rush to his side or run away. The love in her heart told her to stay. The fear in her mind told her to run. She decided to follow her heart.

"Will!" she exclaimed as she raced towards him. "Are you ok?!"

The mere sound of Lauryn's voice gave Will the strength to rise out of his trash-filled grave. When he saw his beloved, alive, Will almost thought he was dreaming.

"I thought you were dead," Will sighed as he fell into Lauryn's awaiting arms.

"Not quite," Lauryn said with the smile of a war-torn soldier returning home.

Will took a step back from Lauryn and looked her up and down from head to toe. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"I'll make it," Lauryn replied.

"When I saw the guy in the alley..." Will managed.

"I know," Lauryn said with a sigh.

"You don't know the thoughts that ran through my mind. I just knew you were laying dead somewhere. God, I'm so glad to see you. What happened back there?" Will asked, desperate for answers. "I don't remember a thing."

"You don't remember?"

"No. That's what's killing me. I woke up in a pool of blood next to a decapitated wino. You were nowhere to be found. I didn't know what had happened. Like I said, I thought you had died and... I don't know. I'm just glad you're safe."

Lauryn didn't say anything for a long, long time. *How could he not remember?* Lauryn thought to herself. "You really don't remember *anything*?"

"Nothing," Will replied. "I remember us running into that bum on the corner and following him into the alley, but that's it."

Lauryn had two choices. She could lie or tell the truth. A lie would protect Will from the painful knowledge of the monster he had become. The truth might destroy him. Lauryn decided neither to lie nor tell the truth.

"Babe," Will asked as he held Lauryn close to his bloodstained chest. "What happened back there? I need to know."

"I don't want to talk about it," she replied. "Let's just get out of here and go home."

"But..."

"Please, Will," Lauryn pleaded. "I can't take much more."

Will backed off. "Ok... So what about the cops? I can't walk around like this. I'm soaked in blood. I look like an extra from some horror movie."

"Here," Lauryn said as she handed Will her shawl. "Wrap this around your shoulders. It'll cover most of the stains. Besides, the parking garage is just a block away."

Will wrapped the shawl around himself. "Are you sure you can't tell me what happened? This is our lives we're talking about here. If something went down... If I did something... I need to know. The cops around here... You know we don't exactly see eye to eye. They'd just love to string a brother like me up. So, I'm asking you..."

"No, Will!" Lauryn said firmly. "Just drop it. Haven't I been through enough already?!"

Will could see the pain in Lauryn's eyes. He could feel her body shaking. He knew that whatever happened must've been awful because Lauryn rarely, if ever, broke down. Will knew she was on the verge. He decided to let it go.

"I'm sorry, baby," Will said as he hugged Lauryn tight. "Let me get you home. We can talk later, if you want."

Will and Lauryn made their way to the parking garage without incident. Will drove Lauryn to her father's house, where she was staying for the summer. It was her safe haven. A place of rest before she started her medical career in the fall.

During the ride from the big city to the quiet suburbs, not a single word was spoken between them.

Absolute silence.

Nothing can tear apart two lovers like the deafening roar of silence. Sometimes a word not spoken hurts more than one that was. Lauryn's silence and Will's sense of guilt was creating a painful rift between them. A chasm that would grow wider and wider as time went by.

Reverend Maxwell Jefferson kept his house in pristine condition. From the cobblestone driveway to the sculpted evergreen bushes to the English Tudor style of architecture, everything was perfect and in order. If a man could be known by his home, then the Maxwell would be called a perfectionist.

When Will pulled his Mustang into the driveway, Lauryn's father was already halfway out the door to greet them. Maxwell had a very sensitive spirit. He would often tell his parishioners that if they ever

needed to get in touch with him, all they had to do was think his name and he'd know. And he did.

Maxwell was by no means impressive or noteworthy in appearance. He was just barely five and a half feet tall. Dark skinned. Balding, with streaks of gray along the sides. But his spirit made him *grand*. He was the type of man that could walk into a biker's bar or a corporate boardroom and *command* attention and respect. It was the fire in his eyes. The way he squared his shoulders. The reverend was a man of few words, but when he spoke, he spoke with the authority and intensity of a general commanding his troops. You knew he was a man to be respected.

As this mighty man of God approached his daughter, the light of the full moon dancing off the sweat of his brow, even Akarra had to acknowledge his presence. Not because of who he was, but because of what he was doing.

Maxwell was praising God for the safe return of his eldest child and only daughter, the jewel of his eye and apple of his heart. As Maxwell thanked God, Akarra, Riki and Jediah began to glow brilliantly white, as if engulfed by lightning. The praises of the saints brought down the Spirit of God. And these weary angelic warriors dearly needed the strength and rejuvenation that only came with the presence of the Lord. As Riki lifted her hands towards heaven and offered a hymn of praise, Lauryn and Will stepped from the vehicle.

Maxwell didn't say a word. He simply took Lauryn in his arms and hugged her tight.

"Daddy, I..." Lauryn said as she fairly collapsed into her father's warm embrace.

"Shhh, darlin'," Maxwell tenderly said as he led Lauryn towards the front door. "I know. I've been praying for you all night. And you too, Will."

As tough as Will liked to fancy himself, Maxwell's concern actually touched him. Nobody ever prayed for Will. At least no one he

was aware of. Both his parents were dead, killed at the hands of two teenage gangsters who carjacked them some eight years prior. He didn't have any brothers or sisters; no grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins. Will was a loner, a drifter who spent most of his time on the road chasing down men as crooked as himself.

Faster than the speed of dark, was the tattoo inked across his chest. But Will didn't feel too swift that night. His limbs felt as though they were made of lead. Life seemed to be going in slow motion. He needed to think. Get away. But to where? There was nothing for him at home except for an empty bedroom, a bookshelf full of blues records and a half-empty bottle of scotch.

No, there was nothing for Will at home. Without Lauryn, he didn't even have a home. He had a room. A dark lonely room above a seedy tavern on Wentworth Avenue in the type of neighborhood where the only thing good a man could do was get out.

"You two come on inside and have some tea," Maxwell said as he held the door for Lauryn and Will. "You guys settle on into the living room while I set the water to boil," Maxwell said as he motioned them towards the sunken living room and overstuffed leather couch.

Aside from the couch, the room was modestly decorated. A painting of a lion chasing a gazelle hung over the fireplace alongside a portrait of Maxwell and his late wife Janice, a beautiful woman with cream-colored skin, hazel eyes and chiseled facial features befitting a queen. It was Janice who introduced Maxwell to the Lord and encouraged him to accept Jesus into his life.

They were both social workers at the time. Maxwell was working nights on his Ph.D. in behavioral science. He was a pragmatic and atheistic individual who held the belief that human behavior could be quantified and predicted based on social and economic factors. Man was a product of his environment, no more, no less. All that high-minded, fancy church talk was for dreamers, hippies and old

ladies with nothing better to do with their money than keep their local pastor dressed in silk suits and driving the latest Cadillac.

Maxwell had prided himself on being a man of science, a man of knowledge, a man of his own making. Who was God that he should recognize His authority?

But one day while giving a lecture on the necessity for the abolishment of prayer from state-sponsored children's group homes, Maxwell fell out. He literally collapsed behind the podium, unable to move or breathe. As he laid paralyzed before the crowd of several hundred Department of Children and Family Service workers, he heard a Voice speaking to him. The Voice was as distinctly different from the screaming and shouting of the audience as the clapping of one's hands is from the sound of thunder, or the soft gurgling of a tiny stream is from the deafening roar of a waterfall.

The Voice was what knocked Maxwell to the floor and kept him there. ***"Who are you, little man, that you should assert yourself against My Kingdom and my Will?! Answer and I will listen! Tell me what greatness lies within your heart that you should take away the prayer and praises of my children to satisfy your own ego?! Answer me if you are a man!"***

Maxwell could not answer. He couldn't even blink. So terrible and weighty and powerful was the Voice of God. No one else in the room could hear the Voice, for if they had, they too would surely have been laid prostrate on the floor.

"You are an arrogant man!" the Voice continued. ***"But I will humble you! As a potter fashions the clay into a worthy vessel, I will mold you and purify you with My Spirit and in the Refiner's Fire! Your words are not My words, but they will be! I will send you out to the people and you will teach them My Word, My Will and My Way!"***

Though Maxwell still could not move, tears began to fall from his eyes. His heart was broken. Convicted. The presence of the Lord had laid bare all of his folly; all his sin and filth and ignorance. A

man broken of the Lord is broken indeed. Maxwell felt lower than the dirt, lower than the bugs and vermin that crept and crawled along the ground.

“Do not despair,” the Voice of the Lord said in a loving and forgiving tone that dried the tears from Maxwell’s eyes. ***“My Grace is sufficient for you. Behold, I send you a helpmate to share the Good News! Seek me in earnest and I shall be with you always. My Name is The Lord and I have spoken!”***

At that very moment, a beautiful young lady named Janice ascended the stage and knelt alongside of Maxwell. She laid her hands on his chest and forehead and claimed the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ for healing and life. No sooner had the word Jesus slipped from her lips did Maxwell regain his strength. He sat upright, looked deeply into the eyes of the woman that was to become his wife and at that very moment, accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

For twenty five years, Maxwell and his wife faithfully and tirelessly shared the Gospel of Christ with any and everyone who would listen. Maxwell had abandoned his pursuit of a Ph.D., became ordained and used his savings to open a storefront church in the heart of the ghetto, not two blocks from some of the most violent, gang-infested housing projects in the city of Chicago.

Some Sundays there wouldn’t be more than three or four people in attendance. But oh, how the Spirit of the Lord moved! There was power in the Word! Miracles, healings, prophecies and wonders beyond belief. It wasn’t long before the word got out that there was a real-life man of God in town. A man who for the first ten years of his ministry refused to accept tithes and offerings from his parishioners, telling them to give their alms to other pastors and churches.

Maxwell didn’t feel worthy to collect a blessing from the Lord. He worked full-time and donated seventy percent of his personal income to sustain his church. He felt he owed it to the Lord for all the grace and mercy shown to him. No matter how many times Max-

well recounted the story of the Lord’s intervention in his life, his eyes would become teary at every instance.

As his congregation grew from a few dozen to over two thousand, Maxwell finally relented and quit his day job as human resource director for a prominent insurance company. He knew that for his ministry to grow, it would require a full-time effort.

His church, the Missionary Baptist Outreach, in addition to bringing people to Christ, also helped raise money for scholarships, obtain business loans for entrepreneurs in the congregation, taught practical skills in parenting, diet, marital relations and financial management. His church was the first in the state to institute a temple guard regiment and to provide strict warfare and survival training to any interested young men and women.

He ran a tight ship. No fancy dress clothes were to be worn to church. Men were expected to wear a black suit, white shirt and tie. Women were to wear a modest white dress or skirt. Church, in Maxwell’s mind, was not to be a fashion show. It was not a time for all the eligible bachelors to come and eyeball the available ladies and vice versa. It was a time of serious learning, praise and fellowship.

As for the warfare and survival training, Maxwell was an ex-Marine who strongly believed that for a man or woman to operate at maximum efficiency and performance, as the Lord expected, one had to be as equally concerned about his body and mind as he was about his spirit. To that end, members of his congregation were expected to attend at least two exercise classes each week in the church’s recreation center and to read at least one new book a month. Martial arts classes and outdoor survival programs were available, but not mandatory. He stressed the importance of eliminating red meats and pork from his congregation’s diet, but left that matter to the realm of personal choice.

Maxwell preached that if Christians were truly the army of God, then they had better start acting like it. Maxwell had very little

patience or tolerance for the fat-back, ham hock and chitterlings ministers who were so encumbered by their own girth that they could barely preach an entire sermon without falling out from exhaustion.

What Maxwell envisioned for his congregation was a holy army, fit and trim, sharp-minded and astute, yet humble and obedient to the scriptures. Such a group, he felt, could withstand the coming storms and tribulations of the End Times and still manage to be of useful service to the Lord. Strength and endurance were the hallmarks of his teachings. As Maxwell prepared the tea for Lauryn and Will, he couldn't help but wonder what the ultimate purpose of the attack on his daughter's life was. Could it have been another test of his own faith? Had Lauryn somehow invited the attack?

"Tea's almost ready," Maxwell called out from the kitchen.

He worried about his daughter. Despite growing up under his constant care and tutelage, Lauryn still didn't have the type of personal relationship with God that he felt was crucial to leading a successful and fulfilling life. She was intelligent, beautiful and morally upright, but Lauryn still saw God as being something far off beyond the stars; a distant King sitting on His throne in heaven. The Man Upstairs. Not really a personal God that you relied on and walked with every day.

No matter how many times he had tried to help Lauryn step closer to God, she always seemed to pull away. Maxwell believed it was partly due to the untimely death of her mother Janice.

It was two days after Christmas. Janice and Maxwell were relaxing by the fireplace sipping eggnog with just a touch of rum. Janice turned to her husband and told him that she felt the Lord calling her home. Maxwell strongly disagreed.

"I won't let you go," he protested. But Maxwell knew in his spirit that what Janice said was true. She had been ill for quite some time and for the prior three nights he had dreamed that an angel of the

Lord, dressed in white and sparkling like the sun, took Janice in a whirlwind up to heaven.

Each night Maxwell would confront the angel in his vision and rebuke him saying, "You will not take my wife from me! Not tonight! Allow me one more day!"

The angel would nod his head and depart.

Later that night, when the angel returned for the final time, Maxwell leapt from his bed and pointed towards heaven. "It is not time! One more day! Just one!"

"Dear heart," Janice replied as she awoke from her sleep and gently took her husband's hand and caressed his cheek. "How can I stay? If the Father wants me home, that's where I must go. We should be thankful that He's given us a chance to say goodbye."

"But how can I live without you by my side?" Maxwell pleaded.

"I will always be in your heart, and you in mine."

And with that Janice kissed her husband tenderly on the lips, laid her head on his chest and breathed her last.

Maxwell sank to his knees and prayed. Prayed all night and into the next morning. As the sun crept over the horizon, Maxwell rose to his feet and carried his wife to the corner of his bedroom room and stood her body upright against the wall.

With every ounce of faith and authority he had, Maxwell pointed at his wife's lifeless body and said, "Death!! You are a liar!! You were defeated on Calvary!! I rebuke you in the Name of Jesus and command life to return to my beloved wife!!"

Janice's eyes suddenly popped open. "Maxwell," Janice said lovingly. "What are you doing? Would you seek to put your will before that of our Father? This earth isn't my home any longer. I'm a child of heaven now. And it's so beautiful, love. Words can't describe."

"But I need you," Maxwell protested.

"They need me," Janice replied tenderly. "Will you let me go, Maxwell? Will you obey?"

Maxwell thought long and hard. What was more important to him? The company of his wife or obedience to the Lord? After a great deal of heartache and struggle Maxwell decided what he would do. "I will obey," he said, barely able to speak the painful words. "Go in peace, sweet one."

Janice stepped forward, hugged Maxwell, and slowly departed. The last thing she said was, "Maxwell... I can hear the angels singing. Bring me my horn, love. Bring me my horn."

Maxwell conducted a simple funeral three days later. As much as it hurt his heart to say goodbye to his wife, it hurt him more to see Lauryn and her younger brother Robert in so much pain. At least he had had a chance to say goodbye. Lauryn and Robert had spent Christmas with friends of theirs from college, so they never had the chance to say their final farewells.

Neither one of them was the same after their mother's death. Robert dropped out of school and drifted from job to job, experimenting with drugs. Lauryn became distant and cold. She spent more and more time with Will, perhaps because he too had lost a parent; two in fact.

"Here we go," Maxwell said as he set the silver tea set onto the coffee table.

"Thanks, Max," Will said as he sipped mint chamomile from a porcelain cup with golden doves embossed on the sides. Lauryn simply stared at the tea set. She seemed lost in another world.

"How about a little music?" Maxwell said, trying to stay upbeat. "I know just the thing." Maxwell rifled through his collection of LP's and pulled out a compilation of John Coltrane ballads. He spun the record and then sat in his favorite easy chair next to the weary pair.

"Nothing like a little Coltrane to relax the mind," Maxwell said as he sipped his tea.

You could cut the tension in the room with a knife.

"So..." Maxwell ventured after about five minutes of utter silence. "Tell me what happened."

More silence.

Maxwell had a pretty good idea of what happened based on the images he perceived while in prayer, but he wanted to hear it from their lips. After a hard spiritual battle it was important to talk it out. It helped put things into perspective and it gave the wounds an opportunity to heal.

Discussion also helped you to recognize where your victory laid. Many times, even the most battle-hardened spirit warriors would get so caught up in the struggle that they didn't even realize when they had won. They would just keep on fighting and fighting an enemy that wasn't even there any longer. And as a result, they would get fatigued and worn out, never getting a chance to enjoy or savor the sweetness of triumph.

Maxwell didn't want that to happen to his daughter, but he also knew better than to force the issue.

"Well," he said after another five minutes of silence. "We don't have to talk if you don't want to."

"I want to, but..." Lauryn finally ventured.

"But what?" Maxwell said with a warm smile and reassuring pat on the knee.

Lauryn cast a quick glance at Will then turned her eyes to the floor.

Even though Will was looking the other direction, he *felt* her gaze. He knew that whatever she had to say, she had to say alone.

Maxwell knew it too.

"Hey, Max," Will said in an uncomfortably lighthearted tone after checking his watch. "It's almost midnight, and I don't want to keep you up too late..."

"Nonsense," Maxwell replied. "You know how much I enjoy your company." And that was true. In many ways, Will reminded Maxwell of himself before he found the Lord. He respected the fact that Will truly loved his daughter and always did his best to look after her.

"I really should be going," Will insisted. "I'm sure Lauryn has a lot of things she needs to get off her chest. Father-daughter type stuff. B'sides, I've got a lot of work to do tomorrow. And...You know."

"Sure," Maxwell said as he nodded his head and shook Will's hand.

Will knelt down and gave Lauryn a kiss on the cheek. "Love you, sweet."

Lauryn never took her eyes from the floor. "Same."

Will could feel his heart breaking bit by excruciating bit, but he held his head high, clinched his teeth and managed a smile. "See you guys later. Thanks for the tea."

"Here," Maxwell said, "Let me see you to the door."

"Don't worry about it. I'll show myself out."

A few seconds later the front door slammed shut and the sound of an engine roaring and tires screeching filled the air.

"He's gone," Maxwell said as he sat beside his daughter. "Now, tell your father what happened out there."

Lauryn lifted tear-filled eyes from the floor and stared into Maxwell's comforting gaze.

"Where do I even begin?" Lauryn sobbed.

"The beginning," Maxwell stated. "Just start at the beginning and don't leave out a thing."

2

BANQUET OF THE DAMNED

TWO LIVING SHADOWS, KOLO AND MIN, paced nervously back and forth atop the Sears Tower, the nation's tallest building. Their wispy charcoal bodies had the appearance of humans made of solid smoke. Sulfuric sweat dripped from their brows. Their dull green eyes were wide with fright. These demons were scouts, the equivalent of a buck private in Satan's army. Their job was simply to observe and report. A good report might lead to a promotion. *Tempter* or *Seducer* perhaps. A bad report might banish their essence to the animal kingdom or worse yet, the insect realm.

The night was a horrible failure for their forces. Hundreds of their comrades were slain by the Captain of the Host and forever consigned to the Abyss. And to make matters worse, the *emerald* compound that their researchers developed was still too lethal for the average human body to endure.

"It's almost time," the demon Min gurgled with a thick Japanese accent as she wheezed out a puff of green vapor. Her six inch fangs *click-click-clicked* together like a high speed metronome as her lower jaw trembled with fear.

Min was a seducing spirit who had previously worked the geisha houses in Japan, whispering lustful and perverse thoughts into the